The learning experience of students in Middlesex University Business School (MUBS): why do they enjoy some modules/lectures and dislike others?

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Abstract

The context of teaching in higher education has changed rapidly in the last decade. The purpose of this paper is to explore what students today really want, what they expect of the lecturers and why they prefer some modules or courses but dislike others. Specifically, the study looks at the learning benefits of lecturing as 'good education' context vs. lecturing as 'entertainment' context. Overall, thirty seven focus groups were convened within Middlesex University Business School. It was found that students still regarded lecturing as an important means of learning. Learning is regarded as a comprehensive experience rather than single activity. Motivation, however, is the key to success. Students appreciate those lecturers who are not only 'knowledgeable' but also 'skilful' in teaching, good at getting information across and 'caring' in the process of student learning. They enjoy those modules which stimulate deep learning, adopt a pedagogical style and deliver positively on the ten evaluation criteria highlighted in the conceptual framework of this study. Perception of any one particular module can vary if the module is delivered strongly in one single dimension. Most importantly, the perceived learning support is regarded as critical and should be managed as a strategic asset, especially in universities which enjoy large numbers of students but relatively poor facilities.

Key words: Learning experience, Higher Education, Lecturing, evaluation criteria.

Introduction

In an "away-day" discussion session in the 1998/1999 academic year, David Smith, formerly marketing director of a printing company but then a newly-appointed senior lecturer within MUBS, asserted that students are our customers, we should listen to them about their requirements and their needs. "Not necessarily: the customers may not always know what they want," retorted Rebecca Brandon an experienced senior lecturer. She argued that, while there was no denying that it was always important to evaluate the quality of teaching from student perspectives and that students were ultimately the purpose and objective of our service, these students needed to be re-moulded and guided carefully by teaching staff. These two views highlighted two different paradigms of education. Interestingly, this debate mirrors the long-term debate in the business world, that is: should the product or service be developed according to advances in technology or according to the desires of consumers? The answer seems simple but is always debatable. Ramsden (1992) lists eleven examples of student accounts regarding experiences of teaching and teachers, from Mirr in 1943 and Marris in1964 up to students in the late 1980s. He suggests that there are four major elements which may contribute to a student's positive attitudes toward teaching and teachers:

- enthusiastic teaching and commitment of teaching staff
- combining certain human qualities with explanatory skills
- lecturer-student rapport
- well-structured content

However, the context of teaching in higher education changed rapidly in the 1990s (Race and Brown, 1998, Anderson & Moore, 1999, Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997). Some educators have started to experiment with new teaching methods (Sirvanci, 1996). For

example, at the British Academy of Management annual conference in September 1999, Knights and Willmont introduced their experiments of teaching level three students by drawing heavily from outside the conventional management texts. Four modern novels, *Nice Work* (Lodge); *The Unbeatable Lightness of Being* (Kundera); *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro); *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Wolfe), in particular, were used. knights and Willmont asserted that management teaching should relate to students' lives and experience even in terms of fiction, otherwise it would alienate them and the effectiveness of learning woudl be in doubt. Furthermore, Teach and Govahi (1993) found that simulation is effective in teaching 20 out of 41 managerial skills; experiential exercises are effective in teaching another 12 of the 41; case methods are effective to teach another 8 managerial skills; whereas lectures are only effective in teaching the remaining managerial skill: reflective listening.

Given these concerns, it is worthwhile to find out what students nowadays really want, what they expect of the lecturers, and why they prefer some modules but dislike others. Specifically, this research project looks at the learning benefits of lecturing as a good education context (learning something) vs. lecturing as entertainment context (enjoying the time but maybe not learning much).

This paper is divided into the following sections.

1. **Introduction:**— providing a general outline of the research project.
2. **Conceptual framework**: —summarising existing work in the literature with a focus on evaluation criteria of good lectures (for a definition of a 'good lecture', see below).
3. **Methods**:— describing how the research was conducted;.
4. **Data analysis**:— highlighting the method used for analysing the data.
5. **Findings** and discussions.
6. **Managerial implications**:—limitations and further work.

The framework of the project

To define what is a good lecture and what is a bad lecture is difficult if not impossible. This study uses a conceptual framework, which largely describes the virtues of a good lecture and its context. The framework is derived from literature (e.g. Bligh, 1998; Saroyan and Snell, 1997, Fisher et al, 1998).

This conceptual framework consists of three basic elements:

1. the context/usage of lecture;
2. lecture styles;
3. the evaluation criteria of good lectures.

The logic for the framework is simple. Any lecture is delivered in a certain educational context and it serves a certain purpose or purposes, both of which are usually defined by the lecturer, not the students, of course. It is meaningless to discuss the usage of lectures without a proper understanding of the context of delivering them. Consequently, the context/ usage of a lecture largely decides its delivery styles, from which we can derive some common criteria by which lectures can be judged, no matter how different the styles of delivery might be. These judgements are all subjected to the influence of students as well as lecturers' self-image. The framework is illustrated in Figure1 and described in detail through the rest of this section.

Element 1: The context/usage of lectures

In his latest version of 'What's the Use of Lectures', Bligh (1998) provides a rich summary of literature regarding the usage of lectures. He suggests that:

- the lecture is as effective as other methods to transmit information;
- most lectures are not as effective as other means to promote thought;
- changing student attitude should not normally be the major objective of lectures;
- lectures are relatively ineffective to teach behaviour skills.

Bearing in mind these limitations of lectures, most modules or courses, as integrated teaching units, in universities today no longer use lectures as the only means of delivery.

