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Deconstructing the notion of a "good teacher". An analysis of the formal and non-formal characteristics of university teaching

Deconstrucción del "buen profesor". Análisis de las características formales y no formales de la docencia universitaria

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Abstract

Background: Student appraisals of teaching quality in universities have mainly focused on more formal aspects of teaching, overlooking other personal factors.

Objective: To identify and analyse the weight of each of the different factors that contribute to the notion of what good teaching represents for students. That is, to identify the equation that constitutes a "good instructor".

Method: A crosscutting survey, based on the results of reviews and research by the author, leading to the identification of the different factors involved in student appraisals of university teaching. The sample was 885 students from the University of the Balearic Islands, obtained through multistage mixed sampling.

Results: A solution of four factors. In order of explained variance, from highest to lowest, they are personal qualities, teaching competence, compliance and subject matter. From the regression analysis that was conducted, each of the four factors was found to have a statistically significant effect on appraisals of good teaching, with the first and second factors jointly accounting for 93% of all the model's explained variance.

Conclusions: The big impact of characteristics unrelated to teaching in the resulting equation opens up debate on the relevance of an instructor's personal qualities, not only in contributing to student satisfaction but also in influencing the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Appraisals of teaching, teaching quality, student satisfaction.

Resumen

Antecedentes: la evaluación de la calidad del profesorado universitario, desde el punto de vista del alumnado, se ha centrado principalmente en los aspectos más formales del ejercicio docente, desatendiendo así otros factores de tipo personal.

Objetivo: identificar y analizar las cargas de cada uno de los distintos factores que conforman la idea de la buena docencia según el alumnado. Es decir, detectar la ecuación que da lugar al esquema mental de "buen profesor" o "buena profesora".

Método: encuesta transversal, elaborada a partir de los resultados de revisiones e investigaciones propias que permitieron conocer la identidad de los distintos factores implicados en la evaluación de la docencia por parte del alumnado. La muestra es de 885 alumnos de la Universitat de les Illes Balears, obtenidos mediante un procedimiento de muestreo mixto y polietápico.

Resultados: la solución factorial de cuatro elementos, que en orden de mayor a menor varianza explicada son: cualidades personales, competencia formal, cumplimiento, y materia. El análisis de regresión determina que cada uno de los 4 factores presenta un efecto estadísticamente significativo sobre la consideración de buen docente, donde el primero y el segundo son, en suma, responsables del 93% de toda la varianza explicada por el modelo.

Conclusiones: el gran peso que las características no formales presentan en la ecuación resultante abre la discusión sobre la importancia de las cualidades personales del profesorado como elementos que pueden estar modulando, más allá de la satisfacción del alumnado, el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Evaluación de la docencia, calidad docente, satisfacción alumnado

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Even though student appraisals of the quality of university teaching have been conducted for almost a century now, they are still one of the most controversial aspects of university assessment system. the The application of these appraisals and adapted versions to fit in with new ideas in teaching continue to be the object of psychometric analyses (Tejedor, 2012). The strongest reticence to them can be found in the teaching sector, due to the deep-rooted belief that certain factors might bias student opinions of their instructors' standard of teaching, even though numerous scientific studies have concluded that none of the supposed biases has any substantial effect (Theall & Feldman, 2007), with, at most, only the occasional very minor influence being detected (Marsh, 2007).

The validity of the construct

Studies based on the analysis of student appraisals of teaching have mainly centred on the dimensionality, reliability and, above all, validity of the said tools. Debate on the issue multidimensionality of versus unidimensionality, originally represented by Marsh (1987) who upheld that teaching is a multidimensional complex activity, was responded to through research by Abrami and D'Apollonia (1990) and Cashin and Downey (1992). Without actually denying the existence of multidimensionality, they questioned Marsh's categorical defence when, after a review of Feldman's meta-analyses (1976), items of similar weights were found in more than one dimension. In our country, research mainly supports the existence of а multidimensional model (Escudero, 2000), although some authors also claim that students have a tendency to globalize their answers in questionnaires (González Such, Jornet, Suárez & Pérez Carbonell, 1999), pointing to the existence of something rather like a "general factor" - similar to the idea of the "g factor" as opposed to the usual breakdown into different factors typical of intelligence tests. For their part, Apodaca and Grad conducted a dimensional analysis based on parametric and non-parametric techniques, concluding that the unproductive lead to superficial results

