

INITIAL STUDENT DELIGHT AND THE FINAL EVALUATION OF TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

What happens to the final evaluation of a class when the students' initial expectations are met or exceeded? This exploratory study investigated this issue and found that initial expectations do influence the final evaluation, but the most positive outcome occurred when the initial expectations were met, not when they were exceeded. Implications for the evaluation process and for the understanding of students as customers are explored.

INTRODUCTION

More than half a century ago, Solomon Asch (1946) showed how first impressions can influence later perception. When a person was described as envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious and intelligent, rather than intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn and envious, the second order produced higher personal ratings than the first. In some cases, a brief first experience seems to create a perception that is only slightly modified by further interactions. When we are first introduced to another person, we make judgments of attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness within 1/10th of a second. Surprisingly, it has also been shown that more extended exposure (beyond ½ of a second) simply boosted the confidence of judgments (Willis & Todorov, 2006). These findings are examples of the *primacy effect* and refer to the process by which early information may alter the perception of subsequent information. This is especially true if the initial information has high relevance, but is less true if subsequent information is stronger, the situation is more structured, or if subjects have higher cognitive sophistication (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994; Krosnick & Alwin, 1987).

Moreover, observers have a tendency to look for, and remember information that fits their preconceived expectations, while contradicting information may be dismissed, ignored, or distorted. This *confirmatory bias* was found in early studies by Wason (1960). He showed that subjects seemed to offer only positive tests for their hypotheses, and did not attempt to falsify their rules. In other words, the subjects chose to select evidence that would confirm a prior hypothesis rather than disconfirm it. Later research found that the retrieval of confirming

evidence actively inhibits the retrieval of disconfirming evidence, further strengthening bias (Davies, 2003). Rabin and Schrag (1999) found that initially being wrong often only strengthened the original hypothesis, and that people could believe with near certainty in a false hypothesis despite receiving an infinite amount of information.

These findings suggest that the early first impressions that a student makes of an instructor and class may be long-lasting and influence their final evaluation of a class. Widmeyer and Loy (1988) conducted an experiment in which students were exposed to the same guest instructor, but before the class began half received descriptions of the instructor indicating that he was "warm," and the other half that he was "cold." After the instructional period, not only did the students in the "warm" group rate the instructor higher on positive aspects of personality, they also rated the instructor previously defined as "warm" as having more "teaching ability." Other evidence indicated that many students appear to form an opinion of a class and the instructor very early in a course, and subsequent class and learning experiences may not have the power to completely modify that opinion (Feldman, 1977; Ortinau & Bush, 1987; Sauber & Ludlow, 1988).

Since almost all business schools use some sort of student evaluation of teaching (SET) (Clayson, 2009), and in many cases, these instruments can influence tenure, promotion, and merit pay decisions, any factor that can influence the outcome becomes of interest to teachers and administrators.

RATIONALE

One interesting relationship between primacy and SET has not been studied. Does the customer satisfaction findings in marketing relate to how students evaluate classes and instructors? Customer satisfaction is defined as "the individual's perception of the performance of the product or service in relation to his or her expectations" (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). It is generally thought that satisfaction occurs when customer expectations are met. On the other hand, the term "customer delight" is typically utilized when customers are pleasantly surprised when expectations are exceeded (Kumar, Olshavsky & King, 2001; Patterson, 1997; Weeks & Chonko, 2010).

Delighted customers are better than satisfied customers, the reasoning goes, because they buy more, complain less, spread positive word-of-mouth and exhibit other profitable behaviors (Keiningham & Vavra, 2001).

These studies would seem to suggest that if a student was pleasantly surprised by a class early in the term, then the same student would possibly give the class and the instructor a better evaluation at the end of the term. No literature could be found relating primacy, customer delight, and SET. Consequently, the following can be seen as an exploratory study which attempts to answer two questions.

- 1) *Will early expectations in a class influence the final evaluation of that class?*
- 2) *Will students give a higher final evaluation to a class and an instructor that initially exceed their expectations? In other words, will initial "delight" influence the final evaluation of a class?*

METHODOLOGY

This study was made possible by mining an existing database. Previously, students in Principles of Marketing and Organizational Management classes were followed for an entire semester. Data was gathered about the students and their perceptions of the class and instructor periodically over the time period. Within this data were measures of student perceptions before instruction actually began, the same measures one week later, and corresponding perceptions in the last week of the semester. These measures could be compared to investigate the questions raised in this study.

The instructors in 11 sections of these introductory, undergraduate business courses gave permission for the study to be conducted in their classes over the period of a semester. On the first meeting of the class, the instructors introduced themselves, turned the class over to a researcher, and left the room. At this point, students had not seen the syllabus, and had an average of about five minutes of exposure to the instructor. Due to the nature of class schedules and the physical facilities, a student could be exposed to the instructor for no less than one minute and not more than ten, depending upon how early the student arrived. Students who signed a consent form were then asked to complete a questionnaire. Pertinent to this investigation, the class sections were evaluated again one week later and then again at the end of the sixteen-week term. The questionnaires were identical to the one given before the class began except that no demographic data was gathered. Not every question was

answered by each student, and not all students completed their enrolled course. Consequently, the sample size for this study consisted of 388 students who completed all the questions pertinent to this investigation. A validity check found no significant differences in the final evaluations between this group and the total sample.