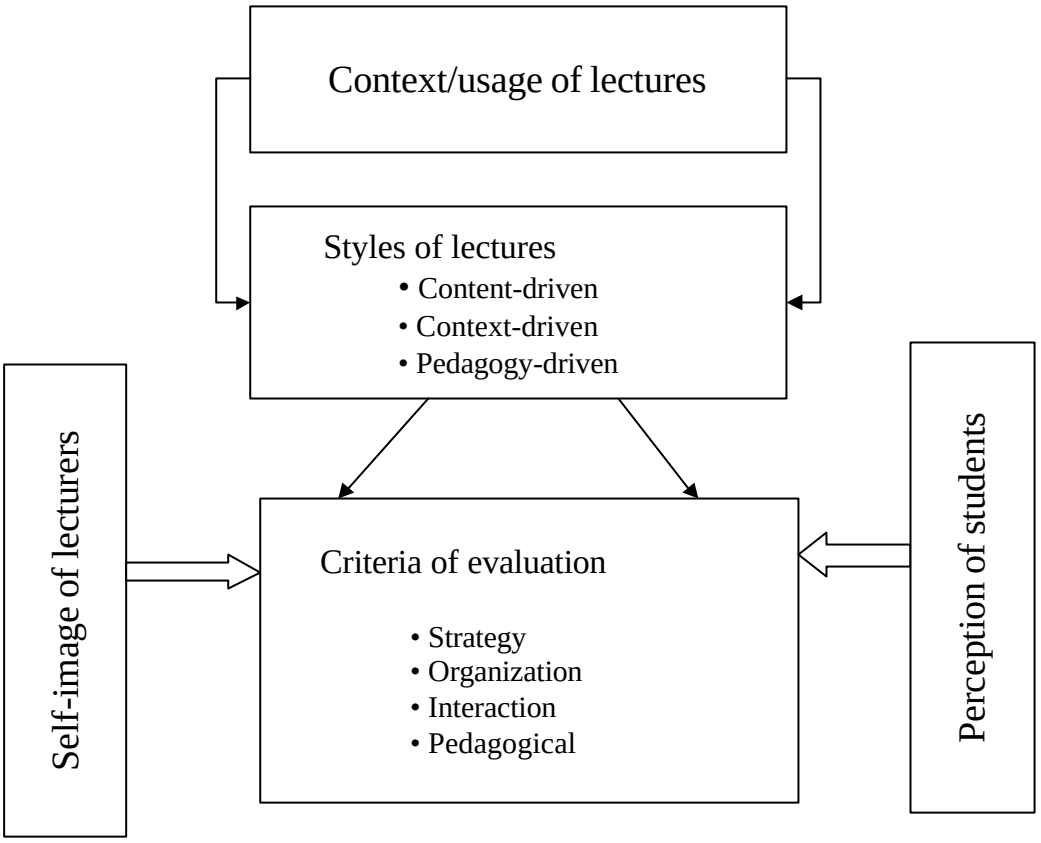

Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

For example, the modules with which I am involved, all feature seminars, student projects, etc. However, none of these modules dismisses the role of lectures, even if most of these are not delivered in the pure, traditional form of 'lecturing'. For, as Isaacs (1994) contends:

> If one accepts that deep learning is a desirable end in higher education - indeed, is the desirable end - then the problem for those who must lecture (and, especially, those who must lecture regularly and extensively) is how to organise their lecture classes so that students' individual needs are addressed. (215)

Bligh (1998) suggests that buzz groups and horseshoe groups can be useful activities in lectures. Buzz groups are groups of two to six members who discuss issues or problems for a short period or periods within a lesson. A horseshoe group may be an amalgamation of two buzz groups and could vary in size from five to twelve members. However, no matter how the lecture is organised, there is one thing lecturers cannot avoid: the need to deliver presentations effectively. The extent to which a lecture can achieve what it claims to achieve is an interesting point; sometimes its claimed ability may be regarded as mythical. As Gibbs (1999) asserts:

> Myths about the effectiveness of lectures are perhaps not quite as dominant and the lecture is not quite the all-pervasive teaching method in higher education that it was, but change has been slow and, in some institutions, negligible. (259)

However negligible the change is, different styles of lectures have emerged and it is necessary to include these changes in our framework.

Element 2: Styles of lectures

As indicated above, the large number of higher education lecturers, the wide range of disciplines, and different teaching paradigms inevitably determine that lecture styles vary. Saroyan & Snell (1997) distinguish different styles of lecturing and attitude or perceptions toward the lecture. According to them, the range of these styles and attitudes:

> ...characterise the least sophisticated view and practice of teaching as being teacher-centred and conversely, the most sophisticated view as being interactive or student-centred. Thus they measure gain in pedagogical expertise by the increase in the awareness of students' needs and the decrease in the amount of obsession with the dissemination of a pre-determined amount of facts and knowledge. (86)

They further propose a typology of lecturing styles: content-driven lecture, context-driven lecture, and pedagogy-driven lecture. The content-driven lecture aims at covering a large amount of information in the span of one or two hours and includes few activities to enhance cognitive processing and the storing of voluminous information, whereas the context-driven lecture uses the context information effectively to promote the objectives or aims of the lecture which clearly extend beyond providing information. The pedagogy-driven lecture, on the other hand, attempts to promote and foster the learning of useful, practical principles by means of a wide range of pedagogical tools and ensures that the opportunity to apply the knowledge is provided during the lecture. Saroyan & Snell conclude that the more pedagogically oriented the lecture, the better it is perceived by the students. Using a sample of Canadian medical school students, they found that the content-driven lecture was rated the lowest on every dimension of the evaluation (see below) and the pedagogy-driven one was evaluated the highest.

