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Passion or podcasts? Students' views about university lectures

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As reflected in recent literature, university students are less engaged but have sharper expectations about what is provided by way of lectures and other learning processes. In particular, the literature acknowledges that increased hours of paid work and other responsibilities often mean that students question the need to attend classes at all, especially when the teaching and learning processes do not capture their interest. Consequently, some approaches to lecture delivery within universities are often ineffective in engaging students, and academic staff members feel increasing pressure on them to attract students' attendance by employing IT and other media. Literature from Australia and other countries, however, critiques the learning value of both traditional and more innovative approaches to lecturing in universities. This paper also reports on results from a Tell-Us study focused on the perceptions of students in the School of Social Work & Social Policy about the university lecture – and the range of reasons for attending these or staying away. Based on these research outcomes, other findings from the literature and reflections about these sources of data, the paper makes some suggestions about how lecturing processes could be adjusted to better support students in becoming more engaged in their learning.

Keywords: university lectures, student attendance, IT support

Introduction

This paper explores university students' views about attending lectures and some factors that encourage and discourage their attendance. The primary basis of the paper is research conducted by the author through the administration of a *Tell-Us* survey (an on-line anonymous process) of 180 students enrolled in three undergraduate programs within the school of Social Work and Social Policy in the University of South Australia. These data are contextualised within other findings reported in a range of Australian and international literature and the author's own extensive research and teaching experiences within universities.

Most lecturers would hope that students benefit from attending their lectures and Stanca (2006) suggests this is generally seen to be so. However, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement - AUSSE (ACER, 2008) reveals that less than a quarter of students in Australia and New Zealand spend significant amounts of time on campus – in class or in other ways.

Some studies found that 60% of students do not attend *all* lectures (Shannon, 2006) and this appears to be widespread tendency, for as suggested by Cleary-Holdforth (2007, p.1), non-attendance at university classes is 'an on-going problem that appears to transcend country, university and discipline'. Sleight & Ritzer (2001) surveyed over two hundred USA students

and found some students still believe attending lectures is important, even though dropping attendance figures suggest their lives are getting in the way of their intentions. It appears that students also recognise there may be costs for non-attendance. Sleigh & Ritzer (2001) found students believed their grades may be impacted by lecture absence, as was the case in the author's own study, where many students agreed lectures provided invaluable sources of information about assessment as well as wider intellectual issues. Sleigh & Ritzer (2001) report too that "those who thought borrowed notes were as good as attending class had significantly lower reported grade point averages than those who valued attendance". With on-line PowerPoint slides now more widely available, there is greater temptation for busy students to rely on these instead of attending the lecture, and to risk a possible negative impact on their results.

It appears undeniable that Australian and other university students' life experiences and their preparation for tertiary study have changed (Dobson, Sharma & Haydon, 1997; James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002; Oblinger, 2003; Porter & Swing, 2006; Mason Webber, Singleton & Hughes, 2006, Cameron, 2008). Students no longer appear to see attending university lectures or even their tutorials as centrally important compared with the range of other obligations in their lives. Eight years ago, McInnis, James & Hartley (2000) noted a trend of lower attachment, engagement and commitment by students, both to study and to the more general aspects of university life. Many students were working longer hours in paid employment, or had a range of other responsibilities such as for caring for families, and, according to other more recent research, these trends have extended further into the student population in the last few years (Porter & Swing, 2006; Mason et al., 2006). In the author's university, there are now common points of assessment and consequently in some weeks several courses may have assignments due, often meaning that many students are absent from lectures and tutorials in these weeks. As a result of dropping attendance and acknowledgment of students' pressured lives, Oblinger (2003, p.6) suggests lecturers often find themselves attempting to 'inspire students with zero tolerance for delay'.

