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Perspectives of Faculty on Student Evaluations of Teaching at an Anglophone Caribbean University

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Introduction and Background

Student evaluations of teaching (SET) remain the most prominent and the primary source of data used to evaluate classroom teaching at many colleges and universities internationally (Cashin, 1999; Felten, Little & Pingree, 2004; Spooren, Brockx & Mortelmans, 2013; Zabaleta, 2007). This is also the case in the Anglophone Caribbean and at the leading research institution in the Anglophone Caribbean; the University of the West Indies, student evaluations of teaching remain the only method of the evaluation of the teaching of the faculty. Generally, from time to time, these evaluations are experienced as intrusive, invasive, frustrating and frightening (Ory, 2001). There are instances where faculty members become defensive and extremely protective of themselves and their pedagogy when poor evaluation results are communicated to them. Fink (2008) has asserted that the widespread use of SET is not driving instructional improvement; instead it is creating widespread cynicism about teaching evaluations.

There is a fair amount of disagreement in the professoriate concerning the value that should be ascribed to SET (Beran & Rokosh, 2009, Kelly, 2012). Many university teachers are concerned about the quality and legitimacy of SET scores. This was clearly communicated in the study conducted by Beran and Rokosh in Ontario, Canada. One perspective advanced by some university teachers is that SET scores are biased by factors that are outside the faculty member's control. Others have even contended that faculty members manage the classroom learning environment in pursuit of positive SET scores. In the work cited by Beran and Rokosh above some faculty in Ontario, Canada view SET as popularity contests since student questionnaires are susceptible to manipulation by teachers who make themselves popular by being entertaining, giving easy grades and so on.

SET at the University of The West Indies, Mona Campus is also problematic. The anecdotal evidence suggests that many students do not participate in the exercise because they do not believe their perspectives will be utilised in any meaningful way to impact the quality of teaching. The response of some faculty to the process is also telling as there is acceptance and contestation across the university. Skepticism, cynicism, distrust and outright dismissal are some of the responses by The UWI Mona Campus faculty and these have been communicated in anecdotal responses and verbally in various faculty meetings over time.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the perspectives of the faculty in an Anglophone Caribbean university on SET. The study provided a unique perspective since it was conducted in the Caribbean and there was no known research of this nature in the Anglophone Caribbean

Relevant Literature and Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Relevant Literature
The voluminous literature on SET might be summarized basically along two fronts. In the first instance, this is done by looking at the literature dealing with the concerns raised by university and college teachers concerning SET, including those challenging the reliability and validity of the findings. In the second place, there is the need to look at faculty concerns regarding the place of SET n the academy. It is argued that SET has had an enormous influence in tenure and promotion awards at universities and colleges. Of those studies that question the value SET, Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly (1973) can be cited even though it is old since it communicates many of the criticism. They found that a lecturer/university teacher who was expressive, animated and seeming in charge of the content in his or her discipline because of the authoritative ways in which s/he spoke received high student evaluation despite the fact that s/he really delivered meaningless and sometimes false content. The conclusion reached here by these authors was that the lecturer was able to seduce the class into believing that s/he had significant expertise and competencies in terms of the content. This was achieved mainly through non verbal animated and lively classroom stage presence. Hence performance was an indication of the triumph of the class room stage over the content.

There is much research that supports the reliability, validity and usefulness of SET as there is research that discounts its validity, reliability and usefulness (Tom, Tom Tong, & Hesse, 2010). Marsh and Roche (1997) in their literature review of faculty evaluation by students generally supported the reliability, validity and usefulness of SET. They suggested that these evaluations of teaching are usually:

> (a) multidimensional; (b) reliable and stable; (c) primarily a function of the instructor who teaches a course rather than the course that is taught; (d) relatively valid against a variety of indicators of effective teaching; (e) relatively unaffected by a variety of variables hypothesized as potential biases (e.g., grading leniency, class size, workload, prior subject interest); and (f) useful in improving teaching effectiveness when coupled with appropriate consultation (p.1187).