Element 3: Perceptions and evaluation of lectures

The framework used by Saroyan and Snell (1997) to evaluate good lectures vs. bad lectures can be divided into three aspects: strategy, organisation and interaction.

1. Strategy:

- appropriateness of level of instructional strategy (synergy between long-term learning plan and student acceptance level).

2. Organisation:

- structure: ways lectures are organised, e.g. in hierarchical form, chaining, or other variations (Bligh, 1998);
- provision of summary of main points;
- effective use of media.

3. Clarity:

- interaction;
- active involvement of students;
- responsiveness of students;
- communication of expected learning;
- enthusiasm.

It may look as if Saroyan and Snell's framework (1997) is relatively complete; however, recent literature indicates otherwise. According to Robinson et al (1997) lecturing rate, or talking speed, measured in words per minute (wpm), tends to have an impact on student comprehension. They studied a sample of 119 undergraduates who were enrolled in two educational psychology courses at Mississippi State University. The results suggest that both the students' comprehension and the perceived importance of the information presented in the lecture decrease as the lecturing rate increases, no matter whether students just listen to or listen to and watch the lecturer. In other words, a lecturing rate of about 100 words per minute (wpm) will generate higher comprehension and higher perceived values of importance than lecturing rates of 150 and 200 wpm. This suggests, therefore, that college lecturers need to be aware of how their lecturing rates may affect both cognitive and affective outcomes. So, to evaluate good or bad lecturing, it may be legitimate to add lecturing rate as one of the criteria, although it is arguable that the relationship between lecturing rate and perceived comprehension may be influenced by other factors such as class size.

Furthermore, if Saroyan and Snell's framework is somewhat teacher-centred, Fisher et al (1998) provide a more balanced treatment. Twenty-one lecturing criteria were used as shown below (Note: the criteria are re-organised by the author into four aspects):

1. Strategy

- present materials in an interesting way;
- act as academic role model;
- build on students' previous knowledge.

2. Organisation

- provide clear explanations;
- ensure lectures have defined structure;
- provide periodic summaries during lecture.

3. Interaction

- stimulate students' interests;
- pace lecture to allow note taking;
- arouse students' curiosity;
- use examples relevant to students;
- stimulate independent learning;
- interact with students;
- challenge students' world views;
- pause to allow memory consolidation;
- project enthusiasm for the subject matter.

4. Pedagogy

- display mastery of subject matter;
- provide up-to-date research;
- possess good public-speaking qualities;
- use non-sexist language;
- display high level of verbal fluency;
- use inclusive example and expression.

They used a sample from an Australian university in which complete questionnaires from 89 academic staff and 320 students were analysed. It seemed that students' perceptions of lecturing criteria were quite different from those of lecturers. Using the 21 criteria, and retaining the same categories/ sequence as shown above, students listed their top ten criteria as follows (numbers in brackets show the rank order):

1. Strategy

- present materials in an interesting way; (4)

2. Organisation

- provide clear explanations; (1)
- ensure lectures have defined structure. (5)

3. Interaction

- stimulate students' interests; (6)
- pace lecture to allow note taking ;(2)
- arouse students' curiosity. (3)

4. Pedagogy

- display mastery of subject matter; (8)
- provide up-to-date research; (7)
- possess good public-speaking qualities; (10)
- display high level of verbal fluency; (9)

The top ten criteria listed by academics are as follows:

1. Strategy:

- present materials in an interesting way. (2)

2. Organisation:

- provide clear explanations; (1)
- ensure lectures have defined structure. (6)

3. Interaction:

- stimulate students' interests; (3)
- arouse students' curiosity; (4)
- stimulate independent learning; (10)
- project enthusiasm for the subject matter. (7)

4. Pedagogy

- display mastery of subject matter; (8)
- provide up-to-date research; (9)
- use non-sexist language. (5)

It is easy to see that both students and teachers rank *clear explanation* as the top evaluation criteria. The other six common criteria are: *present materials in an interesting way; stimulate students' interests; arouse students' curiosity; ensure lectures have defined structure; provide up-to-date research; display mastery of subject matter*. However, students tend to stress the importance of performance variables of lecturers which include: *pace lecture to allow note taking; display high level of verbal fluency; possess good public-speaking qualities*. The academics, however, tend to be defensive on their account, and so include: *use non-sexist language; project enthusiasm for the subject matter; stimulate independent learning*. Fisher et al (1998) conclude that:

> ...the academic factor structure has a strong focus on the social equity issues that are beginning to be much more important in higher education — and which match the official ethos of the institution to which the staff members belonged — and to the critical thinking and quality issues of education. For students, the most important factor relates much more to the specific presentation aspects of the lecture-clarity, interests, and structure. (163)

Deriving from the above discussion and combining criteria from Robinson et al (1997), Saroyan and Snell (1997) and Fisher et al's (1998) study, I list here ten evaluation criteria as a reference in this project. It might be desirable to include all of the useful criteria but to maintain clarity and simplicity, it is unwise to go far beyond the 7+2 limit.

1. Strategy:

- present materials in an interesting way (Fisher et al 1998);
- appropriateness of level of instructional strategy (Saroyan and Snell, 1997);

2. Organisation:

- provide clear explanations (Fisher et al 1998, Saroyan and Snell 1997);
- ensure lectures have defined structure (Fisher et al 1998, Saroyan and Snell 1997).

