Submitted

First year students' perceptions of the importance of good teaching: not all things are equal.

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Abstract: *First year undergraduate students at Griffith University were surveyed to explore their perceived importance of various aspects of good teaching typically used to assess course quality. There were significant differences between males and females, disciplines, passing and failing students, and native and non-native English speakers in terms of the strength of rated importance of different aspects of good teaching. These differences could influence CEQ ratings for courses depending on the enrolment profile. From the students' perspective four aspects of good teaching consistently emerged as the most important (i) being good at explaining things, (ii) being approachable, (iii) having enthusiasm for the subject matter, and (iv) providing helpful feedback. The next most important aspects were: making expectations clear, making subject matter interesting and using assessment strategies that did not reward memorisation.*

Keywords: *first year experience, CEQ, quality, good teaching*

Introduction

There is a broad consensus about what constitutes good teaching (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 1992). In his study of university students, Marsh (1984) identified nine dimensions of effective teaching: learning/value; enthusiasm; organization; group interaction; individual rapport; breadth of coverage; examinations/grading; assignments and workload/difficulty. Also on the basis of research with Australian university students and teachers, Ramsden (1991) distilled six similar principles of good teaching: interest and explanation; concern and respect for students and student learning; appropriate assessment and feedback; clear goals and intellectual challenge; independence, control and active engagement; and learning from students. Ramsden (1992) and Biggs (2003) in their books on university teaching both highlight the importance of good teaching, with an implicit message that all aspects of good teaching are equal. There is no indication, however, that one dimension of good teaching might be critically important or that there is some hierarchy within the various aspects of good teaching.

The research underpinning principles of good teaching has been used to generate student surveys in which students are asked to rate the quality of the delivery of teaching that they have experienced. Two of the most popular instruments are the Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) (Marsh, 1984) and The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden, 1991). The national first year experience surveys also used a CEQ-related scale to

measure good teaching (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000), and in the most recent survey (Krause, James, & McInnis, 2005) new questions related to teaching were added (e.g., web resources). The CEQ, administered by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA) over the last decade, provides a national performance indicator of teaching quality and is the major source of comparative data on student satisfaction with the overall university undergraduate experience (Hillman & Johnson, 2000). A number of universities (e.g., Sydney) have employed a version of the CEQ for internal review and allocation of teaching funds.

The Course Experience Questionnaire has undergone significant empirical and psychometric testing to evaluate its reliability and validity. Richardson's UK trial (1994), and the findings of Wilson et al. (Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997) confirmed the reliability of the CEQ. Richardson (2005), in his review of student feedback mechanisms, commends the CEQ on its rigour and extensive testing. However, the original CEQ is not free from criticism. Whilst the structure of the CEQ has remained relatively stable over 25 years (Ainley & Johnson, 2000) the student population has become more diverse. Ainley & Long (1994) have questioned the structure of the Good Teaching Scale of the CEQ. Eley (2001) has argued that changes need to be made to the CEQ to represent current educational practice and new scales have been developed to accommodate changes in teaching and learning practice (McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001). Wilson et al. (1997) and Marsh (1987) have demonstrated that scores on the "CEQ like" instruments vary with students' academic performance. The GCCA has also shown that demographic factors may affect CEQ scores (Richardson, 2005), though they have not yet established whether this is due to course differences or the characteristics of the student respondents.

The implementation of a new university-wide evaluation system gave pause for us to consider whether every dimension of good teaching applied equally to all curricula and disciplines and were considered equally important by students. Since the development of the CEQ in the early 1990s and its validation in the mid 90s, another decade has passed. Higher education continues to change quickly: the diversity of the student population has increased with the number of international students increased to nearly 20% of the overall student population, and the range of motivations to attend university broadened (DEST, 2005; McInnis et al., 2000). In light of these changes in the higher education sector, it is timely to consider how the different aspects of good teaching are viewed by different groups of students.

The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent the dimensions of good teaching are held to be universally true and important by different first year student groups across the university. The aspects of good teaching used in this exploratory study are derived from the national first year survey (McInnis et al., 2000) which uses questions similar to those in the CEQ.