Many faculty view SET by students as popularity contests since student questionnaires are susceptible to manipulation by teachers who make themselves popular by being entertaining, giving easy grades and so on. In recent years, there have been many sophisticated approaches for evaluating teaching. One approach advanced by Arreola (2000) calls for academic departments to assign points to the four role components of teaching. In fact what is proposed is that a model of good teaching be developed and then used to create the evaluation criteria based on four important dimensions of teaching: design of learning experiences, the quality of the interactions of the teacher and students, the extent and quality of student learning and the efforts of the teacher to improve over time.

Babad, Avni-Babad and Rosenthal (2004) found that students who had positive experiences of nonverbal lecturing behaviour were prone to rate lecturers positively at the end of term or semester teaching. Clayson and Sheffet (2006) also found that students' positive experiences of non verbal personality traits had an impact on the rating of their instructors on the end of term

student evaluation of teaching. In their study, they asked students at the beginning, with very little exposure (in fact less than five minutes) to their teachers of the academic term, to rate them on various personality variables such as agreeable-disagreeable, conscientious-not conscientious, emotionally stable- emotionally unstable, introverted-extroverted, unimaginative-uncreative-imaginative-creativity. At the end of the term, students were also assessed again and their assessments showed close association between the initial scores and the end of term scores.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

This study drew on Schein's (1992) theory of organizational culture as well as the work of Kuh and Whitts's (1988) in applying cultural theory to higher education landscapes. For Schein, culture was understood in terms of a conceptual hierarchy manifesting itself in discernible layers. These layers were namely, artifacts, values and beliefs, and basic assumptions. Artifacts, the first layer of this so-called hierarchy were understood to be the visible products, activities and processes that form a culture. The list of artifacts included reward structures, ritual, ceremonies and insider language and terminology. Values and beliefs, the middle layer of the hierarchy or the three levels of culture were understood to be:

> widely held beliefs or sentiments about the importance of certain goals, activities, relations, and feelings. Values can be (a) conscious and explicitly articulated, serving a normative or moral function guiding member behavior, (b) unconsciously expressed as themes (e.g. the tradition of collegial governance) and/or (c) symbolic interpretations of reality that give meaning to social actions and establish standards for social behavior (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 23).

Basic assumptions, the third layer of the hierarchy were those taken-for-granted beliefs that are rarely questioned. They reside at the very core of organizational culture and the deepest level of institutional consciousness and life (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Espoused values were often seen as a subset of the second layer of values and can be understood as the aspirations of the institution, what the institution wants to be.

It is important to pay attention to values since this was the most important part of the theory that guided the study. Many of the values within the university community are context bound and related to the history of the institution. Oftentimes they provided anchorage for people's views about what is right or wrong or those things that are encouraged or discouraged in the life of the institution. This sometimes might be problematic in light of the espoused values of individuals and institutions and how they actually behave. When change is being pursued, there needs to be the coming together or the congruence of the artifacts, values and espoused values (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 1992).

Values oftentimes take on the dimension of "theories in use"(Argyris &Schon, 1978, Schein , 1992, p. 25). It is important to determine the impact of values on institutional life in particular, institutional transformation. The effect of values on practice must be identified since any decision about institutional change must take into consideration the values of the institution. There are times when decision must be taken to transform values but they must be identified and their impact affirmed and if necessary change to ensure that modifications to practice can become a reality. The literature on efforts to change institutions (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Birnbaum, 1988; Senge, 1990) and on institutional culture (Birnbaum, 1988; Bergquist; 1992;

Bolman & Deal, 1994; Schein 1992) are readily available. However, the literature on organizational culture and SET is very sparse.

Research Design

The study was an exploratory inquiry into the perceptions of Anglophone Caribbean university faculty members about SET. A qualitative methodology was chosen since most studies investigating SET were quantitative. The qualitative approach would allow for multiple ideas to be heard and give voice to the deep feelings of faculty about SET. Further, it would enable us to get a broader interpretation of individual perceptions. Therefore, in-depth conversational interviews were conducted with ten faculty members across the various faculties. In formulating the research design, it was decided to conduct ten in-depth interviews or as many as were necessary until considerable redundancy was detected in the responses of the participants. After the tenth interview, it was thought that there was enough was evidence of redundancy and therefore the decision was taken to stop the process. In fact, there was some evidence of redundancy even before the tenth interview was taken.