3. Interaction:

- stimulate students' interests (Fisher et al 1998);
- appropriate lecturing rate/pace the lecture (Robinson et al 1997, Fisher et al 1998);
- arouse students' curiosity (Fisher et al 1998);
- active involvement of students (Saroyan and Snell 1997).

4. Pedagogy:

- display mastery of subject matter (Fisher et al 1998);
- provide up-to-date research (Fisher et al 1998).

Interestingly, Weaver and Cortrell (1985) believe that teachers' concept of self affects their teaching effectiveness. They suggest that lecturers must decide on an image (a material picture and a potent stimulus) of themselves, break it down and then use systematic sensitivities to slowly build proper self-images. Therefore, it is important to relate what has been found in the literature to what is happening in the relevant teaching environment in which one is working, as accomplished both through feedback and self-observation (Weaver and Cortrell, 1985). The primary data collection for analysis of this project serves this purpose. As is shown in Figure 1, self-image of lecturers is an important element but equally important is the self-perception of students on which the criteria of evaluation should also be built. Self-perception of students can be defined as the attitudes/views held by individual students towards learning and higher education and the role of themselves as participants in this long process (at least three years), which can act as stimulus to motivate or de-motivate their learning behaviour.

Methods

The main investigation method used in this study was focus groups. As this was an applied and exploratory study, the main purpose was to find out insights and anecdotal evidence regarding students' attitude towards our current work. The subjects of the study were all from Middlesex University Business School (MUBS), one of the oldest business schools in a new university. MUBS was described by its Dean as "one of the largest international centres of business education in the United Kingdom, and the largest Business School in London. In 1999/2000 more than 1700 students from over 50 different countries graduated with one of our degrees."

The study was carried out in line with the teaching scheme of the marketing research module, in which focus groups were introduced as a main tool in market research, so the students were fully aware of the usage of the technique albeit it was new to them. In total 37 focus groups were convened. The data collection lasted 3 semesters, covering two different years of Level 2 students. Each focus group discussion lasted about one hour. The first 10 minutes were used in briefing and in selection of a student moderator and a note-taker (observer). The group discussion lasted

about 25 minutes. Another 25 minutes allowed students to summarise their findings and present them formally to other student groups. These procedures made sure that group opinions were presented rather than the opinion of a particular member of the group. Each focus group usually consisted of 5 to 8 students, that is smaller than the typical focus group size (8 to 12) but, considering the time length, it was recognised as appropriate.

The data collection procedure was monitored but not manipulated (in terms of tighter control) by the author. The moderator and observer roles in 35 out of 37 focus group sessions were played by students so that they would feel that they were in charge and the result would not be biased by any teaching staff. Due to the sensitivity of the information, the procedure of formal focus group discussion was not recorded or videotaped. The same discussion instrument was used throughout the 37 focus group discussions. The findings were summarised on a group basis and presentation materials were collected after the focus group discussion.

Data analysis

As indicated in the previous section, individual parts of the initial data were analysed together with students and presented to students in other focus groups (2-4 focus groups in one session). The moderator's presentation and the observer's comment sheet were used to document the findings from each focus group, which were further analysed by the author. The analysis methods used content analysis, with the assistance of perceptual mapping provided by the software package Decision Explorer.

Research findings and discussions

The focus group discussions revealed two interesting features: enthusiasm and openness. Students like to talk about their learning experience. It was their day-to-day life. They were thrilled and excited at having the opportunity to have their voice heard; this involved even those who were usually quiet in seminars. However, they rejected, almost unanimously, the idea that a video camera or tape recorder should be used. Confidentiality guarantees seemed to have little effect on them. It was a topic too important for them to be disturbed.

From these discussions, students argued, analysed and presented many ideas and insights regarding the student learning experience at MUBS which was often unnoticed by lecturers. Congruency of these ideas/opinions was evident and can be summarised into three sections according to the three elements of the conceptual framework developed in this study. From discussion of these findings, five tentative propositions emerged.

Element 1: Context/usage of lectures

This was the area that provoked most debate when students were allowed to talk freely. Generally, a common understanding is that lectures are necessary, e.g. those lectures that help to reduce difficulty or learning obstacles. Specifically, several themes appeared during the discussion.

The usefulness of lectures in a module depends on delivery. If the lecture is delivered well, students feel it is useful. The argument is that you need to like it before you feel it is useful. It is clear that good lectures, in terms of presentation, can stimulate student learning, whereas poor ones turn students away.

Lecturing *can* stimulate deep learning — an approach towards in-depth understanding of a subject. It might be argued that lecturing may not deliver or implement deep learning in itself but can certainly play a role in facilitating deep learning. Some students cannot help but refer to the excitement they feel when being motivated by attending good lectures.

The usefulness of lecturing depends on its simplicity and practicality. Many students like some lectures because they reduce the complexity of the subject so that academic credit can be earned more easily and effectively. The usefulness here is not what they can learn from the module but reduced time and effort to they obtain a degree in an efficient way. Here, the danger is that students may get into the mode of 'surface learning' instead of understanding the subject properly.

These three factors can be summarised into a tentative proposition:

> Proposition 1: The perception of usefulness of lecturing by students is associated positively with the effective delivery of lectures.

Element 2: Styles of lectures

Various views on preferred styles of lecturing are expressed. The perceptual mapping of these views is presented in Figure 2 which clearly shows that there appear to be loosely linked views regarding preferred styles of lectures. These views are organised into three aspects as follows.