controversy: "Comparisons between а unidimensional or multidimensional approach are unnecessary, since the construct can be regarded as both things. In short, the need for a unidimensional or multidimensional rating system depends on the purpose of the appraisal" (Apodaca & Grad, 2002, 406). At the same time, there seems to be a general consensus on the contents of the different dimensions if not on their number. The actual number is not such a problem as it might seem though, since models with fewer dimensions use macro categories that are specified in greater detail in models with a higher number of dimensions, with the number normally ranging from six to nine dimensions. There tend to be more dimensions in the case of formative assessments and fewer when a summative or accreditation-based approach is taken, thus setting a formative approach apart as the only conceptually adequate one (Tejedor & Jornet, 2008).

As for the reliability of opinion-based questionnaires, this is regarded as highly satisfactory (Aparicio, Tejedor & Sanmartín, 1982), both in terms of the internal consistency of the items – except when used with very small groups – and the stability of the results over time, with this last aspect being a validity indicator.

Validity has been the most commonly studied, widely discussed aspect. The best research results were achieved when nonparametric structural analyses of multidimensional tools were conducted. followed by parametric ones (Apodaca & Grad, 2002). The results of convergentdiscriminant analyses were either moderately satisfactory (García Ramos. 1999) or satisfactory (Marsh & Hocevar, 1984), as was also the case of multi-section validity studies, methodological although they involved complications 2000). (Garcia Garduño. Transcultural applications also proved satisfactory in supporting the validity of these tools (Marsh, Hau, Chung & Siu, 1997).

Lastly, obtained correlations between ratings by students and ex-students support the validity of the construct (Seldin, 1993). A

significant relationship was also found with instructor self-assessments, in this case at a moderately acceptable level (Drews, Burroughs & Nokovick, 1987). Studies that relate student assessments to those of colleagues do not support the validity of such tools, casting doubt on colleagues' capacity to evaluate the construct (Aparicio, Tejedor and Sanmartín, 1982; De Miquel, 1991). One line of research that has provided strong support for the validity of the construct is based on assessments by trained external observers, particularly when focusing on teaching clarity. This seems to be an aspect at the crux of teaching quality (Hines, Cruickshank and Kennedy, 1985).

But what exactly is a good teacher?

Another point that was widely raised was the construct's lack of clear definition (Álvarez, García Jiménez & Gil, 1999; García Ramos, 1999; Pascual & Gaviria, 2004). Research has come to focus on attempts to identify what different aspects are involved in teaching "quality", an adjective and label of fundamental importance in any worthwhile profession. The authors use expressions like "teaching", "teaching excellence", "effective "a good teacher", teaching", "teaching performance", "quality teaching", "teaching competence" and "teaching function" in a very similar way, using tuition and teaching to a more or less equal extent. Substantial attention has also been given to the method that is used to identify the characteristics that combine to form the construct under study, with these methods ranging from theoretical reflections on what a good teacher should be to qualitative empirical research that explored students' mental perceptions of the notion.

According to Ericksen (1985), a good teacher chooses and organizes the course materials and guides students in recording and assimilating the information so that they can easily remember it. They are also skilled in the procedures and methods involved in their discipline, and they try to foster independent learning.

According to Elton (1987), a good teacher is well organized, well prepared, interested in the subject, friendly, flexible, attentive, creative, keen, clear, interested in the students, open, systematic, committed and devoted to their job.

For De la Cruz (1999), a university instructor must be a top specialist in their branch of knowledge, in terms of research in their field and teaching. They must have been systematically trained in each of the tasks they have to perform: that is, primarily research, teaching and management. They should be motivated to carry out research and to teach their subject; they should be keen, interested and have a vocation for their subject; they have certain personality should traits tolerance. (including patience, an open personality, easily adaptable, flexible and with a sense of humour); they should have certain basic personal skills (including getting on with people, communication skills, stress control, a high frustration tolerance etc.); they should specific teaching skills have (good at organizing the subject matter to be taught, long and short-term planning of teaching activities, clear explanations, presentation of the subject matter in a way that arouses the students' interest and encourages independent learning, good at organizing and managing and situations and learning resources); they should have a critical, contemplative attitude to their own activities as a teacher; and they should be innovative and receptive to change.