McInnis and Krause (2002) described students' identity as negotiated and unable to be taken for granted; more recently other literature agrees that students' engagement with their learning is even less certain and needs to be more deliberately cultivated (Oblinger, 2003; Mason et al., 2006). Engaged students make time and have energy for their studies and feel a personal commitment and sense of responsibility to do their best. Students may also need to be acculturated into university ways. Over ten years ago, Beder (1997) noted many students did not know how to use the library on starting university and were unaware of essential requirements. Despite a growing emphasis on online resources for most courses, over 70% of first year students said they never used relevant IT support and education services (Cameron & Tesoriero, 2003) and more recently many said they had not previously owned or even used a computer (Cameron, 2008). All this means that academics frequently struggle to achieve learning conditions that catch students' interest, maintain their active engagement in learning and encourage attendance at lectures.

What in the literature has been suggested as providing any remedy for falling attendances? Verbally agreed to, signed contracts that include a requirement to be present at lectures, or threatening students with expulsion for not attending have been considered by some as ways to increase attendance (Meikle, 2006). Rogers (2002) however makes the point that compelling students to attend does not necessarily correspond to better student performance. Respect for adult learning principles suggests that all students should be encouraged to accept responsibility for their own behaviour, but how much this should mean making no demands

on them to be present in class remains a matter of opinion. Other encouragement to attend may be technological in nature. Academics are now expected to use a variety of alluring presentation techniques to supplement information given in a lecture – PowerPoint slides, You Tube and DVD for example – to illustrate and entertain and then to present the lecture online via Podcast or media streaming to maximise students' access to it. But do these technological processes encourage students' attendance in lectures or merely make their attendance less necessary? Phillips, Gosper, McNeill, Woo, Preston & Green (2007) refer to other literature which consistently suggests that the availability of web-based lecture techniques, such as video streaming or podcasting, is only a minor factor in students' attendance. Instead they note their 'changing lifestyles, their attitudes to learning and their perceptions of the teaching they encounter when they do attend' were stronger determinants of attendance patterns. Rather than the attraction of technological bells and whistles, Clay & Breslow (2006) suggest the lecturer's ability to engage and entertain was a stronger factor in USA students' decision to attend or not, as for Australian students, yet, paradoxically, few academic lecturers are especially trained in how to present inspiring lectures.

However, perhaps we give lectures too much emphasis. Tutorial sizes (number of students in each) have been increased in many universities whilst tutorials hours have been reduced. On one level, this might suggest tutorials are less important than lectures, despite student opinion to the contrary (Cameron, 2008). Meanwhile lecture theatres have become better equipped; most are at least Power-Point capable and many now have very sophisticated lecture technology, such as video streaming. This investment would suggest the central role of lectures in the learning process, even though, in most instances, lectures are delivered to dwindling numbers of students as courses progress, usually by established and relatively well-paid permanent staff, with salaries coming from main budget sources. Most tutorials in a course, however, which are numerous and usually better attended, are delivered by casual staff whose status is tenuously supported by the softer funding basis of a yearly casual budget. Very few of the higher cost permanent staff members have received specific training about giving inspiring lectures. If lectures are essential, as seems indicated by their persistence and the investment in expensive IT support, then university lecturers need to locate more effective ways of encouraging students' attendance. This paper highlights the need for, and the existing gap in, targeted investment in academics' lecturing skills.

Methodology & research processes

Methodology

The author approached this student-based research in the spirit of modern hermeneutic interpretation in seeking awareness of participants and the current conditions that surround them. In this study both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered, with any quantitative applications in this study limited to simple percentages. The central task was one of making sense of students' perceptions of their activities and opinions as represented in their answers to the questionnaire, but without imposing the author's own views. Writing is socially constructed and unknowingly can resonate with what Garfinkel (1967) terms *reflexivity*. This term refers to the fact that all human activity is bound to the personal context within which it occurs; the key point here for this research is that the telling (the writing) is where the meaning of students' experiences took shape. The challenge remained one of untangling from the findings the author's own knowledge and views about education and practice, saturated as they are with her own history. So the author employed multiple lines of sight to view student data, along with other research and literature, thus providing layers of meaning. In doing so, she remained part of a 'mutual gazing' (Heron, 1996:1) where she was mindful of engaging in

this inquiry with proper integrity. This concern was implicit in how the author positioned herself within the research and ensured the anonymity of student opinion in the survey.

