

Expectations of students versus expectations of lecturers in a postgraduate module in open and distance learning

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research was undertaken at Unisa, an open and distance-learning institution, where various compulsory modules in Philosophy of Education are presented at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In the past few years, many changes have taken place in the content and presentation of modules in Philosophy of Education: it was felt that South Africa needed a Philosophy of Education which encouraged inquiry, co-construction of knowledge, debate, a student-centred approach, problem-based instruction and lifelong learning. Lecturers started to develop a sense of the university as a knowledge-constructing community. In such a community, knowledge can be defined from a constructivist perspective as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated and thus non-objective. Lecturers expect their students to be able to understand and incorporate this point of view in their approach to the teaching and learning of Philosophy of Education. In the qualitative research project described in this article, the researchers became aware of the different expectations of students and lecturers in a Philosophy of Education module. Particular issues arose with regard to student/lecturer expectations which need to be explored in further research.

BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Philosophy of Education is a compulsory module in the education of undergraduate and postgraduate students at Unisa, the open and distance-learning institution where the research was undertaken. In the past few years major changes have been made to the content and the presentation of the various Philosophy of Education modules. Lecturers started to develop a sense of the university as a knowledge-constructing community. In such a community, knowledge can be defined from a constructivist perspective as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated and thus non-objective (Brooks & Brooks 1993:vii). Not taking such an approach to knowledge and learning for granted, the researchers found it necessary to pause for a moment to ask the questions: What do students expect from lecturers in Philosophy of Education? What do Philosophy of Education lecturers expect of their students? Do the lecturers of Philosophy of Education live up to their students' expectations of a lecturer and do the students live up to their lecturers' expectations?

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The aims of this exploratory, participatory research were to:

- explore the expectations of postgraduate students of their Philosophy of Education lecturers
- analyse tutorial letters in which Philosophy of Education lecturers stated their expectations of students
- compare the expectations of lecturers with the expectations of students
- inductively identify issues with regard to student/lecturer expectations which need to be researched in future.

Research design and method

A qualitative research design was utilised to conduct the research, which aimed to be exploratory and descriptive in nature. The focus was on obtaining data that would facilitate understanding of both students' expectations of lecturers and lecturers' expectations of their students. (One of the researchers is also a lecturer of the respondents in the research, and was therefore also able to reflect on lecturers' expectations as a participatory researcher.)

The research questions and outcomes lent themselves to a qualitative research design. This allows individual members of a specific "community of learners" to voice their expectations of lecturers in a specific module in a specific place of learning. In this research postgraduate students of Philosophy of Education had an opportunity to voice their expectations of their lecturers.

The research was conducted in four phases over a period of a year:

Phase 1

Fifty postgraduate education students were asked to do a free-writing exercise. A free-writing exercise was chosen because students did not have to structure their writing, which encouraged a free flow of ideas. The writing exercise would thus not inhibit students who did not have good writing skills. The open-ended question "What do you expect of a lecturer?" was asked.

The fifty postgraduate students (both male and female adult learners) who did the free-writing exercise were asked to do so before their group discussions started in Umtata. These students mostly came from the Eastern Cape. Although the students were assured that the free-writing exercise was not to be about "right" or "wrong" responses, some still felt uncertain about the "correct" way to respond to the given task. This response of the respondents is significant, because in retrospect one can see it as a confirmation of the need of some of the students for structure when lecturers give instructions.

The free-writing exercises were analysed using Tesch's descriptive method (Creswell 1994:154-156). An independent coder analysed the data separately from the researchers (Creswell 1994:158; Krefting 1990:216). After a consensus discussion between the independent coder and the researchers, central themes were identified.

Phase 2

Two tutorial letters, in which lecturers stated their expectations of the postgraduate students in Philosophy of Education, were analysed. All the lecturers of this postgraduate module were involved in the writing of the tutorial letters. These two tutorial letters are sent out at the beginning of the academic year to all the students of the postgraduate Philosophy of Education module. (All of the students who did the free-writing exercise therefore received these particular tutorial letters.) Tesch's descriptive method was again used to analyse the expectations of the lecturers as stated in the two tutorial letters. A consensus discussion with the independent coder followed.

Phase 3

To triangulate data, a second group of fifty postgraduate students were asked the same question a year after the first group had stated their expectations. These postgraduate students were, once again, both male and female adult learners who attended the Umtata discussion classes. These students thus mostly came from the Eastern Cape. Again an initial need for structure was sensed when the exercise was given out. This free-writing exercise was analysed by using Tesch's descriptive method and the analysis was discussed with an independent coder.

