

What Students Want: A Study of Desirable Teacher Characteristics as Perceived by Their Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate student preferences and characteristics exhibited by their teachers. A comparison of these opinions was also conducted based on students' sex, age and academic achievement. The results of this study will provide a guide for universities to assist teachers to improve the quality of their teaching. A sample group of 79 students studying in a Faculty of Information Technology and Communication at a Thai university were selected using simple random sampling techniques. The research used questionnaire and interview techniques which were designed to determine participants' attitudes using a five point Likert scale with an overall reliability value of 0.938. Descriptive statistical analysis included percentage, mean and standard deviation. Findings indicate that students prefer teachers who are approachable, treat them with respect, are obviously well prepared, communicate well and exhibit a teaching style that students find easy to understand. Interestingly, student preferences were influenced by sex and age, but there was no statistical significance related to student academic achievement. This research clearly indicates that teachers who are approachable, have good communication skills, and are well prepared are more valued by students. Students are more likely to attend lectures and engage with these teachers and therefore be more successful at university.

Keywords: higher education, teaching, student attitudes, instruction

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Introduction

Being a good teacher who can engage and motivate students to learn, is one of the most important and hardest jobs in our society. The role of the teacher (teacher is the term being used in this paper and includes teachers and instructors) determines the quality of education and the capacity of citizens to continue learning lifelong, which in turn affects the economic, and political growth and stability of a country (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010; OECD, 2012). Teachers can have a powerful influence on their students across all levels of education, particularly at university where students are studying to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to enter enterprise organizations and professions at a higher level. University education is a critical component of economic development worldwide. It provides high-level knowledge, skills and the practical training essential for many professions such as teachers, doctors, engineers, environmentalists and IT personnel to name a few. Universities and their research programs drive innovation and development which in turn creates stronger local economies, supports civil society, and provides the next generation of leaders in government.

Learning is a social experience where the relationship between the teacher and the learner can determine academic success. In wholly online learning environments students experience feelings of frustration, anxiety, isolation and lack of motivation, and consistently crave communication and the face-to-face relationship with the teacher (Combes & Anderson, 2006; Combes et. al., 2011; Gulatee et. al., 2011) that is lacking in the online environment. A good teacher requires qualifications, both broad and focused knowledge in their specialist area, the ability to think critically, be flexible and adaptable to change as the teaching-learning environment is subject to change. Great teachers also have a classroom presence and are able to connect with and motivate their students to engage and learn. It is often assumed that students are only interested in the achievement of high grades, but what is it they are looking for in a teacher, especially at university level where education has traditionally been self-directed and self-initiated, ie. the student is responsible for their own learning?

This paper outlines a research study conducted at a Thai university with students from a faculty of Information and Communications Technology. It investigated student preferences and the characteristics exhibited by teachers that students considered to be the most desirable. Students who are motivated to engage with their learning and the experts who teach them are more likely to experience satisfaction, complete their courses, remain in contact with the university and return for higher education, ie. they remain part of an ongoing learning community. The results of this study provide a guide for universities to assist teachers who may be experts in their field but not teachers, to improve the quality of their teaching and provide students with satisfying learning experiences overall. Retention and the completion of courses means more graduates which leads to higher economic growth in society.

Literature review

Study at university level plays an important role for developing countries trying to become integrated into the global economy. Higher education leads to higher economic growth, a reduced incidence of poverty, a rise in the average wage, an increased share of trade in gross domestic product, and improved health outcomes for

members of that society (Matsushita, et. al. 2006; OECD, 2012; ABS, 2012; Kruss, et. al., 2015; European Commission, 2015). Countries which raise their levels of participation in higher education have been shown to benefit most and exhibit higher levels of integration in the world economy. In addition, there is growing evidence that university education empowers domestic constituencies and affects the creation and building of strong government by nurturing favourable regulatory frameworks and governance structures. These are vital to a country's ongoing political stability and efforts to increase social capital and promote social cohesion, which is an important determinant of economic growth and further development.

Teachers who work in higher education are an important aspect of creating a strong foundation for economic growth and political and social stability in countries. As a result of their efforts universities provide graduates who are not only intelligent and thinking individuals, but are also more likely to exhibit moral behaviours, be able to adapt to changing social conditions and flexible enough to learn lifelong.

Higher education institutions ... [are] seen to play an essential role in society, by fostering innovation, increasing economic development and growth, and improving more generally the wellbeing of citizens (European Commission, 2015).