The research instrument

The research entailed the administration of an online Tell-Us questionnaire to students in undergraduate program within the School of Social Work & Social Policy at the University of South Australia. This was an anonymous and fairly brief instrument, comprising fifteen either single or multiple choice questions with some free text opportunities. The anonymity of this online instrument enabled a level of distance between the researcher and respondents and was intended to provide students with confidence that they could respond honestly to the questions without divulging their individual identity. The focus of the questionnaire was students' lecture attendance, their concentration levels during lectures, key factors influencing their attendance and their reaction to IT assisted processes such as provision of online Power-Point slides and podcasting of lectures.

The sample

The student sample was gained through an email to students with a link to the Tell-Us online survey attached. Only the opinions of students studying internally were solicited, as the overall focus was lecture attendance. Student response to the survey was enthusiastic, such that it was decided to close it a week earlier than originally planned. In all, 180 students submitted it, but in fact only 174 students fully completed the questionnaire. The sample comprised around 25% of the total undergraduate student group enrolled internally in the school's programs, maybe more as 81 were on leave or not receiving emails. As such, this sample is large enough to make some statistically valid conclusions about this student group.

Results

This was a primarily female group of participants with the question about gender revealing an 8:2 female to male split, an unsurprising result in light of the firm gender bias in social work and similarly focused fields in this sample group. The span of student ages was from 18–62 years, but there was a clumping of the majority in the 20s, 30s and 40s. A majority of 60% were in year 2 or 3 of their programs, followed by 37% in other years. Most were studying several courses, about 40% were full time and some were over-enrolled. The full-time nature of study brings added pressure at assessment points where four or more assignments may be due within a week or two of each other and skipping lectures becomes a temptation.

Self estimates of attendance at lectures

The participants were asked to estimate how many lectures they attended. This was a single choice question and 174 answered by selecting from a range of options. A group of 19% checked the first option (Attended all of them). A majority group (64%) selected the second category (Most – I only missed a few). A smaller group (14%) answered 'Missed about half of them'. Only 2.4% selected 'Missed most of them' and 0.6% checked 'Attended only a few'. No one selected 'None'.

Concentrating in lectures

Another single choice question asked about concentration levels in lectures and 171 answered. Of these, 51% selected 'I drift off or do other things sometimes but mostly concentrate quite well' and about 35% checked 'I concentrate really well on what is being said all the time'. About 8% agreed 'I often miss a lot, because my mind is usually on other unrelated things' and 3% checked 'I often have trouble understanding what is being said and then I cannot concentrate'. The remaining 3% selected either 'I sometimes do other uni things

in the lecture - like catching up on reading or writing an essay, 'I often go to sleep during it' or 'I use the time to catch up on phone texts or similar'.

Use of online PowerPoint slides and podcasting

Most students (80%) said they made good use of these online slides by printing them and taking them to lectures to aid concentration or looking at them later for revision purposes. A smaller percentage (15%) did not use them at all – either because they like just listening (5%) or because they have just never bothered to view or download them (10%). A small number (5%) did not attend lectures very often whether or not slides were posted in advance.