Phase 4

The question: "Do the students' expectations of lecturers correspond with the approach of lecturers of Philosophy of Education to knowledge and learning?" was asked during this phase. A literature survey was done and the outcomes of the research were also discussed with fellow scholars at the INPE conference in Sydney, Australia, in August 2000.

OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH

Expectations of lecturers

The study guide, text book and the tutorial letters which are sent out to students indicate lecturers' expectations of students.

The basic approach to teaching and learning which underlies the expectations which the lecturers have of students is socio-constructivist in nature. According to the lecturers, students must acquire an informed and critical voice to address contemporary issues in education, to become effective agents of change and to be of use to others (Tutorial letter 104/2000:3).

The expectations of lecturers in this module of Philosophy of Education are merely listed below as they are indicated in the various tutorial letters, but they will be discussed in the section on students' expectations of lecturers to show discrepancies between lecturers' and students' expectations.

The outcomes (Tutorial Letter 103/2000) of the first module in Philosophy of Education in the BEd (Hons) programme which indicate a constructivist approach are to

- provide the students with concepts and vocabulary needed to critically assess the claims that are made about the nature and aims of teaching and education
- provide the students with the conceptual tools and experience necessary for creative and independent thought
- help the students develop an understanding of the relationship between education and the context in which knowledge is created
- expose the students to a pluralistic problem-centred approach to educational discourse
- encourage the students to interact critically with contemporary issues in education.

It is expected of learners (Tutorial Letter 103/2000) that they

- read primary and secondary texts on different metatheoretical perspectives
- apply different interpretations to different metatheoretical perspectives
- communicate effectively.

The general outcome of this module (Tutorial letter 103/2000) is thus to demonstrate the ability to make one's own voice audible and interesting - a voice that will command respect because it

- clearly explains its particular or preferred frame of reference
- acknowledges that there are other significant voices from various and opposing perspectives
- describes the set of significant context variables
- explains key social and educational issues in clear, direct and brief terms.

To become competent to do the above, students need to be able to (Tutorial Letter 103/2000)

- collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information
- communicate effectively using visual, symbolic, and language skills in various modes
- show cultural and aesthetic sensitivity across a range of social contexts
- reflect on and explore a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.

Comparing lecturers' expectations with those of students (as will be done in the next section) highlights a definite discrepancy.

Expectations of Students

Three main themes in the expectations of students were identified in the free-writing exercises of the respondents, namely:

- Teaching and content
- Communication with lecturers
- Disposition of lecturers.

(Similar themes were identified by Van Heerden, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2001:159) in research done at a residential university). The above themes will be discussed briefly, supported by direct quotes from students' free-writing exercises.

Teaching and content

Under this theme are grouped the expectations which concentrate on the assistance of lecturers concerning assignments and examinations.

Many of the respondents felt that they needed more guidance from lecturers. They saw guidance as advice concerning the examinations, assignments and critical issues addressed in the particular module. One of the students wrote: "I'm expecting him/her to give ... students some guidance as far as studying of ... material ... The guidance should cover studying, or learning the course material, the guidance in the writing of assignments, the approach that [the lecturer] prefers should be spelled out."

According to the students, marking should be done in a thorough way, so as to assist them in examination preparation. They specifically wanted feedback sent with the marked assignments, and in some cases wanted even the complete memoranda of assignments. One student's remark was: "I would also like my work to be evaluated by way of marking as this shows me where I've written what was expected of me."

Students seemed to be very unsure of their own ability and competence to write assignments and to evaluate and assess their own work.

In the past, when it came to assessment, the lecturers assessed the students' work in terms of a curriculum that was content driven. Few opportunities were given to the students to participate in the assessment of their own work. In such an approach to assessment, student participation was nonexistent. Lately students have been encouraged to participate in the assessment of their own work within the context of a curriculum that is fundamentally learner centred. The whole object of the exercise is to encourage students to assess their own ability to express a critical and informed opinion on certain problems and issues in education, in a clear and communicable fashion (Higgs 1998).