Most of the research in this area deals with what educators think students want or what educators think makes a great teacher and is often based on personal or anecdotal evidence (Jenkins, 2016). Difficulties arise when asking both teachers and students about what makes a great teacher. Is the response about popularity or the characteristics and attributes of the teacher? Is the student response based on academic achievement or that personal teacher-student dynamic that motivates the student to learn and explore beyond the topic? Individual teachers are classified differently by their students. Young (2009) found that perceptions of teacher capability depended on the location of the educational institution (country), the level of students being taught and the kinds of communities in which students live, as well as the cultural background of that community. Young also found that thorough lesson planning by teachers is a prerequisite for good teaching. Teachers also need to be good leaders who have a sound knowledge base in their curriculum area and are able to implement multiple strategies in their teaching practice. Dean and Gillespie (2015) maintain that good teaching practices involve detailed understanding and knowledge as well as an understanding of developmental stages of individual students. Teachers need to be able to implement direct or explicit teaching strategies to build knowledge bridges for their students, as well as provide learning experiences which allow students to construct their own learning using authentic, every day experiences. Arnon and Reichel (2007) found students' perception of good teachers included professional knowledge, moralistic knowledge and an appropriate personality. In addition, good teachers at university level need to be experts and specialists in the subject they are teaching, as well as intellectual leaders who are researching to contribute new knowledge in their field of study. However, they need to be able to transmit this knowledge and skills to students. Teachers who develop strong professional relationships with their students, ensure their students feel they are accessible and approachable and care about their learning and them as an individual. Such teachers have an expectation that all students can and will achieve in their classroom, and they don't give up on underachievers. Effective teachers are also well prepared and organized. Most of the research regarding the perception of what constitutes a good teacher by students, includes the acquisition of more than just professional knowledge

or the achievement of student learning outcomes, a conclusion that is supported in this research.

Method

The research used quantitative method in the form of a web questionnaire to find out of how young people felt about their teachers (Steckler et. al., 1992; Williamson, 2000; Bryman, 2007; Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007; Pickard, 2007). Using the Web is cost effective and time efficient, enables the researcher to gain a snapshot of the current state of affairs, allows for a fast turn-around for data collection (Nancarrow, Pallister, & Brace, 2001), and has been shown to be a reliable alternative to telephone surveys (Braunsberger, Wybenga & Gates, 2007). Web questionnaires also afford participants with anonymity and allows them to answer the questions in a non-threatening and often familiar environment.

Questions for the questionnaire were developed using *Qualtrics* software, which is an online research survey tool that can be used for a range of data gathering purposes applicable to higher degree research. The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about participants' feelings and perceptions of the quality of teaching staff and used a five point Likert scale with an overall reliability value of 0.938. It is acknowledged that this method of recruiting students for the questionnaire may have skewed the sample towards the more ICT proficient students, however it could also be argued that university students are more likely to be proficient users of technology. It is also reasonable to assume that the sample may represent the middle to upper end of students in terms of ICT capability.

There were three parts to the questionnaire:

- demographic data collection;
- five questions about teaching (teaching and teaching techniques), teacher knowledge (professional knowledge), how teachers interacted with students (behaviors), communication skills (social) and approachability (moral). Each of the five questions also included 5 sub-questions;
- the five categories were explained to the students; and
- an open question was included where students could comment or add any additional information.

The survey data was analyzed using quantitative research method and descriptive statistics, and included quantity (N), the sum ($\sum X$), the percentage (%), the average (\bar{x}) and mean (S.D.). The data was analysed using SPSS and the data sets discussed here include the descriptive statistical analysis only. The survey was conducted in the Thai language for ease of use with data entry via drop down menus and radio buttons to ensure an uncluttered layout and accurate data entry.

Research Questions

What do students consider the most important attribute for a good teacher?

A major aim of the study was to provide information to both teaching staff and the university on how staff could improve their teaching styles and curriculum delivery so

students were satisfied with their experiences at university and therefore, more likely to continue to graduation.

Participants

The target population for this research study were students enrolled across all subjects in an Information Technology Major. Using random sampling technique (Williamson, 2000; Pickard, 2007) the number of students in the final survey group totalled 79 (33 females and 46 males). Approximately 58% of the participants were aged between 18 and 22, 26.5% were between 23-27, 5% were aged 28-32 and 10% percent were more than 32 years old. Participants were studying at all levels (undergraduate years 1-4). Demographic data is available in Table 1 below.

Variable students	Number	Percentages
Sex	79	100
Female	33	41.8
Male	46	58.2
Age	79	100
18-22	46	58.2
23-27	21	26.6
28-32	4	5.1
32+	8	10.1
Year	79	100
Year 1	6	7.6
Year 2	8	10.1
Year 3	25	31.6
Year 4	40	50.7
GPA	79	100
< 2.00	1	1.3
2.00-2.49	9	11.4
2.50-2.99	44	55.7
> 3.00	25	31.6

Table 1: Demographic data

Findings

Table 2 below provides information about desired teacher characteristics as perceived by the students, where \bar{x} is the mean and S.D. the standard deviation.