Research participants were both junior and senior academic staff members. The sampling was purposeful to obtain participants who were information-rich and possessing diverse experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Pseudonyms were used and a brief profile of each informant was provided in the research report.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher and tape recorded with permission, transcribed word for word. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour in all cases. The main research question for this study was: How do lecturers/faculty understand and respond to the policy, processes and practices associated with student evaluation of teaching? In order to narrow the scope of this question, the following research sub-questions were asked:
1. What are the views that lecturers have about student evaluation of teaching?
2. How do lecturers understand and experience the process?
3. How does the evaluation process influence their teaching?
4. How does the culture of the institution impact on SET?

The process of analysing the data was continuous and ongoing. There was a thorough review of the data after each interview. Data analysis also took the form of an iterative process of coding, categorizing, and abstracting data as recommend by many authorities in qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From the outset, the transcripts were read and coded, compared with each other and then additional coding and categorization took place. In this way themes were identified. Conclusions were also submitted to participants for member checking or verification.

Findings and Conclusions

The views of lecturers/university teachers concerning SET were multifaceted. There were those who readily affirmed the benefits and others pointed out that the flaws in the instrument made it less than beneficial. In fact there were those who suggested that there was very little information from the SET that was helpful or could assist a teacher in meaningful ways to really take stock of

one's pedagogy and engage in corrective action. Tom, a young lecturer was a fitting representative of the more youthful lecturers. He stated that: "I think SET is helpful and I have learned much from it about my teaching." However Anna thought otherwise. She was a fitting representative of the traditionalists and the majoritarian voice of the older professor/lecturers. She stated: "There was very little from the SET that could help a lecturer to know how she was really doing." Apparently even though she dismissed the importance of Set for faculty growth and development, she also pointed to the deficiencies of the instrument itself and the need for it to be completely revised. Yet there were very strong beliefs about the process and the practices and these might be an indication that the cultural underpinning of the institution in which the dominance of faculty perspectives held enormous sway.

In terms of the understanding of the process, this was clearly understood but the experience was fraught with difficulties and hence it was contested by some on many fronts. Despite this the affirmation that there was some good from the process and that it could inform teaching was an indication that despite the fact the faculty were the experts at pedagogy in terms of delivering the curriculum, students as recipients of teaching also had something valuable to contributing to the ongoing conversation on good teaching,. There was therefore an indirect affirmation that students contribution to the ongoing conversation on good teaching was certainly important and that in their own right, they posses s expertise that should be taken to the table when the dialogue on good teaching is being engaged.

There were also findings and results that indicated that SET was indeed a part of the cultural norm of the university but it was essentially problematic. The values of the faculty and the values of the institution often collided. The use of the SET in summative ways was often punitive. The institution's claim of being committed to teaching was questioned even though this was a stated value of the institution, the congruence of the institutional values and those of faculty committed to teaching, was oftentimes at odds. Faculty was suspicious at times of the system and could not readily see how the institutional practice was advantageous to them. The so-called benefit of SET influencing teaching was not readily discerned in many cases. There was also the feeling that the instrument was flawed. Hence it was felt that there was the need for systemic change to ensure reliability and validity in terms of the process. This was vociferously communicated.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Faculty evaluation is fraught with difficulties. There must be a commitment to an ongoing dialogue on good teaching in adult and higher education in every age and in various cultural realities. Respecting the process sis important from both the faculty and the students and there must be continuous interrogation of the process to determine how it can be improved to serve the needs of the institution and especially to respond to the various cultural realities on campus.

Institutional culture impacts the life of almost everything on campus hence educators in higher education and adult educators need to be aware of this and ensure that they are cognizant of the institutional culture and how it informs decision making and it's likely to impact on professional life in particular institutions.

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