

Teachers who Attract or Repel: A Glimpse at Student Expectations of their Tertiary-Level Teachers

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Abstract. This study examined student expectations of their tertiary-level teachers, highlighting specific teacher characteristics that either attract or turn off students from their professors. Four hundred and one (401) students were randomly selected from three teacher education campuses in the north and south of Trinidad as well as Tobago. Findings of the study revealed that students generally had high expectations of their teachers on two levels: (i) pedagogical competence and (ii) discipline competence. Findings also revealed that the three teacher characteristics that attract students to their professors were caring for the welfare of students; professionalism; and teaching style. Conversely, students listed unprofessionalism; teacher aggressive attitude; and lack of concern for students as things that repel them from their professors.

Keywords: student expectations; tertiary-level teachers; teacher characteristics

Introduction

University students generally welcome the opportunity to choose their lecturers. However, some professors become self-conscious when only a few individuals select their courses while the majority of students gravitate to other instructors. Increasingly, students are expecting more of their tertiary-level teachers in terms of pedagogical competence, discipline competence, and endearing personal characteristics.

In their study on the best and worst university instructors, Fortson and Brown (1998) found that the best instructors were those who used a variety of teaching methods and good course organization. Poor course organization was the characteristic that most influenced students' choice of their worst instructors. Other studies identified favourite teachers as those who possessed sound content knowledge and pedagogical skills as opposed to professors who

focussed more on research rather than teaching (Tam, Heng, & Jiang, 2009). Similar studies identified effective communication, enthusiasm, well-organized lessons, and sound knowledge as top qualities of effective university teachers (Malik & Bashir, 2015; Singh, Pai, Sinha, Kaur, Soe & Barua, 2013; Al-Mohaimed, 2015).

Student conceptions of the ideal or most effective teacher fall into three major categories: (1) knowledge of the subject taught (2) personal qualities (3) knowledge of teaching and learning (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Crawford & Bradshaw, 1968; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie & Minor, 2001; Douna, Kyridis, Zagkos, Ziontaki, & Pandis, 2015; Obermiller, Ruppert, & Atwood, 2012; Slate, La Prairie, Schulte, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Epting, Zinn, Buskist & Buskist, 2004; Korte, Lavin & Davies, 2013).

Studies have shown that excellent professors also tend to exhibit specific personal characteristics beyond instructional practices. Gurung and Vespia (2007) posit that “professors should not think just about preparation for lectures but also about preparation for being in the classroom” (p.9). Findings of these studies also revealed that students generally enjoyed the teaching and learning process better when lecturers were friendly and accommodating, interacted well with students, and paid attention to personal grooming. McLean (2001) concurred that personal qualities were more important to students than other technical aspects of the job such as well-organized lesson plans and lectures. Students also expect their instructors to have a good sense of humour, maintain interesting class sessions, as well as demonstrate caring and concern for students (Fortson & Brown, 1998; Strage, 2008; Feldman, 1998; Goa & Liu, 2013).

Since the education process can also be considered as a social process, students expect their instructors to go beyond traditional roles of lecturing to embrace more social aspects of learning (Giroux, 1988). Therefore, more is demanded of the teacher’s time outside of the formal classroom setting for consultation and feedback on students’ performance.

Although there is a proliferation of studies on the ideal professor conducted in Europe, North America, and to a lesser extent Asia, not much has been done in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean to investigate student perceptions of their tertiary-level teachers. This current study seeks to expand the discourse to the Caribbean region.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine what students expect of their university teachers and what specific teacher characteristics attract or turn off students from the teaching/learning process. Three research questions served to focus this investigation:

1. What are students’ expectations of their tertiary-level teachers?
2. What teacher characteristics attract students most to their tertiary-level teachers?

3. What teacher characteristics turn off students most from their tertiary-level teachers?

Methodology

Participants

A random sample of 401 students was selected to participate in the study. These respondents were both full-time and part-time students enrolled in the University of Trinidad and Tobago Bachelor of Education programme at three campuses located in the northern and southern parts of Trinidad and well as Tobago.

