

# IS CUSTOMER SATISFACTION THE CURRENCY OF EXCHANGE IN TODAY'S CLASSROOMS?

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## ABSTRACT

*This is an Ethnographic analysis that views the classroom as an information system. The general purpose of this project was to identify the causes for differences in view between faculty and student instructor performance assessments. The research was motivated because of the opposition between faculty and student evaluations about an instructor. There is a culture of passive learning that is quietly accompanying the increased emphasis of the "customer focused classroom." This focus encourages passive students to ascribe course dissatisfaction to instructor or instructional deficiencies. When an instructor challenges passive learners, they report being dissatisfied customers. How that assessment will be used by umbrella organizations to retain faculty is uncertain. That uncertainty impacts how faculty members evaluate their peers.*

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Assessment, Classroom, Ethnography, Evaluation, Information System, Passive Learners, Performance

## INTRODUCTION

This exposition describes an ethnographic study in which the classroom is viewed as an information system. The domain is the evaluation processes used by faculty and students to rate an instructor's performance. Two main questions are addressed: What framework do these different evaluator-participants use to observe and assess behavior? What are the shared and enduring values that determine the outcome of the evaluations?

### The Classroom as an Information System

Several works address why organizations do what they do and how to study them [1, 2, 3, 6]. Some of these works also share a common conclusion regarding the underlying basis, or root cause, accounting for the direction taken and actions made by organizations: that is, the tacit value systems that are shared by members of these organizations [1, 3]. To understand the actions, these value systems must be discovered.

### Identifying Properties that Embody Values in Organizations

Organizations are information systems and information sharing systems [6]. Four frames for developing an understanding of the driving forces within an organization are described in [1]: structural, human relations, political and symbolic. The application of these frames does not directly reveal the cultural values the organization members share, but they do help infer them. Values are inferred from actions that people or organizations make [3]. Five dimensions of culture are conceptually related to the above four frames, and studies report that these dimensions consistently reflect the cultural values of a nation [3]. The observations in this study can be related to three of these dimensions:

1. Power Distance Index (PDI) - The degree to which distributed or centralized authority is valued (political and structural frames).
2. Individualism Index (IDV) - The degree to which a person is individually oriented (values own pursuits before others) or is collectively oriented (values others before self).
3. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) - The degree to which an individual is tolerant of uncertainty and ambiguity (political frame).

The two remaining dimensions, gender and time orientation, are beyond the scope of the observations made in this study.

### Previous Research on the Role of Classroom Culture

A report by Penny Oldfather at the University of Georgia described an interpretive study of a 5th/6th-grade whole language classroom [4]. The study examined how students with literacy problems responded to three different types of learning situations. The situations were distinguished by how students were coached to engage in a learning task. The results indicate that a responsive "classroom culture" that honors students' voices may enhance students' ownership of literacy learning, and alleviate feelings of anger, anxiety, alienation, and powerlessness. The study identifies students in one of

two motivation categories: motivated independent learners and unmotivated dependent participants. Of the unmotivated, there were two states: one group was active but easily discouraged; the other was passive aggressive in actively avoiding the learning process as well as discouraged. The results indicate that the concept of honoring student voices did not move passive students from one state or category to another. However, it may have enabled the visibility of these students in these categories or states [8].

### **The Symptoms of a Problem**

This ethnographic study was initiated because of polarized differences in perception that faculty and students held when evaluating a particular instructor's teaching performance. Faculty and student evaluations are conducted very differently. Faculty evaluations are observations resulting in a report describing student and instructor behaviors and a judgment regarding instructional effectiveness. There is no formal rubric published. Student evaluations are administered as surveys using specific criteria that are rated using a Likert scale. When one compares the assessment results, the evaluations are worlds apart (these are discussed in more detail after this ethnographic study is presented). The information provided in these evaluations does not identify what actions would bring the views into agreement. This absence of guiding information is the reason for performing an ethnographic analysis. The ethnographic approach is based on Spradley [7] to make observations and examine artifacts of the classroom situation.

## **THE ETHNOGRAPHY**

### **The Situation: Classroom and Topic**

The course topic is an undergraduate course in Systems Analysis (SA) and it is taught at a state sponsored university. The class met twice a week for 75 minutes. The classroom is a relatively square room and is otherwise unremarkable. The only impact of the layout is that students tended to congregate on the instructor's left (when facing the students).