1. Lectures as entertainment

Students like to enjoy lectures (so do lecturers, of course). The list of features referring to an entertainment dimension can be very long. For example, good lectures were described as 'interesting, not boring', 'humorous not stern', 'charismatic not weak'. Much less attention was paid to the education aspect. Boring lectures were always the focus of student complaint. They did not like a dull atmosphere in the classroom. They liked jokes and they wanted to be *entertained*. Many groups mentioned the word charismatic. Lecturers are the focal point of the classroom and students expect them to show that they can maintain the audience's attention, by means of good communication skills and the right personality.

Lecturing is usually a solo performance. Unlike the Christmas lectures of the Royal Academy, lecturers at new universities get very limited assistance but have to face up to an audience of 400. Naturally, the imbalance between lecturers and students requires to be addressed with some characteristics that are powerful and special. In such circumstances, admiration for good lecturers and high expectations of the lecturers from students is understandable. However, once such expectations are not met, students can become very cynical. During the focus group discussion, some students claimed that there were no lectures they enjoyed because they had not yet met a good lecturer. Other students could list many factors good lecturers/presentations should have, whereas in practice, lectures exhibited the negative factors the students identified.

In one of the staff development seminars at Middlesex University, some lecturers mentioned that they had received death threats from students. On the other hand it is not a surprise to hear other lecturers stating that they get love letters from students. Such extreme feelings of hate and love may imitate the role of pop stars or some other public figures and indeed the entertainment requirement expected of lectures will be strengthened if the numbers of students in classrooms continues to increas. In formal terms:

> Proposition 2: The higher the lecturer: student ratio in the classroom, the higher the requirement for entertainment components in a lecture.

2. Lectures as education

The general findings of the study were largely consistent with those of Saroyan & Snell (1997). The students studied at MUBS preferred a pedagogically-driven lecture to a content-driven lecture (see the framework section above for definitions of different lecture styles), although there should be no particular superiority of one lecture style over the other. They seemed to have less difficulty in studying business-oriented modules, such as major modules in marketing and management but when dealing with modules which required learning of another discipline, such as statistics, economics, law, they encountered enormous difficulty.

A good example was the study of law by business students. Among 37 focus group discussions almost no business students claimed that they enjoyed law modules. The reasons enumerated were almost the same: law modules were boring,involving too much to learn andremember. But surely study of law can be exciting and challenging? I observed several law lectures, trying to find out why students failed to be motivated. I found that there were similarities in the terms used in law