Podcasting is not used across all courses yet in our school, so this explains why around 60% of students said they had no lectures offered in this way and 10% admitted they would not know how to access or download a Podcast. A further 15% have used Podcast lectures and liked them a lot, as these make up for any missed lectures and allow flexibility about when and where to listen to the recording. The remaining 15% know they are available but do not use them. Only two students saw Podcasts and online slides together as obviating the need to attend lectures, reflecting the assertion of Phillips et al. (2007) about this factor in student attendance. Without exception, additional comments about slides and other resources and IT processes were positive. One commented 'You can't replace listening to a lecturer as they explain things in more detail than the slides but the slides are great for revision and to add to'. Another suggested Power-Point slides 'can enhance the subject; and provide material to reflect on after the lecture and for assignment preparation'. One added, '...lecturers that won't post slides before a lecture because we won't go, really miss the point'. The few comments about podcasting lectures were all positive. 'The podcasts are fantastic, they give me confidence in my learning, that I haven't missed anything ...love it!' Another commented, 'Great idea to keep options open for people with busy lives' and an international student commented 'Sometimes I can't manage to follow the lecture by my writing, so I can use on-line resources'.

What discourages them from attending?

This question allowed multiple choices as answers and the two most chosen were 'Pressure of due assignments' and 'If the lecturer just reads the slides'. A set of linked comments focused on other negative lecturer qualities – no passion for the topic; poor delivery; poorly organised; unskilled with IT, boring; talking too fast, too softly, unclear, going off the topic, reading from the textbook; and badly organised slides – e.g. small and crowded print. A couple of students commented about the lecture being an out-dated concept and not fitting the lifestyle of 21st century students. A set of comments focused on annoying behaviour of other students (talking up the back, chatting to each other during the lecture) and the inability or unwillingness of lecturers to manage this. At the next level were, 'Health problems' and 'Paid work commitments' closely followed by timetabling issues – 'lectures early in the morning' and 'the number of hours between the lecture and its tutorial'. Additional commentary on linked aspects focused on lengthy travel, expense of travel; peak hour traffic; and needing to drive in for just one hour. Next were 'Family health problems', and 'Child care pressures'. At the lowest level were 'dingy lecture rooms', 'problems with using IT', 'when slides and podcast are also provided' and if there are 'no friends to sit with'.

What encourages them to attend?

In this multiple choice question, the top scoring choice was 'when the lecturer has an entertaining style of delivery' followed by 'when a lecture is close in time to the tutorial'. The next level focused on 'when the lecturer makes me think', and 'can use IT well'. Other timetable issues received strong support too e.g. 'time of day of the lecture'. Lower in

importance was 'When the lecturer encourages us to ask questions or to comment'. In reference to a question about getting marks to reward and encourage attendance, around 73% were sure they would attend anyway and marks for being there would not make any difference but the remaining 27% thought it might have some or a lot of impact on their attendance.

Final student commentary

In final comments, participants emphasised several issues about which they felt strongly. A consistent theme focused again on qualities and skills of the lecturer – both positive and negative aspects. Several reiterated their appreciation of lecturers who inspired and uplifted them and had passion for their topic. Many called for 'Lecturers who are really passionate about their subject and who prepare well'. They wanted 'Entertaining and/or humorous lecturers who really make me think' and those who skilfully used 'You-Tube clips, videos/DVD'. Students also liked lecturers who made good links to tutorial activities. Several students however, brought up self-motivational issues as the key factor in their lecture attendance – feeling committed, keenness to learn and not wanting to miss anything important – the centre of engagement. As one commented, 'I know that I can get the most out of the course by attending the lectures and ultimately it helps me with my assignments and the exam.' Another said 'it improves the quality of my understanding of the study material'. More pragmatically, several commented on getting value for their financial outlay on HECS fees. Several also commented again on low student attendance and how this disappointed and frustrated them.

Discussion

With the survey submitted by 180 students, it was disappointing that several did not answer all questions or contribute to free text opportunities. Maybe this was yet another sign of students' general preoccupation with other aspects of their lives where they have limited time for university business, despite their good intentions. That most participants were more or less full-time students, and some were even over-enrolled, points to the pressured nature of their study.