Task management has thus often been assumed by the teacher (lecturer), but in a constructivist environment such as lecturers in the Philosophy of Education module now promote, students themselves should assume much of this role. The lecturers use a rating scale to assess assignments. The lecturers fill out the rating scale for the first assignment, but

after that students need to first fill out the rating scale and submit it with their assignments. The lecturers then rate the students' performance on the same rating scale to give them some insight into their own ability to assess their work. The range statements and performance indicators on the rating scale could also help students to plan their responses to assignments (Tutorial Letter 103/2000:11-12).

It does, however, seem from the responses of students that they opt for a minimalist learning environment where feedback from the lecturer is all that matters (Wilson 1995:28). Minimalist learning environments emphasise learning in a context with information banks (textbooks, videotapes, teachers) and task managers (Wilson 1995:28).

In the postgraduate module of Philosophy of Education which the respondents registered for, lecturers do try to involve students as much as possible as co-constructors of knowledge, but the respondents of this research often seemed to merely expect content-driven guidance, as indicated in the following quotes: "I expect to get all the information from different modules." "They must give us clear information about a particular topic."

Before one could talk of constructivist learning environments, students would have to be willing to accept more responsibility. Perkins (Wilson 1995:28) distinguishes between "minimalist" and "rich" learning environments. In a constructivist approach one would opt for "rich" learning environments where more control would be in the hands of the learners busy with multiple activities in pursuit of multiple learning goals, and the lecturer would act only as facilitator.

With relatively few tools for manipulating and observing content, exploration and problem solving are not really possible. When task management is given over to students, they need tools to assist them in their unfamiliar task such as "assignments within consultations, advisement sessions, strategic planning tools, textbooks, grading programs, assessment devices, devices for conveying rules and expectations, and computer-based instruction programs" (Wilson 1995:28). In both the undergraduate and postgraduate modules of Philosophy of Education, lecturers try to build the capacity of students by developing tools to equip them, inter alia, for inquiry, discussion and debate. The lecturers ask the students to think about the meaning and significance of what they encounter in the text of the workbook and the prescribed book, while at the same time providing them with a great deal of feedback. Students are encouraged to express their own views and to develop an informed and critical voice when addressing contemporary issues in education (Tutorial Letter 104/2000:3).

The assumption is that by encouraging students to develop tools for inquiry and debate, they will make the content their own, or part of "themselves". In this vein Gruender (1996:21) explains that the advantage of a constructivist approach is that "[w]hen one constructs for oneself a solution to a problem, the bits of knowledge that one's resulting ideas consist in and which yield their own satisfactions in one's life become a part of oneself".

Students also expect an explanation of the work in either tutorial letters or in the discussion classes. Lecturers must be able to answer all their questions, and students feel hesitant to answer any questions - they feel the need for factual analysis and explanations. Two different students formulated this expectation as follows: "I don't expect of them to ask questions from us" "(I want) a clear explanation and exact factual analysis of the assignment."

The above quotes from students' writing could indicate that the Philosophy of Education lecturers and the students of the module are currently functioning within two different frameworks. The students expect clearly organised facts and explanations, while the lecturers operate in another framework (a socio-constructivist one), in which they want to encourage interpretation and critical reflection. In the introduction to the textbook Higgs (1995:16) summarises the aims of the module as inter alia "analysing, researching and critically reflecting on the influence of different metatheoretical perspectives on educational discourse" and "providing teachers and students with the conceptual tools necessary for creative and independent thought".

It seems as if students, however, want knowledge, facts and skills directly related to the Philosophy of Education module and its content. Skills such as those of writing examinations and assignments and learning how to study the specific module are important to the students, as they indicated in the following quotations: "(I want to know) tactics of studying the module" "I am also expecting you to offer us with examination skills."

According to the students, lecturers must be subject oriented. Thorough preparation and good planning for classes by lecturers and the setting of learner-friendly tutorial matter are important to the students. The respondents wrote: "Lecturer must equip(ped) the learner with knowledge." "I also expect them to prepare as much as possible especially the areas they know they are difficult for most students."

These two quotations exemplify what Wilson (1995:26) refers to as the "packet of content" approach to teaching and learning. He sees this as the opposite of a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Again these student comments indicate a difference between the mindsets of the students of this particular module and the lecturers.

If lecturers followed the content-based approach to teaching and learning, they would only need to give certain factual, subject-oriented knowledge to learners with the necessary guidance concerning examinations and assignments, and the students would apparently be happy with what they would call "good teaching".