Teacher Characteristics - Perceived				
Student preferences	(\bar{x})	(SD.)	Significance >0.45	Rating
Behaviors	4.27	.578	high	1
Moral	4.26	.511	high	2
Social	4.22	.513	high	3
Professional Knowledge	4.10	.473	high	4
Teaching and Teaching Technique	4.09	.492	high	5

Table 2: Teacher characteristics – student perceptions

The dataset indicates that students prefer to have teachers who are outgoing and interact well with students (behaviours), are approachable (moral), have strong communication skills (social), evidence strong professional knowledge (academic) and employ good teaching and teaching techniques in the classroom. In the sub questions (Table 3), students indicated that good behaviours included kindness and generosity (\bar{x} = 4.35; S.D. = 0.680). Teachers who worked hard to improve regularly their teaching and skills (\bar{x} = 4.28; S.D. = 0.678), and who appeared to love teaching (\bar{x} = 4.24; S.D. = 0.664) were also important teacher attributes for students.

Teacher Characteristics - Perceived	(\bar{x})	(SD.)	Rating
Kindness / generosity	4.35	.680	1
Professional knowledge	4.35	.661	2
Justice and reasonable	4.34	.658	3
Moral	4.29	.719	4
Improving teaching skills	4.28	.678	5
Considerate	4.28	.659	6
Treats everyone equally.	4.27	.746	7
Student confidentiality	4.25	.688	8
Responsible behaviors	4.25	.630	9
Love teaching	4.24	.664	10

Table 3: Teacher characteristics, student perceptions comparison by order of importance

Students preferred teachers who were approachable (moral), who were just and reasonable in their dealings with students (\bar{x} = 4.34; S.D. = 0.658), were considerate (\bar{x} = 4.28; S.D. = 0.659), treated everyone equally (\bar{x} = 4.27; S.D. = 0.746), and exhibited responsible behaviors such as arriving on time, were obviously prepared for class and scaffolded student learning with notes and templates (\bar{x} = 4.25; S.D. = 0.630). Students also wanted teachers they could communicate easily with (social), who provided advice and treated student information in a confidential manner (\bar{x} = 4.25; S.D. = 0.688). Above all, staff who were perceived as kind and generous, were knowledgeable in their field, and approachable by students were considered to be good teachers.

Students wanted teachers who were just and reasonable in their dealings with students, treated them with respect and spoke politely to them (\bar{x} = 4.23; S.D. = 0.733), were good role models (\bar{x} = 4.22; S.D. = 0.592) and included strategies for social growth as part of classroom practice (\bar{x} = 4.20; S.D. = 0.686). Students also wanted their teachers to have strong academic knowledge, although this attribute appeared fourth on their list of preferences. They also wanted teachers to have good teaching strategies and provide clear guidelines for students to follow (\bar{x} = 4.19; S.D. = 0.681), clarify the scope of the learning required (\bar{x} = 4.11; S.D. = 0.640), develop consistent teaching techniques for students to pursue new knowledge (\bar{x} = 4.09; S.D. = 0.624), research a range of techniques to improve classroom instruction (\bar{x} = 4.06; S.D. = 0.722) and be able to teach students how to acquire deep knowledge in a subject (\bar{x} = 4.05; S.D. = 0.658).

An important finding is that teaching techniques in class, while important, were less important to students than teacher approachability and the social aspects of the teacher-learner dynamic. Teachers who were perceived as more skilled and exhibited a wide knowledge of their subject area (\bar{x} = 4.18; S.D. = 0.675), used new

technologies (\bar{x} = 4.14; S.D. = 0.674), provided clear examples (\bar{x} = 4.08; S.D. = 0.694), allowed participants to ask questions and comment in the class (\bar{x} = 4.06; S.D. = 0.627) and created a collaborative atmosphere that encouraged students' interest in work being covered in class (\bar{x} = 4.01; S.D. = 0.670) were also considered better teachers.

Student factors – gender

The comparison using t-test analysis between male and female students found that in this particular group male students preferred teachers who exhibited good teaching and teaching techniques, were approachable (moral) and had strong communication skills (social) more than females. The difference between males and females was statistically significant at the 0.05 level as shown in Table 4.

