

Personality and Ability Traits of Teachers: Student Perceptions

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Abstract

The study attempts to explore higher education students' perceptions of proficient teachers, which is of importance to them in their learning. Since no effective system of teacher evaluation was in place in Pakistan until recently to distinguish between good and poor teachers, research shows that poor teaching quality is pervasive in higher education institutions in the country. The study analyzed students' views of good and poor teaching through two focus group discussions with students from two engineering schools in Pakistan. The thematic coding of data yielded the desired outcomes of students' views according to the personality and ability traits their teachers demonstrated. It was revealed that teachers possessed both categories of characteristics to a certain extent with the shortcomings of approachability, ability to bring knowledge to the level of the students, low emotional intelligence and poor communication ability resulting there from. It is expected that action to improve teaching quality would result in awareness of the problem.

Keywords: behavioral theory, cognitive theory, effective teaching, personality characteristics, teacher behavior

Introduction

The renewed importance of teaching quality and the increasing evidence arising out of student evaluations of their teachers in the higher education context establishes the relevance of examining the vigor and deficiencies in the teaching of higher education faculty. However, the very idea of asking students to verbalize their learning experiences from the perspective of the kind of teaching they have experienced is problematic (Riasati & Bagheri, 2014), especially given the fact that the quality of teaching in the universities in Pakistan is a matter of concern and yet students remain reluctant to be very open about it due to their fear of receiving poor grades. The justification to classify teachers in higher education in Pakistan as 'good'

and ‘poor’ arises from the fact that until the last decade, teachers in institutions of higher learning were appointed on the basis of only degrees, political clout and nepotism with no system of evaluating teacher effectiveness characteristics. Thus, there is a strong need to stimulate interest in the issue if the quality of teaching and learning is to be improved and educational programs are to flourish. According to Marsh and Roche (1997), good or effective teaching has several measures and teaching evaluations should also include these several aspects. Given that the success of academic endeavors depends majorly on faculty competence, qualifications and engagement (Ibad, 2016), this researcher has chosen to examine teacher traits in the domains of personality and ability as arising out of student perceptions of their teachers and classifying them as ‘good’ or ‘poor’.

With this importance attributed to student views of their teachers’ ability to facilitate learning, the objectives of student assessments of teachers are of benefit in terms of decisive feedback about teacher effectiveness. This would lead students to make appropriate choices of courses of study and faculty, permit academic administrators to evaluate teacher performance with a view to making forays in research aimed at teacher development and learning improvement (Marsh, 1983; Marsh & Dunkin, 1992).

Having assigned importance to student assessments of teacher effectiveness, Fernstermacher and Richardson (2005) endorse that higher education student learning outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness and quality of their teachers. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate student views of the effective characteristics of their teachers aimed at characterizing good and poor teachers with a view to promoting teacher improvement.

Teaching quality in Pakistan needs considerable improvement in order to enhance the quality of learner outcomes and student participation in teacher evaluation exercises would produce purposeful observations allowing teachers to make the quality of teaching better. This researcher aims to uncover the characteristics of effective teachers important to students in their learning endeavors. In this way the gap between the assumed and real effectiveness would be uncovered to assist in teacher development programs. At this point, it is important to mention that ‘good teaching’ and ‘poor teaching’ have been interchanged and operationalized with ‘good teacher’ and ‘poor teacher’ from time to time in researches since the ideas

and actions happen in an environment in which teachers function and therefore, the character of the environment is dependent on the personality of the teacher (Leinhardt, 1988).

Research Question

What good and poor teacher characteristics are evident through student perceptions as significant features resulting from engagement with their teachers?

Literature Review

Coming to what personality characteristics and ability features contain, it may be said that personality includes inborn features which lie in the perceptual sphere, whereas ability comprises cognitive features of bringing theory to practical instances (Raymond, 2008). The roots of teacher personality construct arise out of Skinner's behavioral theory (1957) and relates to teaching. It spotlights the behaviors of teachers, which render them as effective or ineffective. According to Shulman (2004) behavior comprises foundation, interplay, importance of objectives and assistance as the range of interconnected actions required for good teaching. To further the understanding of good teaching based on teacher characteristics or personality traits rests in the relationships between teachers and students. Good teachers are surrounded by human qualities of understanding, self-assurance, regard for others, empathy, fair play, appreciation, adaptability, objectivity, interest, friendliness, maturity, credibility, trustworthiness, humor, polished delivery and ability to engage which allows them to influence students (Beishuzen, Hof, Putten, Bouwmeester, & Asscher, 2001; Chickering & Gamson, 1991). This ability to influence students is important since it is closely linked to learning and effective teaching (Walsh & Maffei, 1994).

