

What does a satisfied student look like? Visual representations of satisfied students in Business and Management (0292)

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Introduction and Context

While higher education institutions (HEIs) are only too aware of the marketised nature of the HE landscape, there is less clarity over how university managers and educators might best respond to the notion of student-as-customer (Scott, 1999). Both constituencies must confront the challenge of deepening their understanding of, and formulating responses to, students' needs and desires. These developments are taking place against a background where, for some, the notion that educators' professional judgment ought to take a back seat to meeting 'customer' demands is deeply problematic (Marshall and Craig 1998) and where the very concepts of student and customer are in conflict (Brennan and Bennington, 1998). At the same time, students are being asked to make a growing financial contribution to their education; hardly surprising then that they are often seen as increasingly instrumental and demanding.

These trends may be particularly acute in university Business Schools. Harrington and Booth recently reported that "*Business school staff increasingly complain of students who are disaffected, de-motivated and disengaged.*" (2003: 7) In their study of pedagogical challenges faced by Business and Management educators, Ottewill and Macfarlane found similar evidence of a lack of student motivation and identified what they called an '*expectation gap*'. Unsurprisingly, the authors also found that, in turn, tutors' motivation was being negatively affected by this trend. On the whole, educators are resistant to students applying these service expectations to learning and teaching.

Within this context, the Association of Business School (ABS) research on UG business degree courses concluded that: "Admitting one teaches research methods is unlikely to impress acquaintances, win friends or influence people. The subject possesses a peculiar association with boredom, lack of relevance, and with all that is held to be worst about academia: an obsession with theory, with trivial, arcane distinctions and with pointless detail." (Harrington and Booth, 2003:7) Certainly, our own experience of teaching research methods has presented us with a considerable challenge to motivate students and communicate the relevance of the course content. Funding from a teaching innovation project on improving student engagement around methods offered us the opportunity to develop new forms of engaging students around their experiences.

Methodology

Applying visual methods is becoming an increasingly popular topic in a range of contexts. Students participating in a lecture on qualitative methods were asked to draw a satisfied student, with the proviso that there was enough information for an

observer to know why the student was satisfied. Over 8 years a total of 1277 drawings have been produced by students on a variety of degree programmes (PG and UG).

These drawings have been analysed (using NVivo to code the picture drawing on a combination of thematic and discourse analysis approaches) including emotional temporality and a number of other elements.

Findings and Discussion

Our approach was concerned with the collection and analysis of visual data. The students were asked to '*Draw a picture of a 'satisfied student'*' with the proviso that the lecturer could tell why the student was satisfied

The pictures were then collected and used as the basis of an initial class plenary focusing on the collection of visual data and some preliminary analysis was conducted.

This activity was followed by formal input on Discourse Analysis approaches presenting a range of options concerning visual data analysis (e.g. narrative, temporal, emotional, and spatial). Students were then encouraged to discuss the utility of these analytical frames and reflect on the lecturer's critical analysis of the composite picture, provoking significant classroom debate around the meanings and significance of being satisfied and satisfaction.

Initial analysis of the students' pictures revealed a remarkable thematic homogeneity. The images tended to emphasise hoped-for future outcomes as opposed to, for example, a sense of satisfaction with the process of education. Many pictures presented graduation day scenes featuring students clutching a degree certificate in one hand (often labelled *first class* or *2.1*) and an alcoholic drink in the other and thought bubbles containing symbols of a desired lifestyle (pound/dollar signs; empty diaries/desks; nightclubs; houses; happy relationships), data that serve to reinforce instrumentalist notions of the higher education experience (see McCulloch, 2009 for a full discussion of the 'student as consumer' metaphor).

Conclusions

This research was tasked with identifying whether drawing reveals anything which orthodox data collection methods do not, and thus whether the data tells us something about the student experience. The most significant outcome is the suggestion that those factors which students consider the most important to their experience differ from those highlighted in literature perhaps redolent of some of the framings associated with student generated approaches to rating experiences such as RateMyProf. This prevalence of certain elements over others brings with it an interesting argument; whether those elements which feature so regularly are being drawn due to their relative importance to students or, more likely, due to a satisfaction gap.

References

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