Getting the Job Done:
Understanding the Characteristics of Liked and Disliked Courses
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What are the jobs students want done in their university courses?

Using Clayton Christensen’s Jobs-To-Be-Done perspective, in 2012, we conducted a survey of 1032 students from eight Penn State campuses. We hypothesized that students perceptions of their best class would align with competence, success and enjoyment; and b) students would endorse these factors as more important than an “easy A.”

Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>M = 20.47, SD = 3.54</td>
<td>M = 3.30, SD = .41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>607</td>
<td>M = 22.21, SD = 5.86</td>
<td>M = 3.29, SD = .47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

The survey contained 18 Likert-style statements related to characteristics of the best course they had ever taken. Students were asked to choose the most important factor in their best class from the 18 statements. They were also given 12 statements about a course that they had disliked.

Results

Hypothesis 1

For liked courses, a principal components analysis, using varimax rotation, of the 18 questions about the positive course resulted in three factors that accounted for 63% of the variance:

Competence
- You gained knowledge or skills that you could use in real life (.825)
- The course helped you to think about things in a new way (.626)
- The things you learned in this course were useful to you (.824)
- This course helped you prepare for future employment/ grad school (.785)
- The course helped you to feel competent (.655)

Positive Classroom Atmosphere
- The professor was friendly (.876)
- You felt like the professor treated you with respect (.826)
- The professor was enthusiastic about the subject (.664)
- The professor really liked the students (.842)

Enjoyment/Success
- You liked the subject matter (.559)
- You could understand what you need to do to get a good grade (.775)
- Grading was done fairly (.678)
- It was in a format you like (.646)
- The course was enjoyable (.672)

For disliked courses, principal components analysis yielded two factors, accounting for 52% of the variance

Hindrances to Success
- You couldn’t understand clearly what you need to do to get a good grade (.551)
- Assignments didn’t seem to relate to what is being taught (.584)
- It took a long time to get assignments graded and back (.714)
- The syllabus was hard to understand (.766)
- There were problems with assignment due dates (.776)

Negative Classroom Atmosphere
- The professor was unfriendly (.661)
- The professor just lectured (.685)
- You felt like you had to teach yourself (.753)
- You couldn’t understand what the professor was saying (.606)
- You didn’t feel valued as a student (.744)
Ratings of Competence and Success/Enjoyment differed by class standing

Ratings of Competence by juniors/seniors were significantly higher than freshman/sophomores \([F(3, 761) = 15.05, p = .00]\). Ratings of Success/Enjoyment were significantly higher for freshmen/sophomores than juniors/seniors \([F(3, 761) = 9.17, p = .00]\). These differences were also present when males and females were observed separately (Males Competence \([F(3, 307) = 3.58, p = .023]\), Success/Enjoyment \([F(3, 307) = 5.38, p = .005]\), Females Competence \([F(3, 452) = 3.85, p = .002]\), Success/Enjoyment \([F(3, 452) = 3.38, p = .005]\)).

Ratings of all three factors differed depending on whether or not the course was in the major.

A positive classroom atmosphere \((t = 2.52, p = .01)\) and enjoyment/success \((t = 7.50, p = .00)\) were rated as the most important factors when the course was not in the major, but competence was more important when it was \((t = 6.60, p = .00)\).

Ratings of Competence and Success/Enjoyment differed depending on whether or not the best course was in the major and the students’ gender.

Females rated their best course higher on Competence if it was in the major than if it was not. Males also rated their best course higher on Competence if it was in the major than if it was not, but their ratings on Competence were lower than those for females \([F(1, 720) = 5.20, p = .02]\).
Hypothesis 2

Easiness was not the most important element of the best course. “The course was easy” was chosen by less than 2% of students as the most important element of the course.

Application

Information obtained from the student focus group discussion (which was the basis for the questions in the survey) included the following suggestions for helping students “get the job done”:

**Competence**
- Provide information and skills they can use in their lives, future education, and employment
- Teach problem-solving skills
- Facilitate their understanding of themselves and their relationships (how theories apply to them or people they know)
- Create activities that involve real world application of the skills and knowledge obtained in the class
- Organize hands-on experience and contact with people in real life

**Positive Classroom Atmosphere**
- Smile (I was surprised at how much of a difference this made in class)
- Enjoy your material—find something new in it you like. Don’t let it get stale
- Show that you respect and care about your students

**Success/Enjoyment**
- Don’t change the syllabus unless there is an emergency
- Plan lessons with the idea “what will my students discover in this class?”
- Don’t try to cover too much. Increased depth means decreased breadth.
- Understand students’ shorter attention spans now.
- Have a clear description of tasks that must be performed in order to get a good grade, along with a clear description of how they will be evaluated in doing those tasks.
- Give an explanation of how the assignments relate to what they are learning. Without this, their assignments appear to be “busywork.”