One could use the extreme form of the product metaphor in this case, namely: "Instruction is a pill that you take to address a learning deficit and, magically, you learn something! A sure-fire indicator of the pill metaphor is that the program will do all the work for you; as they say, 'All you do is listen!'" (Wilson 1995:25).

Students also want to be supplied with examination papers from previous years, with memoranda if possible. It is also expected of lecturers to provide summaries of the learning material ("the packet of content" - see Wilson, 1995:26) which would indicate the important sections for the examination. This expectation is reflected in the following quotes: "More sections which will be asked in the examination should be highlighted. We need more correspondence on written work and the memos for all the assignments even those the student did not do." "I expect question papers of previous years. I think another important aspect is the summary of the courses or the revision."

Students feel that they do not have time to do all the assignments and prepare for the examination without a great deal of guidance from the lecturers. They want to know the scope of the examination in advance in order to know exactly what to study. They want what they call tips or hints concerning the examination paper: "We expect scope from lecturers because the syllabus is too wide to master." "They must give us tips for examinations."

These expectations of the students could again be in conflict with the expectations of their lecturers. In Tutorial letter 104/2000 (p 3), lecturers express the following expectation for examination preparation: "In the examinations we are not going to be interested in testing your powers of memory, but in finding out how well you have understood the views put forward in the workbook and the prescribed text. Even more importantly, we are interested in obtaining, from you, your informed point of view regarding the many issues we have raised in both your workbook and the assignments".

In a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, knowledge should be created rather than received, mediated through discourse rather than transferred by a lecturer, and explored/transformed rather than memorised as a uniform set of positivistic ideas (Holt-Reynolds 2000:22). Human knowledge and the criteria and methods one uses in inquiry should be constructed, rather than being transferred as a preordained packet of ideas (Phillips 1995:5) There should be a shift from teaching to facilitating; from teaching by imposition to teaching by negotiating. Active students would learn more than passive students (Bodner 1986:876).

Communication with lecturers

These expectations of the students revolve around the communication styles of lecturers in an open and distance learning environment.

Face-to-face contact is very important, even in an open and distance learning environment. The Faculty of Education has only one set of discussion classes per year at specific centres for the BEd (Hons) programme. The students want more regular discussion classes at various centres in the country. They want to see the lecturer/s involved in the specific module, not substitutes who do not know the tutorial matter. They wrote the following regarding discussion classes: "I would have preferred a more conversational tone that would make the students, who make the effort of arriving at the lecturer, relax more and fully indulge in the opportunity of having and enjoying a one-to-one encounter with the lecturer." "Group discussions must be conducted at list (least) twice a year."

Students feel communication must be very clear. Lecturers must not, for instance, tell students what to learn for the examination and then not ask those specific sections of work in the examination. Students want to know that they can trust what the lecturer communicates to them, as indicated by the following quotation: "Be clear, faithful and concise when giving scope."

This quote could again be interpreted as indicating students' insecurity and unwillingness to study anything other than that which the lecturers regard as "important". An exam-driven approach rather than a process-driven approach to learning could underlie views such as the above. This is in contrast to the lecturers's expectations, which regard the process of knowledge construction as important. Lecturers express this expectation as follows: "Being an active participant means that you will need to work through the contents of the workbook slowly, reflectively and systematically In order to succeed in the examinations you would be expected to have worked carefully through the study units in your workbook, pausing when necessary to reflect on the questions that are asked ..." (Tutorial letter 104/2000:3;4).

Communication with students could take on many forms in an open and distance learning environment. Lecturers and students rely on the written word (tutorial letters and feedback on assignments); the spoken word (discussion classes and telephone conversations); and technology such as computer programs and e-mail conversations. These communication media could be of great assistance if only students wanted more than merely factual information.

The students of the Philosophy of Education module will probably only develop an epistemic fluency if they change their expectations and see their role as students in a different light. It is only when the nature of the discourse between lecturers and students develops from exam-driven, factual descriptions to critical reflection and interpretation that students will develop such epistemic fluency. In Tutorial Letter 101/2000 (2000:5;6), lecturers ask students to become part of the education discourse to empower and transform their own educational experiences, because education is open to all. There are many voices speaking about education and they include the voice of every student. Students are, however, required to work through the study material in a critical and reflective way to enable them to express their informed opinion.

"[E]pistemic fluency, like language in general, develops in the context of social interactions with other members of a community of practice ..." (Morrison & Collins 1995:43). The epistemic fluency of people depends largely on their contextual experiences, ie the kinds of subculture and community of practice in which they participated. The role of learning environments should be to assist people to become more epistemically fluent, by enabling them to use and recognise a relatively large number of epistemic games (Morrison & Collins 1995:39).