According to Ramsden (1992), skilled teachers should have a wide variety of specific teaching skills. Do not forget that their goals are to assist students in the learning process, to listen and learn from their students, to assess their own teaching activities on an ongoing believe that teaching means basis, to facilitating learning, to teach with enthusiasm, to show a concern and respect for students, to be easily understandable to students, to promote learner autonomy, to use methods that foster active, cooperative learning on the part of students, to give good quality feedback to students on their work, to teach the key concepts of their subject and not to overload students with work.

Efficient teaching, according to Brown (1993), should encompass the following: an in-depth knowledge of the subject, fluent communication with students, an awareness of students' learning styles, and an understanding of what a university education entails.

From studies of instructors who were awarded top ratings (Gros & Romaña, 2004), it was concluded that a good teacher should have a sound knowledge of their subject; prepare classes well; explain clearly and in an organized manner; write clearly, legibly and in an organized manner on the board; be able to work as part of a team; have a certain sensitivity to their social and cultural background; be able to put themselves in the place of their students; be easily approachable; be a little theatrical; get students involved; be punctual, polite and friendly; and have a good physical appearance.

The criteria that some universities apply to distinguish excellence in teaching are (Dunkin & Precians, 1992) a keen interest in teaching and fostering learning, an interest in improving through innovations, teaching a good command of the subject, keeping up to date in their field of study, understanding student needs, taking into account feedback on their teaching by colleagues and students, the ability to organize class materials and to present them in a stimulating way, the ability to assess students and give useful feedback, the ability to arouse the interest of beginner students and to foster autonomous learning, to encourage creativity in students from later years, and to show an interest in and commitment to fostering excellence in teaching among their colleagues.

Through the DOCENTIA programme, the Spanish Quality Assessment & Accreditation Agency (la Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación) established four categories for assessing teaching staff: planning, teaching, checks and reviews of the process. These are subdivided into 10 subcategories used to put them into practice: syllabus planning, organizing teaching work and coordinating teaching staff, fulfilment of teaching procedures and obligations, reinforcing subject matter, extended tasks, achieving teaching goals, student satisfaction, the training received by the teacher, innovation in projects, innovation in materials and innovation through external recognition.

Figure 1 shows the mental image that students have of a good teacher, based on qualitative research aimed at breaking down students' understanding of the construct (Casero, 2010a). Casero Martínez, Antonio (2016). Deconstructing the notion of a "good teacher". An analysis of the formal and non-formal characteristics of university teaching. *RELIEVE*, 22 (2), art. 4. doi: <u>http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/relieve.22.2.9419</u>





There are many common denominators to different understandings of what good teaching means, and not all of them are strictly related to formal, academic or professional aspects. Various personal aspects have been identified that have more to do with a person's character and personal skills than with their training or command of the subject. Thus this study aims to identify the weight of each of the different factors that contribute to student perceptions of good teaching. That is, by using the results of reviews and research studies aimed at identifying the factors involved in student appraisals of teaching quality, it aspires to find the blueprint to a good teacher.

Method

To achieve the above goal, a cross-cutting survey was used in the form of a 30-item questionnaire, where the students were asked to rate their level of agreement with 30 statements on a scale from 0 to 10. The first 20 items, from A1 to A20, are the outcome of a study by Casero (2008), where the importance of 92 items from a pool of items used at Spanish universities were rated by both students and instructors. This led to a solution that was obtained by conducting a mixed analysis combining the use of robust indicators with an exploratory factor analysis and contents analysis. The ten remaining items, from B1 to B10, are the outcome of qualitative research by the same author into non-formal aspects of perceptions of teaching quality, identified initially through qualitative student questionnaires and latterly through discussion groups (Casero, 2010a). Table 3 shows all the items in the 30-item questionnaire.