Goleman (2002) added the element of emotional intelligence as crucial to effective teaching because it includes the management of relationships, leadership, knowledge and management of self. These attributes allow teachers to mentor, inspire, control and advice students. However, this personality view of teaching is not complete in itself to distinguish between good and bad teaching.

The ability perspective arises from theories of behavior and identification of behaviors of effective teachers. McBer (2000) associated teacher behavior

with student performance with the belief that teaching effectiveness arises from knowledge, behavior, skills and experiences. Ability features were derived out of the cognitive theory of Bandura (1997), which considers the creation of meaning as important and when applied to teaching, it emphasizes the intellectual growth of students. Anderson (2004) described good teachers as goal achievers, whether the goal setting was their own or pre-set for them and linked to student learning. Fuhrman and Grasha (1983) supported this view by stating that teachers' ability to create meaningful objectives, establish classroom environment, and specify student behaviors conducive to teaching and learning were classified as effective. This process product approach is debatable since student outcomes are measurable whereas teacher processes are not measurable. These realizations lead to the cognitive movement where Bandura (1997) enhanced the ability perspectives with the inclusion of teacher understanding in teacher effectiveness. Fuhrmann and Grasha (1993) postulated that the compatibility of instruction and student understanding encourage the ability to be productive in thinking and problem solving in learners. Saafin (2005) is of the view that students are motivated and learn in the presence of certain teacher behaviors and characteristics such as respect for students, thorough subject knowledge and good presentation skills. Borich (2000) corroborates that competence in organizational skills and well-structured presentations contribute to teacher effectiveness.

When looking at teaching from a holistic perspective, these two categorizations of good teaching as in personality characteristics and ability features, serve as the basis for determining teaching quality in this research. Previous research reveals the multidimensional nature of teaching and the evidence of nine characteristics (Marsh, 1982). The research perspective on the basis of personality and ability constructs brings to light that the nine dimensions of Marsh (1982) are present in these two constructs and justify these as the basis of this research.

Vygotsky (1978), in his social constructivist theory supported the belief that the merging of perceptual and humanistic qualities in teaching lead to teaching effectiveness. This is achieved when understanding is created in the mind of the learner through the presentation of knowledge leading to cooperation between students and teachers. In this situation the mind of the learner is considered valuable and the facilitation of learning leads to student autonomy making students accountable for their own attainments. Teacher facilitation becomes paramount

when learners can handle questions and deduce their own outcomes. This renders the process as more important than the output and leads to the conclusion that in spite of other variables used in qualifying teaching as good, research on the cumulative aspect of good teaching includes signs of personality as well as ability characteristics in the good teacher (Raymond, 2008).

To conclude, Skinner's behavioral theory and Bandura's cognitive theory are inclusive of the positive characteristics of good teachers which are reflected in personality traits of caring, communicativeness, cooperativeness, kindness, accessibility, ability to motivate, and having a positive attitude. This paper then examines teaching on the basis of these two constructs and is a deviation from other methods applied in earlier research to determine the same by this researcher (Ibad, 2016; Ibad & Sharjeel, 2017). Since research on this perspective of examining teacher behavior and performance is non-existent in Pakistan this researcher felt it imperative to pursue this line of inquiry.

Methodology

The study was undertaken with the intention of bringing forth student perceptions regarding what good and poor teaching characteristics are present in engagement with their teachers. The lack of research in this area of teaching effectiveness calls for further research forays in this direction. The researcher aimed to employ a qualitative method of analytical investigation in order to ascertain what meanings should be ascribed to the phenomena derived through the views of the respondents of the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). More appropriately, the study examines forms of experience or knowledge based on the inner or original experiences of the participants and thus, is ascribed to the research domain of phenomenology (Smith, 2003). According to Husserl (2001) phenomenology is a method of inquiry which allows for the description of things as they seem in observed occurrences and how they happen. Within the parameters of qualitative inquiry, the research will use focus group interviews to investigate respondent experiences in detail for the purpose of generating data for clarifying and understanding the phenomena. Focus group inquiry to be used by the researcher would be fitting for this inductive study wherein inclusive understanding of the issues surrounding the situation would be derived from the views and exposure of the respondents allowing the researcher to better understand the phenomena in question (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The outcomes of the study could be of use to both teachers and academic

administrators in developing programs for the improvement of teaching in higher education institutions since students possess awareness of the characteristics they want to find in their teachers.