Instrument

This study utilized a survey instrument with 20 items covering three objectives arising from the research questions outlined above. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, respondents were required to express their opinions regarding what they expect of their tertiary-level teachers. The instrument was pilot-tested and feedback from that activity was used to improve the instrument before formally distributing the questionnaires to the research sample. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure internal consistency or reliability for 6 of the items used in the Likert scale. The result was .847, which indicates a high level of internal consistency for the items used in the scale.

Procedure and Analyses

As part of the survey, participants were asked share their expectations of their tertiary-level teachers. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were conducted to provide information about the sample used in the study. Frequency tables were also developed for recording and tabulating demographic responses with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The demographic responses included questions related to gender, degree programme, status (part-time or full-time) and level (Year I, II, III, or IV).

Results

Four hundred and one (401) undergraduate students participated in a survey which required them to share their expectations of their professors. These participants were located in the north (40.1%) and south (42.4%) of Trinidad as well as Tobago (17.5%). As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants, 72.3%, (n= 290) were females, while 27.7%, (n= 111) were males.

Frequency analysis of the data also revealed that the majority of the respondents, 64.3% (n=258) were part-time students, while 32.4% (n=130) engaged in full-time studies. Table 1 also shows a distribution of students according to the year of study in the undergraduate programme.

Table 1. Demographic Data on Participants

Demographic	N (%)
<i>Geographic Location</i>	
North	161 (40.1)
South	170 (42.4)
Tobago	70 (17.5)
Total	401 (100)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	111 (27.7)
Female	290 (72.3)
<i>Status</i>	
Part-time	130 (32.4)
Full-time	258 (64.3)
Missing	13 (3)
<i>Level</i>	
Year I	56 (14)
Year II	131 (32.7)
Year III	115 (28.7)
Year IV	85 (21.2)
Missing	14 (3.5)

Student responses to the survey questionnaire were grouped in the following three categories: (1) student pedagogical expectations (2) discipline and pedagogical competence (3) teacher characteristics. As shown in Table 2, all of the respondents, irrespective of their level or status, indicated very high pedagogical expectations of their professors. They all expected their professors to find out how they learn best; use appropriate teaching/learning methods; and set high standards for teaching and learning.

Table 2. Student Pedagogical Expectations

Demographic	Pedagogical Expectations		
	Find out how I learn best	Use of appropriate teaching/learning methods	Set high standards for teaching and learning
<i>Level</i>			
Year I	46/56	53/56	55/56
Year II	105/131	125/131	125/131
Year III	100/115	111/115	111/115
Year IV	71/85	79/85	77/85
Total	322/387	368/387	368/387
<i>Status</i>			
Part-time	109/130	123/130	125/130
Full-time	322/388	369/388	371/388
Total			

In addition to having high pedagogical expectations of their teachers, participants of the study also expected their professors to keep up-to-date with developments in their specific disciplines; use appropriate assessment methods; as well as provide prompt feedback on their assignments. Table 3 provides information on student expectations about their professors' discipline competence. As shown in Table 3, 97% (n=374) of the respondents indicated that their professors should always keep up-to-date with content knowledge in their specific fields, while 98% (n=378) of the participants felt that their teachers should explore appropriate assessment measures to evaluate student learning, and 95% (n=366) of the respondents required prompt feedback from their professors on their class assignments. Review of the data revealed a high level of consistency in the responses among participants regardless of their level or status. All participants had high expectations regarding teachers' competence in their various subject domains.

Table 3. Discipline Competence

Demographic	Discipline Competence		
	I expect my teacher to always keep up-to-date with content knowledge	I expect my teacher to use appropriate assessment methods	I expect my teacher to provide prompt feedback on my assignments
<i>Level</i>			
Year I	54/56	55/56	54/56
Year II	127/131	127/131	125/131
Year III	114/115	114/115	111/115
Year IV	79/85	82/85	76/85
Total	374/387	378/387	366/387
<i>Status</i>			
Part-time	250/258	251/258	243/257
Full-time	124/130	128/130	123/130
Total	374/388	379/388	366/388

Participants were asked to report their level of confidence in their professors' ability to effectively teach concepts; conduct fair assessment; and model what good teaching is all about. These responses were based on a table which indicated 0 - 30% as *no confidence*; 40 - 80% as *moderate confidence*; and 90-100% as *complete confidence*. As shown in Table 4a, the majority of participants (67.7%) reported moderate confidence in their teacher's ability to effectively teach concepts, with 19.3% indicating no confidence at all, and 13.5% reporting complete confidence in their professors' ability to teach concepts effectively.