Language plays an important role in epistemic fluency. "Epistemic forms and games are language based ... while you can play epistemic games by yourself in the private arena of internal cognition ... you cannot do so without language, any more than you can escape your identity as a social creature" (Morrison & Collins 1995:43). Many students' need for structure or "scope" could be an indication of inadequate English language skills to participate in "epistemic forms and games". The majority of the respondents in the reported research have English as a second or third language.

Disposition of lecturers

Expectations with regard to the attitude of lecturers towards students are analysed under this theme.

Students expect lecturers to see them as human beings and as adults who have their own problems in specific environments/contexts. "... the lecturer should be the humane connection for students to feel that they belong to and are important." "I expect that our lecturers to be fair when marking our assignments, mark them even if they receive them after the due date, because there are problems that we cannot runaway from as adults."

Lecturers must motivate students and uplift their morale. It is the task of the lecturer to encourage students to do their best in the module. The lecturer is a support system to the student. One student wrote: "Uplift our morals and motivate us to study seriously."

Lecturers must be friendly. They must be positive in their attitude towards the students and their ability to do well in the module. The following two quotations are an indication of this: "Lecturer must be calm, friendly to answer any question from learners" "My expectation is a positive motivation from our lecturer."

Students want to know that they can trust lecturers to be fair and just: "We need fair, just and equitable treatment."

Lecturers need to realise that in open and distance learning, students judge the attitude of lecturers by the way they assess assignments, the type of feedback students get after the assignments have been assessed, telephone conversations and discussion classes. They need to know that they can trust their lecturers to be fair and to give everyone an equal chance to succeed. Lecturers need to realise that they are interacting with students from various backgrounds and cultures.

A socio-constructivist approach seems suitable for a context in which many views and backgrounds are represented. "[M]any researchers and practitioners have begun to view the classroom as a place in which teachers and students construct knowledge and negotiate meanings together In a complex, multicultural society such as ours, truth takes many forms." (Morrison & Collins 1995:39). Students need to feel important and they do not want to be merely a number in a system, which could be the case in an open and distance-learning environment.

In an open and distance-learning environment it is often difficult to accommodate every person and his or her viewpoint, but in this module for Philosophy of Education lecturers try to give everyone a voice and to listen to everyone's opinion. The general outcome of the module is to demonstrate the ability to make one's voice audible and interesting (Tutorial Letter 103/2000:7).

The lecturers attempt to involve students by developing interactive teaching and learning material. Assignments (Tutorial Letter 101/2000) often focus on the students' opinion and interpretations, for example: "Why do you think educators and trainers have treated blacks and women as if they're stupid, as if they're unimportant, as if their opinions are of no real significance or interest? What assumptions lie behind this sort of attitude?" and "Now that this material is no longer wholly new to you, which of these metatheories are you inclined to focus

on and why? Which of these metatheories do you think is most useful in education? Explain your point of view in detail."

Although students expect their lecturers to be aware of their contexts and their experiences, they find it very difficult to express their own viewpoints. This could be because the respondents of this research still function in a framework in which they do not integrate their learning content with their everyday lives. There could be many reasons for this harsh distinction between everyday life and "academic knowledge", which will require further research.

ISSUES WHICH REQUIRE FURTHER RESEARCH

As a result of the exploratory nature of this research, it gave rise to issues which need to be addressed within the context of lecturer/student expectations:

- How can lecturers address students' need for structure and at the same time encourage critical, independent thinking?
- Must lecturers insist on a particular approach, which they think is "best" for students, if the students do not expect it?
- How can lecturers establish a relationship with students to get an idea of their specific contexts in an open and distance-learning environment?
- How can students become epistemically fluent in a second or third language?

Whose knowledge and expectations should guide the nature of an academic discourse?

Against the background of the reported research, it seems urgent to address the above issues. Urgent because valuable time, money and effort go into the development of teaching and learning material for students, who might not have the same expectations of learning as their lecturers do.

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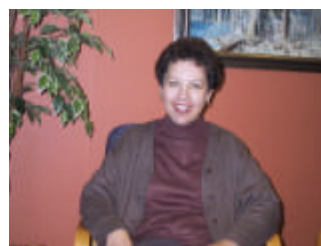
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