The researcher used two focus group data for the study. Each group comprised six participants, that is, data were derived from 12 participants of both genders between ages 20 and 24 thereby amply ensuring abundance and richness of data. The participants belonged to two engineering schools in Pakistan ranked in two different categories according to the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan's current university rankings. Thus, the highest and lowest level of institutions were fairly represented and involved to provide sufficient diversity of views.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit participants' views relevant to the objectives of the study which were subjected to thematic coding for interpretation. Although the focus group discussions were conducted in English which is not the native language in Pakistan, there were several instances of code switching to Urdu by the respondents, as a result of which the researcher had to resort to translating such responses to English. The participants were given a letter introducing them to the research and its purpose along with a consent form. The letter allowed them to either accept or decline participation as per the British Educational Research Association (BERA) document 2011 guidelines for ethical standards in research. Complete confidentiality of participants, their institutions, and their views was maintained.

Findings and Discussion

The study aimed at establishing the importance of student views on what constitutes good and poor teaching since the outcomes are of value to improving teacher performance (Harvey, 2011). In this regard the effectiveness of teachers in enhancing student learning and performance is of significance and their effectiveness is not to be disregarded.

The respondents answered the focus group questions as follows:

The first question asked the participants to articulate on the particular characteristics of a teacher, who could be considered good or effective as well as poor or ineffective. The replies brought forward characteristics from both personality

and ability constructs of teachers. The positive characteristics included personality traits of caring, communicativeness, cooperativeness, kindness, accessibility, ability to motivate and having a positive attitude. As regards ability traits, the participants considered the ability to transmit knowledge, demonstrate ability to present knowledge and possess research skills along with clarity of concepts. The negative characteristics according to the respondents were lack of approachability and high knowledge level, which the teacher was unable to simplify to the level of the students.

Student Expectations of Desirable Teacher Characteristics

The participant's responses about personality and ability traits were related to both what they experienced and what they expected of their teachers. Regarding the personality traits that emerged, the trait of caring considered by Saafin (2005) and Borich (2000) as a characteristic of good teaching when the teaching environment is supportive and friendly is reflected by one respondent thus:

“In my point of view, the teacher should be interactive with students and he should be well, eh, well-managed and well... planned in the topic which he's going to discuss, and there should be a feedback from students and also from teachers, and he should be intellectual and he should be uh well managed about his topic... of study.”

Other respondents had this to say about the attitude and cooperativeness of their teachers:

“It's brilliant. I mean... when we go together then they cooperate with us. Ma'am, personality is good.”

“A teacher's attitude is very important for the class, and that of our teachers is brilliant. In class, interaction with the students is very good. I mean, you can easily do any questioning and easily they give its answer. And... I mean... they don't exhibit bad behavior.”

One student had this to say about the teachers' ability to transmit knowledge, demonstrate ability to present knowledge, and having the relevant knowledge as supported by Beishuzen, Hof, van Putten, Bouwmeester, & Asscher, (2001)

“Okay. Basically, should have good personality. Should have very much knowledge of skills. Uh, other than theory, uh, should prefer, uhm, practical, uh, because both are important.... Just uh... both uh... eh should, uh, must have both practical and theoretical knowledge.”

About the ability traits of good teachers another teacher said:

“The teachers in our department... with them, we are completely satisfied because the lecture they give, we completely understand. Its preparation is also absolutely brilliant... about the lecture, Ma'am, they are cooperative. And I mean... if there is any problem, go to them in their office and then even they help us....”

Regarding the ability to communicate and friendliness, Raymond (2001) considers this as important to close relationships with students. One respondent expressed this to support and also mentioned an example of poor teaching:

“The teachers know how much to teach the students. They don't burdenize them so much that the other... students cannot understand anything, because sometimes it so happens that (subject matter) goes over the student's head since they teach too much. And secondly, seeing the teachers, students become motivated... so even we want to learn so much that we can reach their level.”