The sample was made up of 885 students (284 men and 601 women, with a mean age of 21.32 and standard deviation of 4.17) from the University of the Balearic Islands, obtained through multi-stage mixed sampling, with a

selection of primary units (the instructors), selected through simple random sampling, secondary units (the subjects), obtained by assigning a teacher, and final units (the students), obtained by accidental sampling in the classroom. This gave a sample error of 3.82% for the whole sample, estimated for a confidence level of 95 % under the most unfavourable condition of p = q = .5.

Results

The analysis of the responses was divided into three parts: firstly, an analysis was made of the measurement guarantees offered by the assessment tool. Secondly, an analysis was made to detect the factors that comprise the construct under study. Lastly, an analysis of these factors was conducted to find the equation that summarizes the general teaching appraisal model for students.

Measurement guarantees

The reliability analysis for internal consistency gave a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96, based on the standardized items. This is a more than satisfactory value. When each item from the 30 items in the assessment tool was eliminated in turn, the values oscillated between 0.95 and 0.96.

To estimate the criterion validity, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, where the independent variables were the 29 items; that is, all of them except for A20, which acted as the dependent variable since it represents an overall appraisal of the instructor. The obtained result - see Table 1 - indicates the high predictive capacity of the set of 29 items with regard to the overall appraisal of the instructor, with a value of 81%, denoting the concurrent validity of the construct's measurement.

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Table 1. Multiple correlation.							
		R	Adjusted R	Standard error			
Model	R	squared	squared	of the estimate			
1	.91	.82	.81	.98			

Factor-based structure

Table 2 reflects the adequacy of applying a factor analysis to our data. The result of the KMO index is very good, according to Kaiser's scale, while the test of sphericity

indicates that the required high correlation among the variables has been met. These results are very satisfactory, validating the use of a factor analysis.

Table 2. KMC Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin	IO tests and sphericity. Bartlett's test of sphericity			
measure of sampling adequacy	Approximate chi-square	Significance		
.97	17434.23	< .01		

An exploratory factor analysis was applied using the principal components analysis extraction method, the most widely used in this kind of study. This was rotated, using Varimax with Kaiser normalization. This orthogonal rotation method minimizes the number of variables with high saturations in each factor, simplifying their interpretation. Thus the analysis led to a solution of four factors that account for 64.73% of the total variance, with the first being responsible for 25.48% of the total variance, the second 23.95%, and the third and fourth 10.01% and 5.22% respectively.

Table 3 shows each item's correlation with the factor that it saturates the most. From the items associated with each of the factors, we decided to name the four factors as follows:

Factor I: *Personal qualities*, encompassing items that deal with personal aspects of the instructors, not related to teaching.

Factor II: *Teaching competence*, items that mainly deal with the instructors' capacity to motivate their students, arouse interest, convey knowledge, explain with clarity, answer in a precise way, and relate concepts to subject matter. Overall, this behaviour demonstrates a command of the subject matter and an ability to transmit it in an inspiring way. As we see it, this is the essence of teaching competence, in the strict sense of the word.

Factor III: *Compliance*, made up of items relating to the instructors' contractual obligations in dealings with students.

Factor IV: *Subject matter*, because this factor solely relates to aspects of the taught subject, and not to variables associated with the instructor.

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Item	ΙI	I III IV
A1. Explains the syllabus (aims, contents, methodology, assessment, scope, development), at the beginning of the course	.5	55.54
A2. The programme develops at a rhythm that allow all topics to be dealt with adequately and rigorously	.6	59
A3. What is explained during class corresponds to the syllabus of the subject	.6	66
A4. Is available during tutorial times		.72
A5. Complies with student care obligations		.66
A6. Classes are well prepared, organized and structured	.7	6
A7. Explains the s involved in each topic clearly	.7	'9
A8. When new s are introduced s/he relates them, where possible, to those already known	.7	73
A9. Answers questions asked in class on the s of the subject matter and other questions promptly and accurately	.6	55
A10. Knows how to convey his/her knowledge	.7	'5
A11. Relates the contents of this subject with other subjects, avoiding overlapping	.5	57
A12. Teacher/student communication is fluent and spontaneous, creating an atmosphere of trust	.70	
A13. Manages to get us motivated about and interested in the subject matter	.63 .6	53
A14. Is concerned about his/her students' learning difficulties	.66	
A15. Tries to make the subject interesting	.66 .6	50
A16. Is approachable and is willing to help us	.70	
A17. Is respectful towards students		.59
A18. Study materials (texts, notes, etc.) are suitable	.5	59
A19. Practical classes are a good complement to the theoretical contents of the subject matter	.5	53
B1. This teacher has a great sense of humour	.76	
B2. The teacher has a very good reputation	.65	
B3. I like this teacher	.79	
B4. This teacher seems to me a modest person	.66	
B5. Is very likeable	.82	
B6. I find this teacher attractive	.51	
B7. You can tell s/he likes teaching	.61	
B8. According to the credits this subject has, I think we have been overloaded with work (assignments, reading)		.79
B9. This subject is renowned for being a tough subject		.75
B10. This subject is very important for my studies as a whole		.42