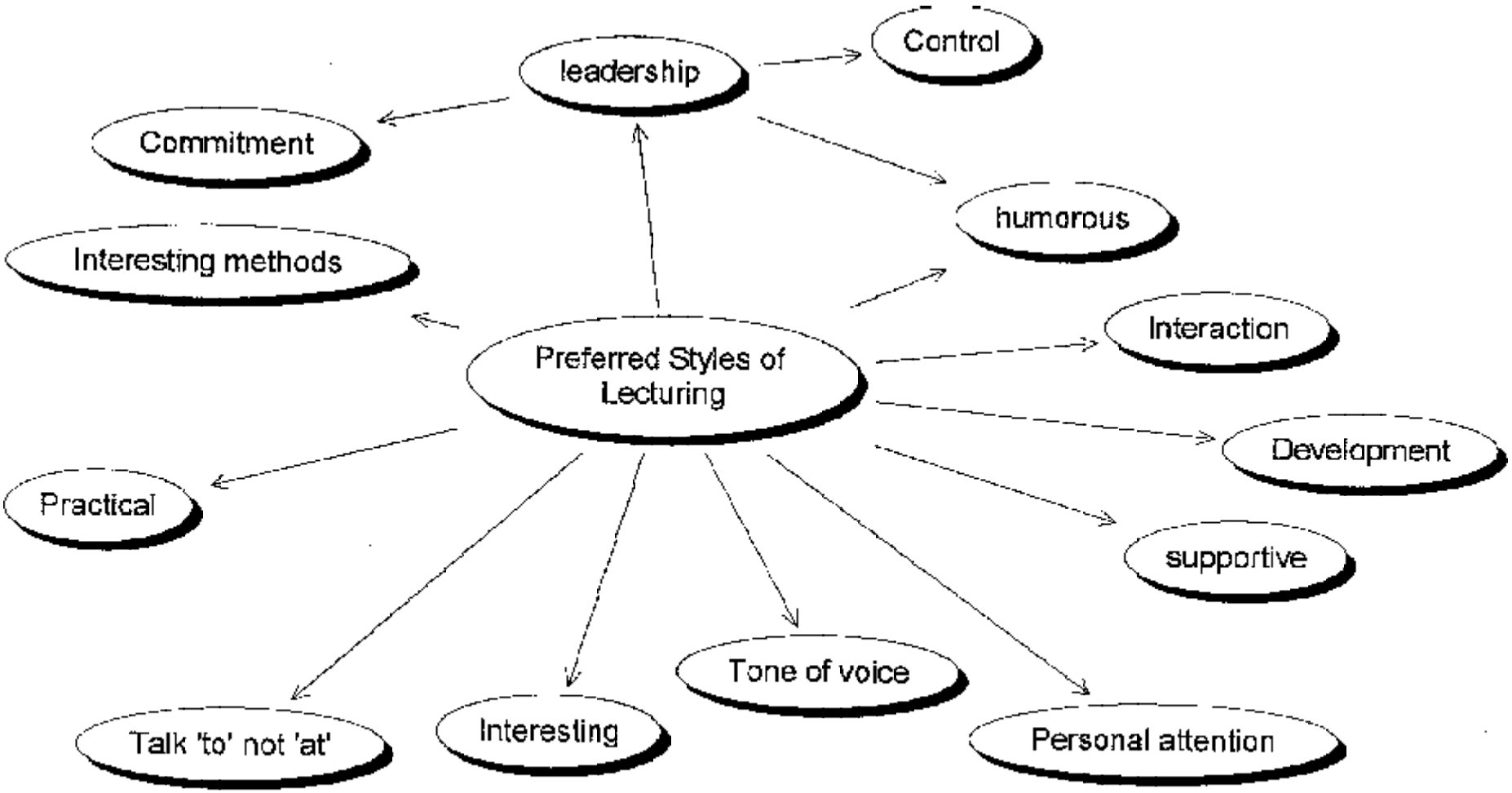

Figure 2: Preferred style of lecturing: conceptual mapping from focus group discussions

and management. The most common one is 'cases' or 'case studies'. In business modules, cases are usually taught in a pedagogy-driven style characterised by thorough scenario description, analysis and role-play, whereas in the law modules I observed, the cases were delivered in a content-driven style with an exploration of many different cases and loads of information to be remembered. Law lecturers insist that this is the way law should be taught. Law is not only explained but also presented via relevant cases. The requirement is not thorough and flexible but comprehensive and rigorous. The misperception of differing lecture styles may call for a role alteration in student learning and it is difficult for students to adjust quickly, therefore they would view the less pedagogical style of lecturing as boring without realising the different requirements from the two distinctive disciplines. Apparent similarities, or supposed commonalties between disciplines, can sometimes be potentially confusing. To put it simply, it can be assumed that:

Proposition 3: The wider the gap (or the greater the difference) between taught disciplines, the more effort should be put into addressing the potential difference of lecturing styles in order to achieve educational/learning objectives.

3. The education/entertainment dilemma

In some cases, students were divided in their judgement of a module. For example, regarding a particular level 1 statistical module, some students expressed their satisfaction because they felt that they had 'learnt' a lot from the module, i.e. they appreciated its educational value. They said that they were highly motivated by materials provided during the study. On the other hand, many others disliked it, saying the content was too difficult and the lecturer was boring etc., i.e. a low entertainment rating. This indicates the entertainment/educational dilemma facing lecturers nowadays. Motivated students of the statistical module obviously enjoyed lectures as education. Those alienated students from the module required some 'entertainment' elements that were difficult to find in a statistical module. Therefore, it can be assumed that:

Proposition 4: Motivation of students is directly and inversely associated to the entertainment requirements they place on lecturing. The lower the student motivation, the higher the entertaining requirement placed on lecturers.

How a lecturer approaches such a dilemma is critical to the success of student learning. The difficulty also lies in how the lecturer can stimulate those less interested students without alienating those that are highly motivated.

Needless to say, many students choose a module because that module is, or is thought to be, 'soft & easy'. They avoid those modules that are 'difficult and hard' to learn. Two factors may contribute to this phenomenon. One is our student base. MUBS undergraduate students have similar backgrounds in terms of their academic achievement. Their entry qualifications are often not high. Many students failed to get into or did not attempt to apply to a "better" university. Many come through the clearance procedure. The other factor is that most students have to support themselves while studying. They are full time students and also in 'full time' employment. The result is, they do not have sufficient time to read and digest. Some of them even do not have time for the lectures or seminars. On the other hand, multiculturalism and diversity of our student intake 'complicates' rather than simplifies the scenario: many mature students, for example, have clear objectives and strong motivations to learn.

These factors contribute to the education/ entertainment dilemma. Students require and deserve to have a good time during their college years yet they are also here to learn. In a university like Middlesex which has a large number of students and large class sizes, support from lecturers becomes critical in the resolution of these two needs. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Element 3: The perception/evaluation criteria

The students' preference for specific lecturer/ modules is briefly summarised in Figure 3. In general, the findings are consistent with the proposed ten criteria framework. However, learning support emerged as a very important factor from focus group discussions and has been added to the diagram.

Students value very highly the support they can get from the lecturer. As learning is a comprehensive activity, learning support is also required to be 'comprehensive'. Support factors include:

- a good clear module handbook as guideline;
- in-depth lecture handouts distributed in the classroom as well as on the intranet;
- lecturer support for individual students including longer office hours catering for different student requirements.

The importance of learning support can never be underestimated. Students' perception of a lecturer or the lectures/modules can change if the level of learning support is reduced. As explained, the 37 focus groups were carried out in three semesters and on each occasion one particular lecturer's name was mentioned. In the first two semesters, he was nominated as one of the best loved lecturers by students, pictured as humorous, interesting, and fun. However, in the third semester he was a much-hated figure, with students saying that he was boring, imposing too much work which, according to students, was a complete waste of time. The main reason for such a dramatic change of perception is that the lecturer somehow ceased to deliver the necessary learning support. For example, he would not see students outside his office hours; the coursework he assigned for level one students was demanding a huge contribution of student time; and the organisation for seminars was chaotic, which is always a headache for every lecturer at the beginning of the term. All of these put together contributed to the students' perception of being let down and of the lecturer as careless of their learning processes. Therefore it can be assumed that:

> Proposition 5: the lower the staff:student ratio in higher education, the more critical is the perceived learning support being delivered to students.