Another respondent remarked:

“So, there are different kinds of teachers. But there are teachers who are very friendly, who are very communicative, who can understand feelings of

students. He doesn't say that why you are asking questions. He says, 'Yeah, it's a good question. You can ask more question.' If, sometime, he doesn't know the answer of that question. He says, 'I don't know the answer of... now... yet. I will...search for it.' So... I would like to say that the teacher must be friendly, he must entertain the questions...."

Some more views of effective teachers were as such:

"Okay, uhm, the most effective teacher I have come across has opted for more of a discussion-based class rather than just reading off the slides. Uh, we're cross... there's cross-questioning in the class, our opinions are heard and discussed upon. Uh, we're also shown practical examples, be it videos on YouTube or is... actual projects."

"Uhm, the most effective teacher... encourages to actually pursue our interest fields and actually pursue knowledge and information on our own means instead of it being readily told that this is what you will be researching or working on. We're encouraged to seek out topics that interest us, and the instructor encourages that communication which enables it... it to be a mutual process...and that sort empowers you to actually take more responsibility for...learning."

Finally, one added:

"Uh, in my mind, the teachers I can think of who, at this time, are most effective... about him, he is not only, uh, as said earlier, he's not restricted to slides only. He give us the knowledge and... knowledge that is related... that is related to a practical field. I mean, it leans more towards learning."

The remarks of the participants reveal their ability to identify the traits of good and poor teaching and their expectations both inside and outside the classroom. The identification of personality and ability traits of teachers establishes the fact that

personality traits have their place in the sphere of perceptual knowledge, whereas ability traits being more objective in nature fall in the domain of teacher expertise and experience (Raymond, 2008). According to Yodez, Shaw, Siyakwazi, and Kaarina, (1993), personality attributes of the teacher are reflected in the relationship between the teacher and students and is an essential constituent of good teaching. To further corroborate these views, Rogers and Frieburg (1969) considered good teachers as those individuals possessing human features of caring, empathy, respect, fair play, friendliness, sensitivity, and a host of other personality attributes.

The second question pertained to the ability traits of teachers as in their level of knowledge, skills and experience. What was forthcoming from the participants was that the level of knowledge was highly reflecting a high IQ; however, EQ was low resulting in their inability to create interest, bring about clarity and understanding of concepts due to barriers in communication.

Student Perceptions of the Ability Traits of Good and Poor Teachers

One participant expressed the characteristics of good and poor teachers in this regard in this way:

“Well, the teachers I’ve come across are all PhD’s. ... they have the knowledge, but to bring that knowledge to the students is sometimes a problem.... Some are amazing. They know how to come down to your level. So, some of them do that, but some just think of it as their job to just convey the information, and understanding of the student is not their responsibility. So, I think they don’t put in a lot of effort in the slides and google material... they just convey the information and leave the classroom.”

Another participant remarked:

“Yeah, they’re open to questions. You can interact with them even after the class, but... they don’t develop your interest in that subject. So, if they come and start just... literally stating information from Google, you’re not interested because you don’t know where it’s implemented or how it’s going

to... benefit the society or yourself. So, for me, if I'm not building interest, I will not be asking questions later."

Regarding the research skills of teachers, one participant said:

"Uh, as we're talking about the general perceptions, not a particular teacher, so the... some of the teachers are very good in research, but, uh, they don't have the skills to, uh, ...pursue the, uh, skills. They cannot deliver because, if you look at it, then one in ten teachers...don't deliver."

To further this, another participant stated:

"Uh, the issue here is exactly that the level of the teachers that prevails, that is very high. Some levels have PhD teachers; they come and teach at their own level. Some students pick up. They have extra background knowledge. They can do very good research. You ask them any question, they'll answer it. But, for them to convey new ideas to you in this way, there are some teachers who are unable to convey them in the manner, I mean, at a student's level the way they can convey... should convey, in that manner."

Regarding student understanding, one respondent said:

"Yes, yes, they... they do, I mean, for them it is that, through that whole process of how a it is difficult for a student to understand something, they have to completely lower their level then explain. Some students pick up facts, some cannot."

About the relevance of the teaching another teacher said:

"The good thing about teachers here is that they give you practical knowledge. The other great thing about them is...around eighty percent of the teachers are such who reach your level and explain things. Ask them any

question then they start from the mere basics, even if the whole class goes to waste. So, maybe ten to twenty percent of teachers are such who skip. They don't explain much, but they answer your questions...."

