

STATUS QUO OR INNOVATION: THE INFLUENCE OF INSTRUCTIONAL VARIABILITY ON STUDENT EVALUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Most educators know someone who brags about having perfected the instruction of a particular course and thus no longer needs to invest much time or effort in preparing instructional materials. Such a boast is often met with frustration from students and colleagues because it suggests satisfaction with the status quo and precludes commitment to innovation and continuous improvement in learning approaches. But is it possible that innovation in the classroom, in the short term, actually weakens student evaluations of teaching quality and effectiveness? This study presents exploratory empirical research that addresses this question and offers new avenues for exploring the impact of technology and innovation in the classroom.

Heterogeneity is a defining trait of service experiences. Within a classroom setting, both instructors and students play pivotal roles in producing high quality learning experiences, yet current student teaching evaluations (STEs) give little consideration to the effects of variability on perceptions of instructional performance. Because variability may create uncertainty, it is possible that increased variability in classroom performance will negatively impact STEs. Furthermore, SERVQUAL, a commonly accepted measure of service quality, includes reliability, i.e., the ability to perform the service right the first time as the most critical component in customer evaluations of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1988; 1994). Any educator who has experimented with technology in the classroom knows that "getting it right the first time" is seldom realized and is never guaranteed. Thus, endorsement of experimentation and innovation in the classroom may potentially exacerbate any negative effects of variability on STEs.

Although a plan of continuous improvement in instruction will ultimately produce better educational outcomes, standard teaching evaluation approaches do not focus on the long-term developmental gains of such improvement. STEs ask for ratings of things such as organization, teacher-student interaction or rapport, communication skills, workload, fairness of

grading, and student learning or progress (Hobson and Talbot 2001). No clear consideration is given to the innovativeness of instruction and the unintended consequences of quality inconsistencies experienced during instructional development. If administrators and educators are to responsibly advocate innovation and experimentation in the classroom, then research should examine how short-term sacrifices in the consistency of instructional quality potentially influence STEs.

The study employed a sample of 237 students in two sections of an introductory marketing course. Range (best and worst class experiences) and consistency ratings (uniformity of class quality from day-to-day) were used to assess variability. Regression analyses suggest that variability in the classroom experience affects student evaluations of course quality, course satisfaction, instructor preference, and course value. Intuitively, this result should not be surprising since heterogeneity is a recognized attribute of services. What is surprising is the absence of research on this construct's importance in the evaluation of instructional effectiveness. Unfortunately, this study merely scratches the surface of this important issue. The exploratory nature and limitations of the methodology necessitate more controlled study of this research problem.

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