Several demographics were gathered at the first class meeting. The student's gender (Sex: male = 49%, labeled as 0; female = 51%, labeled as 1, utilized as a dummy variable) were self-reported. In addition, the actual cumulative GPA of each student at the beginning of the class was obtained by student permission from the university registrar (GPA: average = 3.03 (0.48)). Students reported whether they had heard anything about the instructor's grading policy before the class began (Heard: 0 = not heard, 70%; 1 = heard, 30%).

Student evaluation of the instructor was measured on a GPA scale by using the five questions on the student evaluation of teaching (SET) instrument actually used by the university. These five measures, related to both the class and the instructor, were summed and averaged (Cronbach's alpha were: First Evaluation, 0.97, Second Evaluation, 0.90, and Final Evaluation, 0.92) to create the SET evaluation measure.

RESULTS

Delight was operationally defined as the change in the first week's evaluation from the evaluation given before the class began, i.e., $Delight = Second\ Evaluation - First\ Evaluation$. None of the demographics were significantly related to *Delight*: Sex, $t(385) = 0.134, p = 0.894$; previous knowledge of the class, $t(384) = 0.030, p = 0.976$; and GPA, $r = -0.102$. *Delight* was separated into three groups corresponding to the direction of change found within the first week of the term. Sixteen percent of the students lowered their evaluations, while 32% kept them the same, and 52% raised their evaluations. The means of the final evaluation for each of the 3 *Delight* groups are shown in Figure 1.

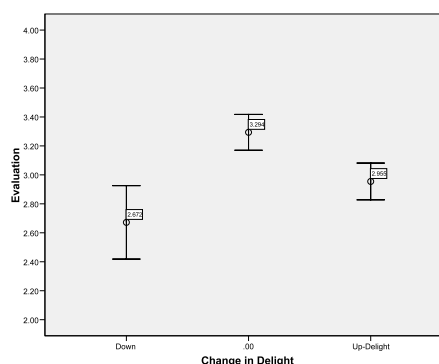


Figure 1

The differences in the final evaluation created by these conditions is significant ($F(2,322) = 12.01, p < 0.001$), and a post hoc test showed that the mean for zero change was significantly different from both the group that lowered their evaluations and those who raised their evaluations. The group that was most delighted (evaluations went up) had a final evaluation significantly higher than the group that had evaluations going down, but also significantly lower than the group whose evaluation did not change during this interval. The final evaluation by Delight, controlled by the student demographics, class sections, and the curvilinear aspects are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Regression: The Effect of Initial Delight on the Final Evaluation

Variable	B	t	Sig.
Delight	0.249	3.06	.002
Delight X Delight	-0.102	1.80	.073
Sex	0.155	1.80	.073
GPA	0.031	0.33	.739
Heard	-0.077	0.80	.424
<i>Dummy variables controlling for class sections ...</i>			
Constant	2.528	7.50	.000

$R^2 = 0.316$ $F(15, 9.08), p < 0.001$

DISCUSSION

The two exploratory questions can be addressed.

1) *Will early expectations in a class influence the final evaluation of that class?* The change in the evaluations from the initial impression to the students' perception of the class and instructor after one week were significantly related to the final evaluation of the class and instructor. Given that students had not yet received any feedback on grades, and had no opportunity to evaluate their own learning, this finding reinforces the contention that the evaluations are contaminated by factors not commonly associated with good instruction.

2) *Will students give a higher final evaluation to a class which initially exceeds their expectations?* The answer to this question is more complex. The linear regression, shown in Table 1, indicates that students who had their initial expectations exceeded gave higher final evaluations 15 weeks later, but the highest average evaluations were given by those students who had their expectations confirmed, not

exceeded. Neither the students' sex nor GPA influenced the final evaluation, indicating that both good and poor students (measured by GPA), and both men and women reacted much the same.

Possible Explanations

While positive change in the initial Delight is related to positive differences in the final evaluation, it was also found that the largest mean evaluation was given when students' expectations were merely met rather than exceeded. There are several possible explanations for these findings.

1) Research has shown that students give the highest evaluations to classes that are not too easy or too hard (Marsh & Roche, 2000), and students will try to take instructors and classes that give the highest grades (Johnson, 2003; Wilhelm, 2004). Students appear to be searching for the lowest effort to reward ratio and may also be seeking a certain degree of security in that assessment. A new study, for example, found that students reacted more negatively to extensive feedback on assignments than to less feedback (Ackerman & Gross, 2010). A class and instructor that meet expectation might be considered superior to one that presents surprises, either positive or negative.

2) The paradigm may not be appropriate. There has been an active debate about whether students are customers in the usual sense (Bay, 2001; Clayson & Haley, 2000; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Franz, 1998). These findings may simply be an indication that the student/customer orientation is inappropriate. Irrespective of the cause, it appears, at least in this sample, that exceeding the students' initial expectations does not result in higher evaluations. Rather, an instructor seeking better evaluations would do well to conform to the students' early expectations.

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