Methods

Details of students' experiences of their course and their opinions were collected using a survey conducted within the regular cycle of university evaluations and surveys. The survey was conducted during weeks 4-8 of second semester 2005, using *www.SurveyMaker.com.au*, a website that generates online surveys with a range of automated email and reporting features. The questionnaire was voluntary and administered in closed, confidential mode, hence all students had to explicitly provide consent to participate in the study upon access to the survey. The surveys were approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee.

Students who were invited to complete this survey included all first year students enrolled at the institution (N = 6350) from which there was a 36% response rate.

Good teaching was measured using a series of questions previously used in the National First Year Experience surveys. These included the Good Teaching Scale and several other questions (e.g. web resources and the focus of assessment). The first question set asking about various dimensions of good teaching experienced in their courses, was presented with response categories across a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly Agree. The second question set asking about the importance of the various dimensions was presented with response categories across a five-point Likert scale ranging from Not Important to Very Important. The weightings of importance were converted to ranks.

Survey data were combined with data from the University administration and coded before analysis using SPSS (Version 12, www.spss.com). Analyses were conducted on raw data, rather than the collapsed scales shown in the Tables. One-way ANOVA or univariate analyses were conducted to examine the effects of gender and age on experiences and perceptions. Multivariate analyses were used to examine the effect of Academic Group on students' perceptions and post hoc analyses, using Scheffe (if equal variances) or Dunnets T3 test (if unequal variances), were used to identify significant differences between and among variables. Missing data were replaced with means. Statistically significant differences were considered at $p < .05$

Cases with less than 95% complete data were removed from the dataset, leaving a total of 1471 (of 2300) complete first-year data sets for analysis. The respondent group consisted of 65% females, 83% under 25 years of age, 74% Australian-born students, 17% students for whom English is a second language and 5% part time students. The proportion of students from each campus was consistent with campus enrolments as was representation from the four broad academic groups (Business; Arts, Education & Law; Health; and Science & Technology).

Results

Overall student perceptions and experiences

The aggregated data from all students regarding their rating of teaching and their rating of importance of dimensions of teaching is shown in Table 1. The focus of this research is not the ratings of students' experiences of teaching in their courses, but their weighting of the personal importance of each of the various dimensions of good teaching for them as students. These weightings were used to rank the importance of each aspect of good teaching. The rankings cluster the dimensions of good teaching into four groups (A-D). From the students' perspective, the most important aspects of good teaching were: being good at explaining things; being approachable; having enthusiasm for the subject matter; and providing helpful feedback.

Differences based upon gender

There were many gender-based differences regarding the relative importance of the various dimensions of good teaching (Table 2). When considering the importance of the various dimensions of good teaching, female students attached significantly greater weighting /importance to most dimensions when compared with male students. However, the same four aspects of good teaching were ranked highest by males and females: being good at explaining

things; being approachable; having enthusiasm for the subject matter; and providing helpful feedback.

Table 1. First year students mean rating of good teaching experienced in their courses, and their mean rating of the importance of various aspects of good teaching. (*N* = 1471)

Elements of Good Teaching	Experience (Mean + SD)	Importance (Mean+ SD)	Rank Importance
Teaching staff make expectations clear.	3.61 ± 1.00	4.33 ± 0.74	6 (B)
Teaching staff try hard to make course interesting.	3.71 ± 0.81	4.35 ± 0.69	5 (B)
Teaching staff are good at explaining things.	3.59 ± 0.81	4.49 ± 0.63	1 (A)
Teaching staff are enthusiastic about the courses they teach.	3.83 ± 0.77	4.41 ± 0.67	4 (A)
Most of the teaching staff are approachable.	3.94 ± 0.71	4.43 ± 0.63	2 (A)
Staff are usually available to discuss my work.	3.61 ± 0.81	4.28 ± 0.65	8 (B)
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress.	3.41 ± 0.92	4.42 ± 0.65	3 (A)
Teaching staff make an effort to understand difficulties I may have.	3.46 ± 0.85	4.20 ± 0.71	9 (C)
Most teaching staff are interested in my progress through semester.	3.23 ± 0.90	4.08 ± 0.75	10 (C)
Assessment focuses on learning not memorisation.	3.23 ± 0.87	4.29 ± 0.69	7 (B)
Teaching staff make good use of the web.	3.68 ± 0.94	3.44 ± 0.81	11 (D)

Table 2. Gender based differences regarding the importance of various aspects of Good Teaching. (*N* = 1471)

