

Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness: Research facts and methodological issues

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Abstract

Amidst recent public debates on deteriorating quality of education in institutions of learning, this study aimed to investigate lecturers' teaching effectiveness using students' end of the semester's evaluation. However, complete reliance on student evaluation as the main indicator to assess teaching effectiveness would be erroneous. Hence, this study also aimed to discuss several methodological issues related to this method of evaluation. Recommendations on alternative measures of evaluating teaching effectiveness were also discussed.

Introduction

The teaching staff in any institutions of learning can vary enormously in their ability to teach effectively. Many methods can be used to measure this variation but one commonly used method is seen in using students' evaluation of lecturers' teaching effectiveness. Students' assessment or evaluation on teaching effectiveness was introduced as early as the 1915 (Wachtel, 1998). For many decades, the outcome of students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness is seen as an important tool to measure the effectiveness of teaching quality (Spooren & Mortelmans, 2006). It would reflect on qualities associated with good teaching such as lecturers' knowledge, clarity, classroom management and course organization. Besides being a measurement tool on teaching excellence, the results of the evaluation is beneficial in helping the lecturers and learning institution identify the specific areas for improving the teaching effectiveness of the lecturer concern (Yeoh, Ho and Chan, 2012). In some cases, the outcome of this evaluation is often used to formulate key performance index of lecturers in staff appraisal for both promotion and tenure decisions (Griffin, 1999; Liaw & Goh, 2003). As the possible benefits that can be gained from students' evaluation are multifaceted, its importance in education cannot be ignored. In fact, numerous empirical studies on students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness have been conducted, both local and international, but thorough search in local literature reviewed that limited or possibly none has been conducted in Teacher Education Institutes in Malaysia. Hence, this study was conducted on add to sparse literature related to teaching effectiveness of lecturers.

It is a known fact that students are the actual recipients of the teaching and learning process and thus, are in a better position to assess lecturers' teaching excellence. According to Nakpodia (2011), student evaluation is considered as the best approach to evaluate lecturers' teaching effectiveness. However, it is important to note that several studies have reported several pitfalls on studies conducted using students evaluation to assess teaching effectiveness.

Hence, this study aimed to investigate the following research questions.

1. What are the students' perceptions towards the teaching effectiveness of lecturers?
2. What are the methodological issues related to using student evaluation in assessing teaching effectiveness of lecturers?

Method

This study employed a quantitative research methodology to address the predetermined research questions of the study. The population comprise of all the students pursuing a teacher education programme in Malaysia Teacher Education Insitute at Batu Lintang Campus in the year 2013. A total of 884 students from various teacher education programmes took part in the study. A 10-item online evaluation form was used to collect data on the lecturers' teaching effectiveness. At the end of the evaluation process, a total of 4768 completed evaluation forms were submitted by the students and 120 lecturers were evaluated. Statistical analyses such as, descriptive statistics, were used to analyse the data. Among the descriptive statistics used were frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and measures of variability. Mean scores were calculated and standard deviation was used to measure variability.

Findings and Discussions

Students' Perception of Lecturers' Teaching Effectiveness

Students were given a 10-item instrument online to rate the lecturers' teaching effectiveness. Table 1 displayed the mean scores and standard deviations of the 10 items in descending order. Among the ten items surveyed, the findings of the study reviewed that none of the items were given a rating equivalent to 'excellent' teaching effectiveness ($M = 4.90$ and above). The students perceived the teaching effectiveness of lecturers as 'very good' ($M = 4.80-4.89$) in 5 of the items while the remaining 5 items were rated as 'good' ($M= 4.70-4.79$) performance.

The five top performing items rated as 'very good' were related to the ability in conducting teaching learning activities in accordance to the course pro-forma ($M=4.84$); providing awareness on the development of human capital ($M=4.84$) commitment towards teaching and learning ($M=4.82$); monitoring and giving feedbacks ($M=4.81$); and motivating students to pursue learning activities($M=4.81$) . Although the lecturers teaching effectiveness was not given an excellent ranking, but these top five items highlighted from the empirical data of the study indicated the lecturers' strengths in the teaching learning process. It is hoped that lecturers would continue to maintain or enhance the strengths as perceived by the students.

However, the mean scores of lecturers' teaching effectiveness dropped in the remaining five areas. The students perceived their teaching effectiveness as 'good', which was one level lower in the effectiveness scale. The five areas were related to effective management of teaching and learning ($M=4.79$); implementing course assignments aligned to topics taught ($M=4.79$); engaging active participation in learning ($M=4.79$); providing thought provoking activities ($M=4.79$); and giving clear presentations ($M=4.74$). This evaluation results served to provide valuable information to lecturers on areas of personnel improvement related to their teaching and learning effectiveness. This finding disclosed areas of knowledge and skills that lecturers should consider for further enhancement of their teaching effectiveness and if evaluation results are seriously taken into consideration, it can lead to overall quality improvement of the lecturer's teaching effectiveness.

This finding also served to benefit managing directors by disclosing future training needs of lecturers. According to Nakpodia (2011), evaluation is an information gathering process

where the information obtained can be used for the purpose of aiding decision makers. Managing directors, being the main decision makers can use the information gathered through the evaluation process to help them in their decision making pertaining to the existing or planned continuous professional development (CPD) courses for the teaching staff. Hence, based on the findings of the study, suitable and relevant CPD courses can be designed, focussing on areas where ratings of teaching effectiveness were relatively lower.