Table 3. Correlations between items and factors.

General teaching appraisal model

From the results that were obtained with the factor analysis, a multiple regression analysis was conducted of the overall appraisal of teaching quality – that is, item A 20 -, using the factor scores of the four detected factors (obtained using the regression method) as predictor variables. The stepwise method was used, allowing for the construction of a multiple linear equation by selecting variables step by step. The advantage that it offers over

other methods is the fact that a variable selected in one step can be eliminated in a subsequent one. The procedure for the inclusion and exclusion of variables is based on calculating an F value for each predictor variable. Variables are included in the regression equation if they have an F probability of less than 0.05, while variables with a value of over 0.10 are excluded.

Table 4. Summary of the multiple linear regression model on the overall appraisal of teaching Model 1. Predictor variables: (Constant), Formal competence

					Change statistics				
					Change				Significance
			Adjusted	Standard	in R	Change			of change
Model*	R	\mathbb{R}^2	\mathbb{R}^2	error	squared	in F	gl1	gl2	in F
1	.64	.40	.40	1.75	.40	598.62	1	883	<.01
2	.85	.73	.73	1.18	.33	1064.86	1	882	<.01
3	.89	.78	.78	1.06	.05	216.59	1	881	<.01
4	.89	.79	.79	1.05	<.01	10.19	1	880	<.01

Model 2. Predictor variables: (Constant), Formal competence, Personal qualities

Model 3. Predictor variables: (Constant), Formal competence, Personal qualities, Compliance

Model 4. Predictor variables: (Constant), Formal competence, Personal qualities, Compliance, Subject matter

Dependent variable: Item A20 Overall I think s/he is a good teacher

The stepwise method, shown in Table 4, is a 4-step solution. The corrected squared multiple correlation indicates that the variables selected in the model predict 79% of the overall dimension.

Tuble 5. Thirdy 55 of Variance of the regression model.						
Sources of	Sum of		Root mean			
variance	squares	g.l.	square	F	Significance	
Regression	3576.47	4	894.12	806.90	<.01	
Residual	975.12	880	1.11			
Total	4551.58	884				

Table 5. Analysis of variance of the regression model.

The analysis of variance of the regression model is statistically significant, indicating that the slope of the regression plane is different from zero; that is, there is a linear fit between the set of predictor variables and the dependent variable (see Table 5).

As for the guarantees that the model offers, because the analysis of variance led to a significant result and there are also significant regression coefficients (see Table 6), it is possible to rule out collinearity. Its absence is confirmed by the obtained tolerance values of between .99 and 1.

To find the relative weights, we used Beta coefficients. These indicate the amount of change that the dependent variable will

undergo, in standardized amounts, for each unit change in the corresponding predictor variable, holding all the other predictor variables constant. Thus with this coefficient, a direct comparison can be made of the importance of each predictor variable, regardless of the scale on which it is measured.

Tuble 6. Reglession coefficients.							
	Non- co	standardized efficients	Standardized coefficients				
Predictor variables	В	Standard error	Beta	t	Signif.		
(Constant)	7.40	.04		209.00	<.01		
Teaching competence	1.44	.04	.64	40.74	<.01		
Personal qualities	1.30	.04	.57	36.59	<.01		
Compliance	.52	.04	.23	14.80	<.01		
Subject matter	.11	.04	.05	3.19	<.01		

Table 6. Regression coefficients.