	Male (N=515)	Female (N=956)	Sig.
Teaching staff make expectations clear.	4.28	4.38	$p < .05$
Teaching staff try hard to make course interesting.	4.44 (A)	4.51 (A)	$p < .05$
Teaching staff are good at explaining things.	4.35 (A)	4.45 (A)	$p < .05$
Teaching staff are enthusiastic about the courses they teach.	4.38 (A)	4.46 (A)	$p < .05$
Most of the teaching staff are approachable.	4.23	4.30	$p < .05$
Staff are usually available to discuss my work.	4.34 (A)	4.46 (A)	$p < .05$
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress.	4.13	4.24	$p < .05$
Teaching staff make an effort to understand difficulties I may have.	4.01	4.12	$p < .05$
Most teaching staff are interested in my progress through semester.	4.27	4.36	$p < .05$
Assessment focuses on learning not memorisation.	4.26	4.31	
Teaching staff make good use of the web.	3.46	3.42	

Differences based upon age

There were few differences between views of students under age 25 years and those aged over 25 years. Students under age 25 placed significantly greater importance (F (1,1469) = 6.18, $p < .05$) on the availability of web-based resources than did mature age students. Compared with students under age 25 years, mature age students placed significantly greater importance (F (1,1469) =11.60, $p < .01$) on the teacher's clarification of goals and expectations regarding the course.

Differences based upon academic performance

There were significant differences on the weightings of dimensions of good teaching based upon the students' academic performance (Table 3). Compared with failing students, passing

students (GPA ≥4) gave significantly higher weighting to the importance of half of the items related to good teaching. Both groups, however, showed similar rankings for the four most important aspects of good teaching (A): being good at explaining things; being approachable; having enthusiasm for the subject matter; and providing helpful feedback.

Table 3. Academic performance-based mean score differences regarding the importance of various aspects of Good Teaching. (*N = 1471*)

	Failing (N=228)	Passing (N=1243)	Sig.
Teaching staff make expectations clear.	4.22	4.35	$p < .05$
Teaching staff try hard to make course interesting.	4.27 (A)	4.36	
Teaching staff are good at explaining things.	4.37 (A)	4.51 (A)	$p < .01$
Teaching staff are enthusiastic about the courses they teach.	4.24	4.45 (A)	$p < .01$
Most of the teaching staff are approachable.	4.32 (A)	4.45 (A)	$p < .01$
Staff are usually available to discuss my work.	4.20	4.29	
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress.	4.27 (A)	4.45 (A)	$p < .01$
Teaching staff make an effort to understand difficulties I may have.	4.13	4.22	
Most teaching staff are interested in my progress through semester.	4.07	4.09	
Assessment focuses on learning not memorisation.	4.21	4.31	$p < .05$
Teaching staff make good use of the web.	3.50	3.42	

Differences based upon academic group

There were significant differences in the weighting of elements of good teaching when academic group was taken into consideration (Table 4). Overall, Business and Science & Technology students weighted all aspects of good teaching lower than students of other disciplines; Health students generally weighted the elements of good teaching highest. The greatest difference in mean weighting was 0.26 on a scale of 5.0. The four most important aspects of good teaching (A) were consistent across the disciplines: being good at explaining things, being approachable, having enthusiasm for the subject matter, providing helpful feedback. The next most important aspects were: making expectations clear, making the subject matter interesting and using assessment that focused on learning rather than understanding. The least important aspect was the use of web resources to support teaching.

Differences based upon English as second language

There were significant differences between native English speaking students and students for whom English was a second language when considering both rated experiences of good teaching in their courses, and their consideration of the relative importance of the dimensions of good teaching. Native English speakers weighted most elements of good teaching significantly lower than did non-native English speakers (Table 5). A similar pattern of differences was seen with Australian-born versus overseas-born students (data not shown). The three most important aspects of good teaching (A) ranked by both student groups included: good at explaining, approachability and giving useful feedback. The next most important aspects were: making expectations clear and giving helpful feedback on progress.

Table 4. Discipline-based differences in mean score regarding the importance of various aspects of Good Teaching. (Business =319, Science & Technology = 247, Health = 294, Arts, Education & Law = 693).