### **Overview of the Players**

Three categories of students are referenced in this research: undeclared undergraduates (UGs); CS (Computer Science) declared UGs; and postgraduate IT (Information Technology) certificate or Master's Degree students. The instructor is a tenure track Assistant Professor holding two Master's Degrees

with 29 years of research and development experience in industry. Tenured faculty members evaluating the instructor hold either Doctorate or Master's Degrees with between 10 and 25 years of academic experience.

### **Summary of Methods**

The instructor recorded, as a participant observer, observations on classroom behaviors, on one-on-one conversations, and also collected student work products (there were 10 students). One of the ongoing student assignments was to summarize the key lessons learned from each lecture and incorporate these into a notebook. The instructor reviewed these notebooks three times during the semester, the third and final review just before finals week.

## **SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS**

### **Structural and Political Frame Related Behaviors**

The students begin immediately to test the instructor's boundaries in at least two areas: first in terms of assignment due dates: Can they be late? How late can they be? Second, what do they have to turn in (produce)? They seem to be deciding "Is this instructor worthy of receiving my respect?" Most of them do this boundary exploration seemingly unaware of being engaged in it. There is definitely a dance going on that involves the dimensions of governance (PDI) and power (approval, respect) and the management of ambiguity and stress (UAI).

### **Classroom Responses**

Students are identified as STD1 to STD10. As class dialogue took place, the instructor asked certain key questions and student responses were noted. For example: "Why no homework today?" "Is this concept clear?" Student responses ranged from no response (wait the instructor out) to "I am working on it, it is my fault." As well, direct topic questions were asked. Two other categories of responses observed related to the most frequently asked questions and the most often cited comments. Based on the number of homework assignments submitted on time (75% of the time or more), as well as the number of informed responses to questions in class (also 75% threshold), students fell into two clearly different groups: active learners (75% or more) and passive attendees (less than 75%). Passive attendees contributed in the range from near 0% to 40%; versus active from 75% to nearly 100% (the gap was very clear).

For passive attendees, the most frequent response to the homework question was no response at all! They just sat, stared at me, and waited me out. The most frequent response from attendees that responded was "I don't know." Active students usually indicated an excuse like "I was too tired" or "I got behind and am working on it." The most frequent response to the direct question regarding concept clarity was no response 80% of the time from passive attendees versus 20% to 50% for active learners. The frequently most asked question from passive attendees was "What, exactly, do you want us to do?" However, the most common behavior was not to initiate questions at all. The most frequently repeated comments from passive attendees were "I am confused!" and "I don't understand!" These were rarely expressed by the active learners who would lead in with "Do you mean that ...?" Interestingly, there were no student absences the entire semester.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

There are several commonalities between the Oldfather [4] study and these commonly observed expressions used by passive attendees in this study. Students were easily identified to be in one of two motivational categories. Four students were deemed motivated because they are prepared at least 75% of the time or more (STD1, STD4, STD7, STD10); the remaining students are unmotivated and are dependent on external factors to be actively involved. STD2, STD3, STD5, and STD7 behave in a consistently passive mode unless involved in a team task. STD6 and STD9 avoided independent action and in fact were assertive in conveying that their inability to contribute was not their fault. They used these phrases routinely: "I am confused," "I don't understand," and "there is too much work." Their voicing and body language were made in such a way as to imply it was the instructor's fault. The written material in notebook submissions mirrored what was observed in classes with respect to participation and expression.

In light of this, Hofstede [3] describes student-teacher expectations for large (L-PDI) and small (S-PDI) cultures (the United States being predominately S-PDI). Five of the mentioned expectations for L-PDI include: (1) all communication is to be initiated by the teacher; (2) students are not peers to the teacher and should be deferential both in and outside of school; (3) the teacher is viewed as the guru with the information transferred viewed as wisdom from the teacher; (4) learning is dependent on teacher skill; and (5) authority is teacher centered (the teacher must be satisfied with student performance). The behavior

of the passive students described here indicates their expectations align with (1) through (4). However, their behavior did not align with L-PDI on (5). It did align with (5) on S-PDI (student centered).