Table 4a. Pedagogical Competence

		Teachers' ability to effectively teach concepts			
		No Confidence	Moderate Confidence	Complete confidence	Total
<i>Level</i>	Year I	12	32	11	55
	Year II	24	88	14	126
	Year III	16	77	18	111
	Year IV	20	57	6	83
	Total	72	254	49	375
<i>Status</i>	Part-time	61	154	34	249
	Full-time	12	99	17	128
	Total	73	253	51	377

Participants indicated similar responses when asked about their teachers' ability conduct fair assessment. The data presented in Table 4b show that 64.5% of the respondents had moderate confidence, while 19.3% indicated no confidence, and 16.3% said that they had complete confidence in their teachers' ability to conduct fair assessment of their work.

Table 4b. Pedagogical Competence

		Teachers' ability to conduct fair assessment			
		No Confidence	Moderate Confidence	Complete Confidence	Total
<i>Level</i>	Year I	10	37	8	55
	Year II	31	75	22	128
	Year III	17	50	24	111
	Year IV	15	62	7	84
	Total	73	244	61	378
<i>Status</i>	Part-time	53	154	44	251
	Full-time	20	91	18	129
	Total	73	245	62	380

When asked about their professors' ability to effectively model what good teaching is all about, only 12.6% indicated complete confidence, while the majority (64.6%) reported moderate confidence and 23.2% indicated that they had no confidence at all in their professors' ability to act as good models of classroom teaching. This information is illustrated in Table 4c below.

Table 4c. Pedagogical Competence

		Teachers' ability to effectively model what good teaching is all about			
		No Confidence	Moderate Confidence	Complete Confidence	Total
<i>Level</i>	Year I	14	34	7	55
	Year II	37	79	13	129
	Year III	18	72	21	111
	Year IV	19	57	7	83
	Total	88	242	48	378
<i>Status</i>	Part-time	66	156	27	249
	Full-time	21	89	20	130
	Total	87	245	47	379

Participants were asked to rank the most important characteristics they expect professors to possess in the teaching/learning context. As shown in Table 5, participants listed professionalism; dedication to teaching; preparedness for class; strong ethical values; and caring/understanding as the top five characteristics they expect teachers to possess. The five least important characteristics were charisma; sociability; ability to use technology; well-dressed; and enthusiasm.

Table 5. Teacher Characteristics in order of importance

1.	Professionalism
2.	Dedicated to teaching
3.	Always prepared for class
4.	Strong ethical values
5.	Caring/understanding
6.	Positive attitude
7.	Engage students in class
8.	Ability to relate well to students
9.	Fairness in assessments
10.	Fun/interesting
11.	Enthusiasm
12.	Well-dressed
13.	Ability to use technology
14.	Sociability
15.	Charisma

Participants of the study were also to list three things that either attracted them or turned them off from their professors. As shown in Table 6, 44.2% of the respondents indicated caring as the number one quality that attracted them to

their teachers; 36.2% indicated professionalism; and 33.7% listed teaching style. Unprofessionalism was the major turn off as reported by 41.1% of the respondents; while 40.7% of the participants identified aggressive behaviour; and 27.7% listed lack of concern for students as other characteristics that they disliked most in professors.

Table 6. Things that attract or repel students from their professors

Things that attract	Things that repel
1. Caring	1. Unprofessionalism
2. Professionalism	2. Aggressive attitude
3. Teaching style	3. Lack of concern for students

The final two questions in the survey explored how students regarded teachers who challenged them to think critically as opposed to those who graded easily. Analysis of the data revealed that 85% of the respondents showed preference to those teachers who challenged them to think critically. Only 15% of the participants indicated preference for teachers who graded easily.