When evaluations of lecturers' teaching effectiveness are rigorously executed, the information gained can serve multiple purposes. To the lecturers, they would be able to know their strengths and weakness as perceived by the students. By maintaining their strengths and overcoming their weaknesses, overall quality of teaching and learning would be heightened. To the faculty heads, being more informed of the teaching staffs' performance can assist them in making better decisions to improve or sustain educational standards by providing excellent lecturers to students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching and learning in every classroom. Beside quality improvement and maintaining educational standards, evaluations of teaching effectiveness is one of the keys to validate policies, plans and procedures operating within the institution (Walklin, 1992). For instance, the information from the evaluation exercise could also be used by decision makers to determine staff promotions or even to extend service of contract staff.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Lecturers' Teaching Effectiveness

No.	Items on Teaching Effectiveness	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Implementation of teaching and learning activities in accordance to course pro-forma	4.84	0.20
2	Provide awareness on human capital development	4.84	0.18
3	Commitment and professionalise displayed when conducting teaching and learning activities,	4.82	0.22
4	Monitor and give feedbacks on student mastery of learning.	4.81	0.26
5	Motivate students to pursue learning activities.	4.80	0.22
6	Effective management of teaching and learning activities	4.79	0.24
7	Implementation of the course assignment according to topics taught	4.79	0.23
8	Active student participation in teaching and learning activities	4.79	0.22
9	Provision of learning activities that stimulate thinking	4.79	0.22
10	Clear presentation of course content.	4.74	0.27

* excellent (4.90-5.00) very good (4.80-4.89) good (4.70-4.79) satisfactory (4.60-4.69) marginal (4.50-4.59) unsatisfactory (1.00-4.49)

Methodological Issues Related to Student Evaluation

Although using student evaluation is considered as the best approach when evaluating lecturers teaching effectiveness (Nakpodia, 2011) there are several methodological issues related to this method of assessment. Firstly, doubts have been raised by psychologist and educators over the validity and reliability of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Several studies reported that the outcome of such evaluations was biased as the student assessed the teaching effectiveness based on non-related learning measures which included race, gender, political ideology, socio-economic status, attractiveness (Franklin, 2001; Huston, 2006; Merritt, 2008; Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman & Misso, 2006; Vaughns, 2003). According to Merritt (2008), students' evaluations can also be influenced by the professors'

smiles, gestures and other mannerisms, rather than the professors' knowledge, clarity, organization or other qualities associated with good teaching (Merritt, 2008). This is commonly known as Dr Fox Effect (Merritt, 2008; Ware & William, 1975). This effect can take place when a lecturer can entice favourable evaluation though his lecture may have little or no substance or content. Instead of increasing learning, the lecture was filled with lively non-verbal behaviours such as lively expression, warm gestures, good appearance and varied vocal tones to engage student interest in learning. According to Merritt (2008), lecturers who used more of such non-verbal mannerisms in classrooms tend to be given higher student ratings than those who don't use them. Critics felt that this type of evaluations were not useful as the ratings that students awarded did not bear any relationship with objective measures of learning or what educators accomplished in the classroom.

There are also several other factors that can influence the validity of student evaluations. For instance, students tend to give higher ratings if they have prior subject interest where courses taken are aligned to their interest or if they know the raters are not anonymous (Marsh, 1988). In some instances, students sometimes fill in what they think the teacher would like rather than how they feel about them (Okoro, 1991). Okoro also reported that some teachers treated the students leniently in order to obtain favourable ratings from them. Hence, to what extent the student ratings of lecturers are valid and reliable is still a matter of controversy.

Although the usefulness of students' evaluation of lecturer' teaching effectiveness is still much doubted and questionable, it is still the most common tool used to assess classroom teaching (Wright, 2006). According to Abrami (2001), there is no other evaluation tool that supplies the same sort of measurable and comparable data on students' perceptions towards their teachers than having conventional system of student evaluations. While some may deem these evaluations as highly controversial and highly debated, past studies examining the reliability and validity of data collected from student evaluation have reviewed that the evaluations are reasonably reliable, valid and relatively free from bias (Centra 1993; d'Apollonia & Abrami 1997; Marsh & Dunkin 1992; Wachtel, 1998). Nevertheless, students being the recipients of teaching and learning, should be in a better position to evaluate lecturers' teaching effectiveness. The information they provide should be a good indicator of teaching performance which can help to increase personnel improvements and educational standards.

Recommendations

The results of the study merely add to the sparse or non-existent literature related to lecturers' teaching effectiveness in this institute. Therefore, further research should be conducted to add to this body of knowledge. As validity of students' ratings is still questionable, future research could use more rigorous research design as opposed to online data collection used in this study to increase validity of student evaluations. Since student ratings, alone would not be able to provide all the necessary information on lecturers' teaching effectiveness, future researcher can use more naturalistic data collections through individual interviews or real in-class observations of teaching performance. It would be interesting for future researchers to also investigate lecturers' teaching effectiveness that go beyond academic responsibilities in the classroom, such as research publications and participation in academic conferences, workshops and seminars. Such involvements have been proven to increase lecturers' teaching effectiveness in the classroom. Evaluations of lecturers performed by peers, heads of department and managing directors could also be investigated in future studies.

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