The number who said they attend all or most lectures does not match the observation of staff in the author's school and her own experiences; where less than 10% of the class of students attends at several points, such as when there is assignment pressure or towards the end of the course. Self estimations may possibly reflect intention rather than reality, a point made by Cleary-Holdforth (2007, p.1) who also notes overestimation deriving from their ambition to attend. Students in the survey knew they did better on assessment and gained better grades when they attended lectures, as Sleight & Ritzer (2001) also note, and this was especially so for those who expressed self motivation as their major inspiration to do well at their study. But for many students life got in the way – and jobs, child care, own and family health matters and pressure from due assignments cut across the best of intentions. For those attending, concentration flagged at least some of the time for all students, but especially when lectures went over time and the lecturer failed to inspire them. The participants were unsure about whether giving marks for being there would increase their own attendance, although a minority thought it might, in line with some literature (Meikle, 2006; Rogers, 2002 and Sleight & Ritzer, 2001) who suggest such a reward strategy to encourage attendance may be worth a try.

The range of techniques to support lecture delivery were appreciated by most students but they certainly wanted PowerPoint slides put up online in advance of the lecture as this enabled them to listen fully rather than trying to write down everything in the lecture. For a small group though, when slides were supplied in advance, they did not bother going to the lecture and maybe this is why some lecturers did not supply these in advance of the lecture – even though this then annoyed the vast majority of students who used them well. But most agreed that these IT supported processes were not more important than the lecturer having passion for their topic, a point put forward by Phillips et al. (2007) who suggest even the most advanced process of media streaming does not replace the passion and fire of the lecturer.

Students were highly critical of lecturers who cannot use IT processes efficiently and fumble about at the beginning of a lecture. It is apparent that lecturers need to be more consistently trained in a range of IT techniques for supporting the lecture so they can skilfully use these. The equipment also needs to be well maintained; sometimes it is not the lecturers' fault when IT equipment does not work properly. Most students really hated it when lecturers just read the material from slides or textbooks and it is clear that training in presentation skills too – how to speak clearly, extemporaneously and with energy – is needed. Many lecturers have had no training in public speaking or in oral presentation skills and, without this, they just keep doing the same ineffective thing. The most consistent student commentary strongly underlined the appreciation of lecturers who *do* have energetic delivery, passion for the topic, good organisation and who effectively use IT processes, including clicker-based activities. Skilled lecturers might be enjoined to share their passion and to demonstrate their skills and techniques to encourage other less skilled staff. Most students loved it when they were inspired by a great lecture, but felt really let down when lecturers just went through the motions and when other students were not present or came but talked up the back. Procedures for better managing chattering students in lectures were consistently requested in the survey, and deciding on effective staff strategy for managing this problem is also a priority. The timetable was an issue and better measures to ensure it is more student-friendly are required, especially to avoid large gaps between the lecture and the related tutorial as far as possible, for busy students with work and carer responsibilities. But have we got the balance right? Are lectures – now much better served by many IT processes – as important as tutorials, which are usually well attended and which are seen by students to provide key sources of academic engagement and support (Cameron, 2008)? If so, greater investment in the presentation skills of lecturers is clearly indicated, a recurring motif in this paper.

Conclusion

In this paper, discussion of the key ideas has been informed by student opinion about university lectures and related literature from a range of sources around the Western world. It was apparent that students expect academic staff to present their lectures with passion, creativity and IT savvy. Stuffy, formal or disorganised lecturers irritated many students who offered a fairly sharp critique of these failings. Nor did podcasts and other IT processes necessarily make up for boring lecturing. It was the presentation skills and passion for the topic that students most appreciated, especially when this built on their motivation and engagement in their study, even though many lecturers lack specific training in these important areas. A range of unique pressures within modern universities, combined with students' more diverse needs, will continue to place demands on academic staff to deliver lectures with passion and IT-supported creativity. Targeted training for staff presenting lectures is clearly indicated, to avoid students voting with their feet in a world where the

battle for space in their lives means many no longer prioritise lecture attendance as a key feature of their learning.

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