

[P7] Examining possible links between student perceptions, expectations and their final grades

Rena Boothe

Department of Geographical and Life Sciences, Canterbury Christ Church University
Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU
rab26@canterbury.ac.uk

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Introduction

In discussing student success, emphasis is often placed on facilities, teacher skills, teacher expectations, student abilities and curriculum issues but not much effort is directed toward student perceptions and expectations. This action research attempted to investigate some of the perceptions and expectations of a select group of students in order to aid the understanding of their views of facilities, mentor/facilitator support and expectations and perceptions of themselves which might be influencing their performance and final grade. The project arose out of listening to students voicing varied perceptions, and expectations from their university programmes during tutorials.

Method

Questionnaires were used to collect data from student volunteers of two second year biology courses for one term only. The questionnaires were completed early in the term to get participants' perceptions before there were opportunities to be influenced by factors such as lecturer feedback. Data was collected after two weeks into the course.

Assistance was obtained to help with maintaining anonymity in matching grades with questionnaires of participants. Discussions were held with colleagues regarding the validity, effectiveness and sensitivity of the items in the questionnaire to be used. In this type of research it is difficult to exclude the perceptions, beliefs and values of the researcher; however, it is possible with collaborative effort to achieve the collection of useful material (Beach *et al.*, 2006).

Questions provided information on programmes being studied, expected qualifications, reasons for taking the course, expected grades, participants' view of some facilities necessary for their course, mentor/facilitator support and participants' self assessment of their effort, ability and enthusiasm. There was a free response section used to determine whether the participant appeared to be an active or passive learner. This assessment was based on a brief statement, if any, given by the participant and thus the determination would be influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher.

Results and Evaluation

The total number of participants in the survey was twenty-five. Seventy two percent participated in the matching of grades with perception. Just over half of the participants

(52%) indicated that they were taking their course for general interest or self improvement. 64% of participants said that their effort in the course was good to excellent whilst 36% rated their effort as only satisfactory to poor. 60% rated their enthusiasm as good to excellent whilst 40% rated their enthusiasm as satisfactory to poor. When self assessment was compared with grades, 64% rated their effort as A/B, 72% rated their ability as A/B, 60% rated their enthusiasm as A/B, however 80% expected to achieve grades of A/B. The actual A/B grades were 44% (there were 40% non participants). When views of mentor/facilitator and lecturer support were compared with grades, 36% rated their mentor support as A/B, 72% rated the approachability of the lecturer and the lecturer's interest in their learning as A/B.

Discussion

The results may be considered only one loop of the spiral of reflective action research, with more questions arising and ideas for further investigations. It was difficult to assess how closely the actual grades linked with effort and enthusiasm as not everyone participated in the grade comparison. When only A grades were considered, the factor which matched closest with expected grades (12%) was effort (12%), but matching closest with actual grades (28%) was views on enthusiasm (16%) and approachability of the lecturer (24%). It was also interesting to note that 8% of participants rated their effort as D and there were 8% of actual D grades although no one had put an expected grade of D. The overall view of facilities rated as A/B was 48%, actual grades matched closely with this by giving results of 44% of participants achieving grades A/B. This is not precise, however, as there were 40% non participants. Further investigations of mentor/facilitator support could examine what scaffolding participants expected of their mentors to improve their views of the support to aid success. A question which emerged was - are students relying to some extent on lecturer approachability and interest in their learning as a measure of how well they will perform whilst underestimating the importance of effort and enthusiasm?

Based on their free response participants were divided into types of learners. Only 24% appear to be active learners whereas 56% were assessed to be passive. 20% gave no response and were also categorized as passive, giving a total of 76% passive learners. The active learner is more likely to engage in the exploratory nature of learning (Rowland, 2000) which is a fundamental part of studying scientific subjects. Hypothetical deductive thinking patterns (Lawson, 1995) continue to develop when students actively seek explanations for occurrences. Active learners, instead of just passively hoping to 'gain knowledge' will want to search for 'new experience from the practicals' or 'broaden . . . course' by in-depth research. Active learners who engage in hypothetical deductive thinking are usually more conscious and critical of their own thinking patterns (Lawson, 1995) and will want to investigate the validity of their own conclusions.

Conclusion

There appear to be some trends towards links between perceptions, expectations and achievements, however, much more research and analyses need to be carried out. It is difficult to make inferences with this limited data; however the enquiry has revealed students' willingness to share their perceptions and expectations. This also taps into the broader debate as to what students ascribe their successes and failures.

References

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