Given that learning support is important, it is the *delivery* of the learning support where the learning support is *seen* by students as delivered, that is essential. In the above example, I checked the learning support environment for that module after the focus group discussion. I found that the formal learning support environment was excellent, much better than that of most business modules. For example, the module guide/ lecture notes were readily available on the intranet before the lecture, which was user-friendly. There was a special *Resource Learning Room* at the library for that module. Videos and extra materials were available there. However, these were not seen by students as being delivered. Many of them did not look at the website until three weeks after the first lecture and they did not know where they could get the support. When they were seeking support, the lecturer turned them away and that was what they noted.

Apart from learning support, a common theme arising from discussion was that lectures should be delivered in a clear and well-planned way. Knowledgeable lecturers were regarded as a necessity. A lecturer showing his/her research strength was also important in contributing positively to student perception. As these corresponded well with the framework, detailed analysis is omitted here.

Managerial implications on teaching and learning

Schratz (1992) contends:

> Looking into one's own lecturing practice through the eyes of a researcher is a challenging task for both faculty and students if they are willing to venture into this rich and virtually untapped resource for the improvement of teaching. (93)

The findings from this research provided information about student learning experiences from MUBS, which were largely consistent with the four major elements of student perceptions on teaching summarised by Ramsden (1992) and corresponded well with the framework derived from the literature.

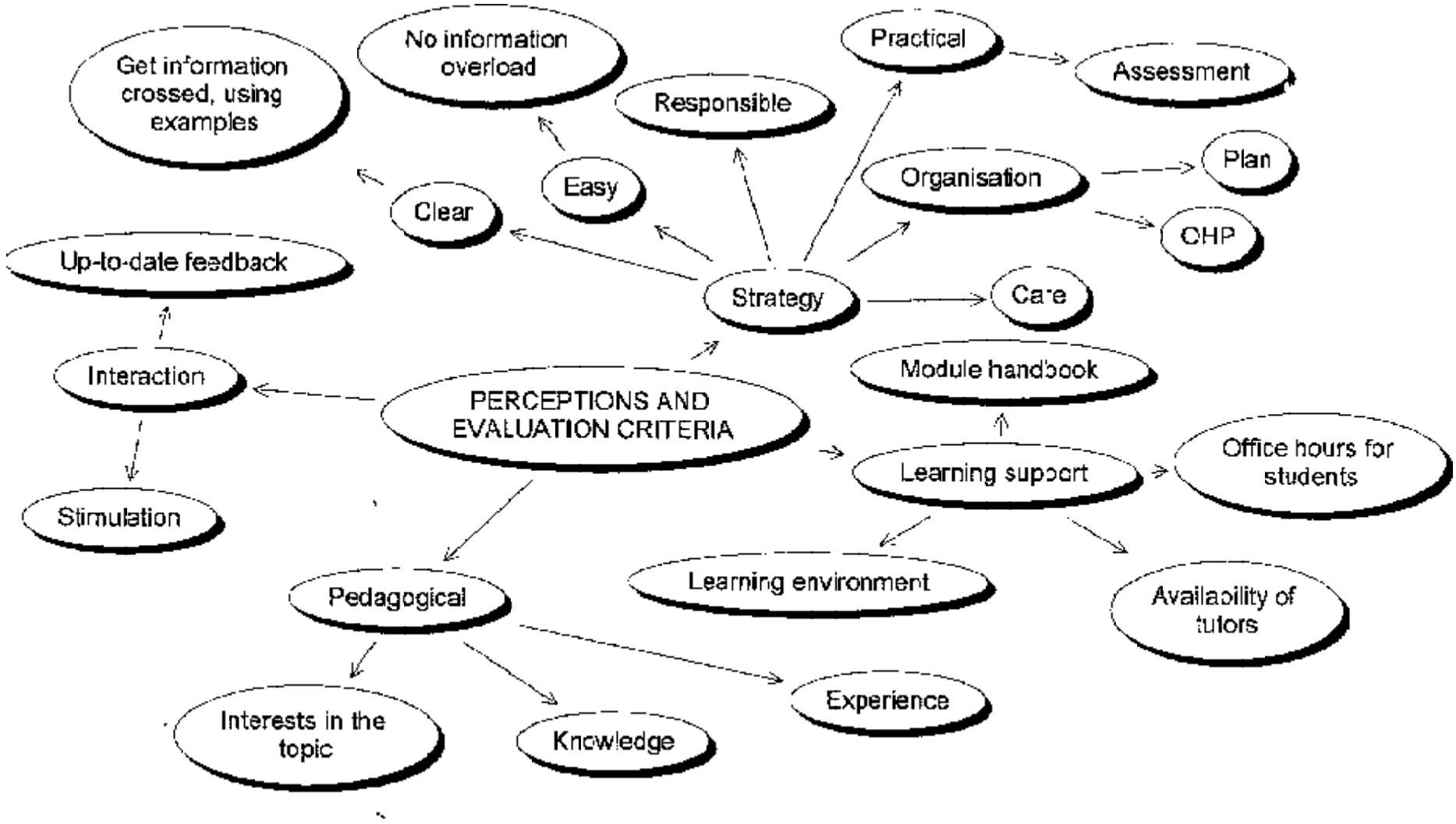

Figure 3. Perceptions and evaluation criteria for good lectures: conceptual mapping from focus group discussions

Specific to the context of MUBS, five tentative propositions arise from these findings, which may be useful for current teaching when the changing environment of new universities since the 1990s is taken into account. These five propositions and their relevance to the three elements of the conceptual framework are shown in Table 1. The implications of this study on managerial teaching and learning are discussed in the following four respects.