Teacher Characteristics - Perceived	Male			Female			t	Sig.
	N	(\bar{x})	SD.	N	(\bar{x})	SD.		
Teaching and Teaching Technique	46	4.113	.431	33	4.067	.572	.411	.033
Professional Knowledge	46	4.100	.421	33	4.103	.543	-.028	.105
Moral	46	4.270	.430	33	4.261	.613	.076	.017
Social	46	4.277	.448	33	4.151	.593	1.074	.043
Behavior	46	4.244	.538	33	4.206	.639	.282	.222

Table 4: Teacher characteristics – perceived, comparison by gender

Student factors – age

The comparison using f-test analysis between students of different ages found there was a significant difference between younger and older students. The average level of statistical significance was 0.05 in terms of teaching and teaching techniques and morality. Students who were aged between 28-32 years valued teaching and teaching techniques and morality more than students aged between 18-22 years. These results are available in Table 5.

Teacher Characteristics - Perceived	18-22 (n=46)		23-27 (n=21)		28-32 (n=4)		32+ (n=8)		F	Sig.
	(\bar{x})	SD.	(\bar{x})	SD.	(\bar{x})	SD.	(\bar{x})	SD.		
Teaching and Teaching Technique	4.083	.521	4.076	.475	4.45	.412	4.025	.392	3.164	.009
Professional Knowledge	4.087	.480	4.133	.483	4.45	.526	3.92	.337	1.524	.186
Moral	4.24	.529	4.31	.504	4.50	.346	4.18	.528	2.58	.028
Social	4.173	.581	4.273	.553	4.50	.408	4.25	.707	2.05	.073
Behavior	4.170	.557	4.229	.581	4.40	.490	4.475	.623	.956	.468

Table 5: Teacher characteristics – perceived, comparison by age group

An interesting finding in this study is the fact that there was no difference between students with different GPAs (Grade Point Average), indicating that students across the academic spectrum felt the same way about what makes a good teacher.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study of Thai university students, participants' attitudes to their teachers are based on personal attributes rather than professional knowledge or ability. What they want most from their teachers is someone who treats them with kindness and generosity. While professional knowledge and good teaching techniques are important (fourth and fifth), teachers who are outgoing and interact well with students (behaviours), are approachable (moral) and have strong communication skills (social) are perceived as better teachers. Students value attributes such as just and reasonable behaviour, consideration, confidentiality and a passion for teaching above professional knowledge and teaching ability and the use of different teaching techniques.

The results of this study indicate that students respond to the personal relationship that exists as part of the teacher-learner dynamic between students and teachers and provides an interesting insight into the teacher attributes students value the most. Research by Pallinia and Baiocob (2015) found that the influence of attachment experiences on the teacher-student relationship is very important. Research by Mikulincer and Shaver (2012) found that adults who had had early avoidance attachment experiences more easily dismissed or doubted others' attitudes, and adults who had had experiences of overprotection were more frequently vigilant towards others' attitudes, while adults secure in their attachment experiences responded more positively to help requests. In order to develop the teacher-learner dynamic teachers cannot ignore the influence of the teacher's role in developing their relationship (own attachment experiences) with students, because this has been shown to have a significant effect on student satisfaction and attitudes to learning.

Scherer's (2009) research had similar results to this study. He found that teachers who help or are perceived to be open to helping students (approachable) are more likely to have students who will improve their achievement. Scherer found that the top five student preferences that characterized a good teacher were approachability, the teacher was kind and generous, just and reasonable, consistently tried to improve their teaching and treated everyone equally. Alrubail (2016) also found that the intelligence or professional knowledge of a teacher does not automatically make them a great teacher, and concluded that a great teacher should be much more than just credentials, experience and intelligence. While it could be argued that cultural differences may be an influence on how students react and engage with different teachers, the fact that the results in this research are similar to other studies indicates that the student experience and how students feel about teachers is not dissimilar across educational levels and organizations worldwide.

Teaching is a very difficult profession because it is more than delivering content in an environment where traditionally, the emphasis has been on a strict behavioral code of objectivity and neutrality between the teacher and the student, and the completion of set tasks. Education in the twenty-first century has moved beyond the lecture-style presentation of content and students want and expect their teachers to be empathic and attentive to students' needs in both face-to-face and virtual teaching-learning environments. Student perceptions of their teachers are important as this can affect student engagement and success, particularly at university level where the students are adult learners. Students remember good teachers and the learning experiences

provided by them. For universities where staff are often experts in their field, but not necessarily teachers, this research indicates that there is more to teaching than just the delivery of content or using lots of technology during class. It is the personal relationship that is part of the teacher-learner dynamic that is highly valued by students. Teachers who establish close relationships with their students are more likely to graduate students who are satisfied with their university experiences, return to the university and participate in higher degree education, and become empathic citizens.

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