Discussion

This study examined student expectations of their tertiary-level teachers on three levels: (i) pedagogical competence; (ii) discipline competence; and (iii) teacher characteristics.

Pedagogical competence

The majority of participants in the study, irrespective of level or status, indicated high expectations of their professors in terms of their ability to recognize varying learning preferences among students. As such, participants expect teachers to set high standards while using appropriate teaching/learning strategies to maximize the learning potential in each student. These expectations matched those in Fortson and Brown's (1998) study which showed that the best instructors were those who used a variety of teaching methods.

Participants of the study expressed moderate confidence in their professors' ability to teach concepts effectively. Only 13.5% reported complete confidence, while 19.3% indicated that they had no confidence at all in their professors' ability to effectively teach concepts. These results suggest that professors should pay closer attention to concept teaching especially in a teacher education setting where effective concept teaching is critical to student success on practicum or field teaching. Studies conducted by Hande, Kamath and D'Souza (2014) concluded that students perceive teachers as effective when they are able to clarify difficult concepts, and make learning fun and interesting.

Student perception of their teachers' ability to conduct fair assessment should also be noted as a matter of concern. While the majority of respondents (64.5%) indicated moderate confidence, 19.3% stated that they had no confidence in their

professors' ability to conduct fair assessment of student learning. This perception seems consistent with student rating of teacher characteristics, where fairness in assessments was ranked 9th on a scale of 1-15 as shown in Table 5.

Modelling good classroom teaching to students is an important objective for professors operating in a teacher education setting. It means, therefore, that professors should not only be concerned with content delivery, but also how different students interact with the content taught in the classroom. Results of the study revealed that almost one quarter of the participants (23.2%) had no confidence in their professors' ability to act as good models of classroom teaching. And while 64.6% of the participants reported moderate confidence in their teachers' ability to model good teaching, professors in a teacher education context should not be comforted by this. These results suggest the need for greater effort on the part of professors to bolster student confidence in their teachers' pedagogical competence. If prospective teachers are expected to demonstrate effective teaching skills in the practicum classroom, then professors should feel a sense of responsibility to model what good teaching looks like.

Discipline competence

Results of the study revealed that the majority of participants (97%) expect their professors to always keep abreast with the latest developments in their field. Students also expect their teachers to use appropriate assessment methods as well as provide prompt feedback on student assignments. These findings are consistent with other studies that emphasize the importance of subject mastery as an indicator of teacher competence (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Roberts, 1981).

Teacher characteristics

Participants of the study listed the five most important teacher characteristics as professionalism; dedication to teaching; preparedness for class; strong ethical values; and caring/understanding. The five least important qualities were charisma; sociability; ability to use technology; well-dressed; and enthusiasm.

Student responses were consistent when asked to indicate the things that either attract or repel students from their professors. Again we see teacher professionalism and caring emerging as important characteristics that attract students to their tertiary-level teachers. These findings are somewhat different from similar studies conducted by Gurung and Vespia (2007), and McLean (2001) who found that students learned more and liked the class better when teachers were well-dressed, good-looking and approachable. In this study, well-dressed teachers were not as important to students as those who demonstrated professionalism and caring for the welfare of students.

Concluding Comments

Professors generally set high standards for their students in terms of critical thinking and problem-solving skills; classroom management and leadership skills as well as reflective teaching skills. In like manner, students have high expectations of their tertiary-level teachers. This study revealed that students expect their teachers to be competent not only in content delivery, but also as

effective models of good classroom teaching. While students in other contexts are attracted to teachers who are well-dressed and exhibit likeable qualities, this research suggests that students are more readily drawn to professors who demonstrate professionalism and show interest in the well-being of their students. Understanding students' expectations of their professors is important for establishing the type of professor-student relationship that inspires student success. In future research, it would be worthwhile to identify those professors who attract rather than repel students, in order to better understand the philosophy which informs their practice.

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