1. The lecture as an important means of learning

Although the role or effectiveness of lecturing is limited (Bligh 1998), students still regard lectures as an important means of learning or as a stimulator/catalyst of learning. Lecturing is a cost-effective way of facilitating some aspects of student learning given the increasing numbers of:students at new universities. It is interesting to correlate this to Isaacs's studies (1994) in which he surveyed lecturers' perceptions. He concluded that lecturers:

> … see the lecture (and any associated notes or hand-outs) as a source of stimuli for study outside the lecture. That is, learning only starts with the lecture; it does not end there. Also, some lecturers see lectures as a way of showing how they might be. (215)

Saroyan & Snell (1997) support this. They claimed that:

> … a lecture can be as effective as any other instructional strategy so long as it is appropriately suited to the intended learning outcomes and it is pedagogically planned and delivered. (102)

2. Learning as a comprehensive experience

Learning is regarded by many students as a comprehensive experience. Lecturing is and should be only one part of such experience (Teach & Govati, 1993). Students' perceptions on learning should be shaped with good guidance and their skills of learning should be trained when they enter university. They should be made aware that the method of learning at college is different from that of A-level or GCSE. Adaptability of learning methods for different environments and disciplines is important and should be developed in the very beginning. This corresponds to Janssen's interesting article (1996) on studaxology: students need expertise to be effective in learning within higher education. Equally important is the awareness of lecturers so that they can cultivate and foster such adaptability of learning and be able to provide proper help and guidance. Lecturers must also be aware of the change of student demand due to the change of student intake. Specific attention should be paid to the entertainment components and criticality of learning support as it is identified in this study. The findings provide an extension to Knights and Willmont's (1999) intuitive experience, in which they integrated the entertainment components and learning support by providing a context with which students can easily identify and be motivated.

3. The common-sense explanation of the debate regarding findings from well-structured research into teaching and experience of excellent teachers

The findings are helpful to resolve the duality highlighted by Gibbs (1999) regarding two contrary views towards learning: that is, 'professional views' (represented by Bligh 1998) of empirical researchers versus 'amateur views' (represented by Murphy 1998) of excellent, award-winning teachers. It is desirable that a lecturer perform well in all dimensions of perception/evaluation criteria - but in that case, he/she would have achieved perfection. However, such perfect lecturers are rare — if they have ever existed. A reasonable scenario is that a good lecturer can deliver reasonably well in respect of most of the evaluation criteria. If a lecturer can deliver extremely well in respect of one or two of these evaluation criteria but not so well in the other dimensions, he/she would be renowned either as an excellent teacher or a bad teacher. An extreme example is Isaac Newton, the great mathematician and physicist, who had to talk to empty classrooms, not because he did not know what he was talking about but because he did not care whether students understood what he was talking about. A more common example comes from one of my current colleagues. Commenting on a former lecturer, he says "John Doe did everything 'wrong', he had no movement, no visual aids, no handouts and no eye contact with his students. Yet he is the

Proposition No.	Description	Linkage to conceptual framework
1	The perception of usefulness of lecturing is associated positively with the effective delivery of lectures.	From Style to Usage
2	The higher the lecturer: student ratio in the classroom, the higher the requirement for entertainment components in a lecture.	From Context to Style
3	The wider the gap (or the greater the difference) between taught disciplines, the more effort should be put into addressing the potential difference of lecturing styles in order to achieve educational (learning) objectives.	From Context to Evaluation Criteria
4	Motivation of students is directly and inversely associated to the entertainment requirements they place on lecturing. The lower the student motivation, the higher the entertaining requirement placed on lecturers.	From Context to Style
5	The worse the staff student ratio in higher education, the more critical is the perceived learning support being delivered to students.	From Context to Evaluation Criteria

Table 1: Five tentative propositions and their linkage to the conceptual framework

one lecturer I remember after 30 years!". John Doe was 'wrong' in many dimensions but delivered well in the critical dimension of aspiration. He had the 'mythica'" power of motivating students. In students' words he knew what he was talking about and, most importantly, he cared about students.

Understanding this is important, it can help lecturers to create and establish an individual lecturing style that is most suitable to them yet effective in facilitating student learning.

4. Standardisation vs. creativity

Another important implication of this study is that lecturers can and should develop their own personal lecturing style but they must make sure that proper factors/aspects are addressed; for example, the importance of the perceived learning support to students can never be underestimated. On the other hand, standardisation has become a trend in higher education as QAA impacts upon each university in the UK. It is necessary and understandable to establish proper standards and quality control procedures. However, measures should also be taken to protect the creativity and innovativeness of lecturers so that maximum learning outcomes can be achieved.

Limitations and further work

Whilst the findings of this study are useful and the implications on teaching and learning are straightforward, it must be interpreted with caution.

Firstly, this is an exploratory study. The intention was not to test or validate existing

theory but rather to find and cross-check ideas and insights which can help to improve professional development.

Secondly, the way the results are explained is semi-structured. A theoretical framework was used to set a focus. It may limit students' views on the subject.

Thirdly, the sample used Level 2 students at Middlesex University Business School, which is not a representative sample. The needs and experience of learning for different types of students may vary. Therefore, generalisation of the results must be controlled.

Finally, the results are generated from 37 focus groups and are encouraging as an example of managerial teaching research. A good direction for future work is to validate the general findings using the framework developed in this study via a much more rigorous descriptive approach. In conclusion, I would like to end the paper with a warning from Gibbs (1999):

> What students like is not necessarily what is educationally effective. And what works for one teacher might not work for another, in another context. (261)

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* Please note that real names have not been used.

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