The standardized coefficients allow the relative importance of each factor to be observed, with *teaching competence* taking priority in predicting the student's overall appraisal of the instructor, closely followed by *personal qualities*, while *compliance* is just under half as important and *the subject matter* lags far behind in last place.

Discussion

With the obtained results, a valid reliable research tool can be presented, with a high degree of internal consistency. The obtained values are similar to those achieved by Muñiz, García and Virgos (1991) and those presented in La Laguna University's General Report on the Quality of Teaching by Teaching Staff (2003), and they are even higher than the findings of Mateo and Fernández (1993), Mairata and Servera (1996), Capelleras and Veciana (2001), and Muñoz, Ríos and Abalde (2002), denoting the concurrent validity of the construct.

At the same time, this study's main contribution in meeting its proposed goal is to have discovered and presented the relative weights of each of the major factors that determine students' overall appraisal of their instructors. Thus the results give us the following equation: Overall appraisal of teaching = Teaching competence (.66) + Personal qualities (.55) + Compliance (.24) +Subject matter (.04). These findings confirm the multidimensional approach to teaching quality upheld by many authors, particularly Marsh (1987). The presence of a general factor is also confirmed, observed by the specific items' high predictive power over the students' overall appraisal. This is fully coherent with the results obtained by Apodaca and Grad (2002), when they state that the construct can be viewed from a unidimensional and a multidimensional perspective, with the end purpose of the assessment determining how the results are used (for summative and/or formative purposes).

By "deconstructing" the construct, the presence of two major aspects can be identified, one of a teaching-related nature and another not associated with teaching, both with

weights that are too similar for the importance of the second to be overlooked. Obviously "non-formal" variables, associated with the instructors' personal characteristics, have played a central role in this study. These variables were included due to growing suspicions of their influential role in appraisals, following informal conversations with students and instructors and partial support from the literature review and the author's own research. Consequently, the presence of these variables in the results came as no surprise. What did stand out was the value that they achieved: accounting for 83% of the *teaching competence* factor's capacity for change. More specifically, "being friendly" and "being likeable" (the items with the highest correlation with the personal qualities factor) are the ones that best reflect the instructors' personal side for students and they have a big impact on overall appraisals. Meanwhile, the item that best represents *teaching competence* is the ability to give clear explanations. This last result ties in with the review of scientific literature – i.e. the studies by Hines, Cruickshank and Kennedy (1985), and Apodaca and Grad (2002) - where clear explanations are found to be a central aspect of teaching quality.

The detected effect might be explained by the instructors' capacity to influence their students' perceptions, at least in part, although clearly this is under the assumption that these instructors make an active attempt to make a favourable impression. This idea fits in with Dr Fox's paradigm, where so-called "educational seduction" is said to have a strong effect on student ratings, although not as much as was observed here. This suggest the existence of at least one other reason (Casero, 2010b), turning the spotlight onto the students. The student population is made up of individuals of both sexes, mainly aged between 18 and 25. That is, they are individuals just out of their teens, exposed on a daily basis to figures of authority with decision-making capacity over their ability to continue in the higher education system. In such circumstances, it is legitimate to believe that an "affinity" between the instructor and the student's personal characteristics might lead to a certain halo effect, influencing the student's overall assessment of the instructor.

Lastly, another point for discussion is how a student's favourable perception of an instructor's personal characteristics might influence the relationship between them (Spilt, Koomen and Thijs, 2011), together with their mutual expectations (Rubie-Davies, C.M., 2010) and the teaching and learning process. Presumably, this process would be facilitated by this "affinity", making the student more predisposed and more motivated, if we heed statements by students. This kind of approach is very important in the business world, where apathetic unpersuasive sales representatives sell few products. In saying this, I am not advocating a teaching model based on a business one, since this would detract from the end purpose of the education system. However, desirable personal characteristics do, in the case of an instructor, play an important role in the education process. Instead of regarding this as a bias in teaching, it should be seen as an "ideal" ingredient of good teaching, when combined with other "formal" skills.

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