As far as communication went, a participant said:

"...it doesn't seem to me that I've found any teacher who does not communicate well or at the... at the, uh, required level of the students. Communication is very good. Uhm, uh, for some teachers, I can say that, uh, some... some teachers definitely have this issue that they don't clearly define the learning objectives as... as you asked the question that what are the learning objectives that we have to go through. Their... their... their way of co... uh, okay. So, their lecture is very general. It is not specific to the learning objectives or specific to the course. That deviates a little."

About knowledge and experience one remarked:

"Knowledge... experience. Uh, whatever he transfers to me, I compare it to the internet. So, what I get from there. So, if internet makes it clear that what I have read from, uh, internet, that clears that the teacher has told the same things. So, means he has... he has expertise. He knows every Uh, with regards to experience, none are at hundred percent. There are also good teachers and there are also bad teachers. And in our institute, in our department, mashAllah, there are quite brilliant teachers. Learnt a lot of knowledge from them. Knowledge they (teachers) have with respect to books, with respect to the topic, is a lot, and they give us a lot of response".

In terms of performance one participant remarked:

"Ma'am, with regards to performance, they should have a speciality in their subject. I mean, whatever they convey to us, we should understand. I mean, it shouldn't be that they come in class, teach and say 'Go and do this on the

net.' But we have come here so teachers should teach us in their own way so then only will we understand anything. Like this, we cannot understand from the internet."

Another added:

"It's not depend on experience. It's not necessary that a person who has experience can also become a good teacher. A teacher has a personality. A teacher... a teacher is a role model for a student... so, if he interacts with the student in a good manner then only will the student be able to l The other thing is that, if he is going to say something very quickly then even students cannot gain anything. And if he does it slowly, then even things will be left. So, it should be in between. In his teaching methodology, the teacher should be very interactive, he should see to students. If he has to write something on the board, he should write in a certain time frame and, during that time, students should not be doing any other work. They should just focus on the board. And he (the teacher) should say such things that make the students attentive."

Regarding teaching methodology a participant said:

"In methodology, what is also important is how the teacher delivers his lecture. That is very important. I mean, not so much that you become friendly and students completely deviate from the topic, or that you teach very strictly. It should be normal so that interaction can be done easily."

To bring closure to the discussion on good and poor teaching in terms of actual and desirable personality and ability traits of teachers, Pakistani higher education students were quite clear about the characteristics their teachers possessed. The traits of good teachers were well represented in student views as being interactive, having a good attitude, being accessible, possessing knowledge of the subject, having the ability to deliver, possessing good communication skills and adequate knowledge, having the ability to motivate, having respect for students

and demonstrating good presentation and research skills. However, regarding bad teachers, students expressed their views abundantly as in lack of ability to bring knowledge to the level of students, poor presentation skills, inability to develop interest in the subject, lack of clear objectives and low emotional quotient. Student perceptions are based on real experiences and match researcher outcomes as found in literature. Lowyck (1994) consider the intellectual character of teaching as the determining factor of teaching quality. Shulman (2004) adds the ability to reason, ability to deduce, make decisions, solve problems, prepare and analyze as contributing to the intellectual character of teaching. Further to this, Fuhrman and Grasha (1983) propound that teachers whose instructional methods match students' intellectual features present the ability to advance student productivity through the use of genuine thinking, problem solving and clear organization and presentation of information.

The students in this study were both confident and competent in giving their judgments. As regards the research question, it appears that although several features of good teaching are evident, many are indicators of poor teaching and the literature review supports students' views as a credible source of determining teacher performance and endorsing classification of teaching traits according to personality and ability dimensions. Thus, there is a strong need for the professional development of faculty if academic programs are to succeed and achieve their objectives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study indicate that personality and ability traits are what students based their views of good and poor teachers. Given the flawed system of faculty hiring in higher education in Pakistan, teacher induction programs need to be developed, faculty must be made aware of the importance of students' views of teaching, and renewal of faculty contracts must be linked to performance evaluations. Policy makers need to be equipped with effective evaluation instruments to gauge faculty performance, which includes characteristics of effective teachers. This would help keep abreast of the progressive demands of the changing classroom climate. Additionally, teacher training could be tailored to equip teachers with the appropriate mindsets and skills to meet the challenges in their profession. This study could serve as a basis for determining teacher effectiveness hitherto unexplored in the Pakistani context.

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