	Arts, Ed & Law	Business	Sci Tech	Health	Sig.
Teaching staff make expectations clear.	4.41	4.18	4.23	4.38	$p < .01$
Teaching staff try hard to make course interesting.	4.37	4.31	4.28	4.37	$p < .05$
Teaching staff are good at explaining things.	4.53 (A)	4.40 (A)	4.47 (A)	4.51 (A)	$p < .05$
Teaching staff are enthusiastic about the courses they teach.	4.49 (A)	4.31 (A)	4.36 (A)	4.41 (A)	$p < .01$
Most of the teaching staff are approachable.	4.50 (A)	4.36 (A)	4.36 (A)	4.44 (A)	$p < .01$
Staff are usually available to discuss my work.	4.35	4.19	4.18	4.29	$p < .01$
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress.	4.49 (A)	4.33 (A)	4.36 (A)	4.41 (A)	$p < .01$
Teaching staff make an effort to understand difficulties I may have.	4.27	4.15	4.09	4.23	$p < .01$
Most teaching staff are interested in my progress through semester.	4.16	4.05	3.92	4.09	$p < .01$
Assessment focuses on learning not memorisation.	4.39	4.25	4.21	4.21	$p < .01$
Teaching staff make good use of the web.	3.41	3.52	3.44	3.40	

Table 5. Country-based differences in mean score regarding the importance of various aspects of Good Teaching. (English as native language =1168, English as second language = 303).

	English First Language	English Second Language	Sig.
Teaching staff make expectations clear.	4.14	4.36	$p < .01$
Teaching staff try hard to make course interesting.	4.26	4.36	
Teaching staff are good at explaining things.	4.34 (A)	4.51 (A)	$p < .01$
Teaching staff are enthusiastic about the courses they teach.	4.17	4.46 (A)	$p < .01$
Most of the teaching staff are approachable.	4.32 (A)	4.45 (A)	$p < .01$
Staff are usually available to discuss my work.	4.17	4.29	
Teaching staff usually give helpful feedback on my progress.	4.29 (A)	4.22	$p < .01$
Teaching staff make an effort to understand difficulties I may have.	4.13	4.22	
Most teaching staff are interested in my progress through semester.	4.02	4.09	
Assessment focuses on learning not memorization.	4.22	4.31	$p < .01$
Teaching staff make good use of the web.	3.40	3.60	

Discussion

There were two significant findings arising from this study of student rated importance of aspects of good teaching. First, all dimensions of good teaching are not considered by students to be equally important, though there was consistency in ranking of the four most important aspects. Second, there were significant differences in the degree of importance attached to the various aspects of good teaching based on gender, academic performance, discipline and background.

The four most important aspects of good teaching, from the student perspective are: being approachable, having enthusiasm for the subject matter, being good at explaining things, and

providing helpful feedback. The study design does not indicate if any of these are critical or specifically considered as most important. In the national survey of first year experience at university, the majority of Australian first year students reported favourably on these first three aspects of good teaching (Krause et al, 2005). However, one third of first year students reported that they did not receive enough feedback on their work, part of an increasing trend seen over the last decade. The provision of feedback is increasingly difficult, with growing class sizes and concerns about the time necessary for giving feedback versus the extent to which students act upon the feedback. These four key aspects of good teaching are areas that teachers might focus on as priorities in the design of their courses.

Student responses to questions about good teaching may be affected by background and other experiences. This study reveals that there are differences in the importance that students place on different aspects of the good teaching. Female students, passing students and native English speaking students weighted the importance of aspects of teaching highest compared with males, failing students and non-English speaking students. Wilson et al (1997) have demonstrated that scale scores on the CEQ correlate with academic performance and Marsh (1987) indicates that perceptions of grades can influence student evaluations of teaching. The nature of the direction of this relationship is not clear. The GCCA has not excluded possible influences of gender, age and ethnicity on the CEQ instrument. Without full examination, they attribute the differences to the nature of courses and differences in student cohorts. Courses with a heavy female enrolment in one year might gain higher CEQ scores than the same course with a heavy male enrolment in the following year. When there are differences in the relative balance of gender and ethnicity in courses, these perceived differences in importance of specific questions may underlie the GCCA's reported observations.

Further work will need to be done with the full range of CEQ questions to establish more clearly if there are differences in the importance of the various aspects of good teaching and whether they impact on scores generated though use of the CEQ. It is also possible that the relative importance of some of the dimensions of good teaching will change over time, thus it would be useful to follow up this group over time, or survey different groups of second- and third-year students.

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