Included in the classroom expectations of S-PDI [3] cultures are: (1) communication can be initiated by either the teacher or the student (students can interrupt and disagree publicly); (2) students are peers to teachers and no particular deference is shown outside of class; (3) the teacher is viewed as an enabler transferring impersonal facts or truths; (4) learning depends on the well developed need for independence in the students; and (5) authority is student centered (the student is expected to be satisfied). Active student behaviors and inferred expectations align with S-PDI (1) through (4). However, they did not align with S-PDI (5) in the sense that they expected the teacher to be an authority and these students were seeking teacher affirmation.

The active students in this study exhibited an active willingness to figure out assignments and develop information on their own. Active students would ask "Do you mean ...?" On the other hand, passive students in this study demonstrated a clear avoidance of ambiguity. Hofstede [3] describes UAI as continuum from strong (S-UAI) to weak (W-UAI) uncertainty avoidance, with the United States being on the weak end of the UAI spectrum (generally tolerant of uncertainty).

S-UAI cultures view the educational situation as: (1) teacher centered, wherein the teacher is expected to know all the answers and serves as the guru of the topic; (2) the teacher is expected to use formal cryptic language that is difficult to understand, to be otherwise raises suspicions whether in presentation or print; (3) students avoid disagreement with the teacher because it is not only disrespectful, it implies the student is disloyal; (4) and student progress (success) is attributed by the student to be a function of circumstance and luck. In contrast, W-UAI cultures are: (1) student centered, wherein the teachers are not expected to know everything; (2) plain language is favored in both presentation and print; (3) disagreement is viewed as a stimulating opportunity to learn and a vehicle to teach the proper way to support a position; and (4) student progress is viewed as a function of the students own ability and initiative.

Consider the following situation and dialogue as an example. The context is a post team assignment debriefing. The teams diagramed the operation of a human-machine system. One of the teams happened

to be formed exclusively by passive students. The teams were formed by sending the students into the hallway where they self-selected teams composed of three members. The passive attendees knew each other because they all voiced the same signal: "I am confused!" They sought each other out during this activity. The active learners actually avoided joining teams and were grouped together because they didn't choose a team. The United States has a very high (strong) Individualism Index (IDV) [3]. The active students behaved consistently with respect to high IDV, but the passive students sought the protection of a group.

The teams composed of passive students all missed significant concepts for drawing data Flow Diagrams (DFDs). DFD concepts were presented in class and assigned for reading in the text. STD5 raised his hand and stated: "This assignment was very confusing and we (claiming to be speaking for the team) didn't know what you wanted. The assignment seemed unfair!" My response went along these lines: "What I wanted is irrelevant! The assignment is about what you need if you are going to be successful in systems analysis to identify the problem or problems in the systems you analyze." STD5 raises his hand again and reports "I am confused" (as he frequently would do). I ask him "Help me understand where you are confused?" STD5 responds "Because it is confusing!" So I continue: "OK, show me where you fall off the horse." STD5 responds "It's the whole thing!" I follow with "Well, get out the book and find the first sentence that is confusing." He opens the book, searches and searches for the DFD section. One of the active students (exhibiting impatience) yells out the page number. He finds it. He asks "Do you mean we have to follow this whole section?" "Yes, where are you confused?" "Well, I didn't read it yet!"

STD5 is conveying to the instructor, as well as the class, that he is expecting the teacher to read the book or present the material so that he does not have to. His demeanor is such that he conveys in tone and body language that he believes it is unreasonable for the teacher to require the reading. It appears that passive attendees are waiting for the information to flow into them without their having to process it or work to remember it. In fact, for several passive attendees there seems to be no interest in demonstrating topic acquisition (though they never miss a class).

Passive students, in general, did not align with S-UAI expectations, which is consistent with W-UAI in the USA. Instead, they aligned with W-UAI expectations

(1) and (2), expecting classes to be student centered and in plain language. Expectation (3) was exercised but not as a learning opportunity, but as a vehicle for registering dissatisfaction. They openly challenged the teacher on the methods the teacher was using to teach, for example requiring reading to be done prior to a lesson. These students behaved as if they believed their progress was function of the teacher's ability and not their own potential and investment. This is in opposition to expectation (4) in both strong and weak UAI. In contrast, active students were generally aligned with W-UAI expectations (1) through (4).

## **PRE-ETHNOGRAPHY FINDINGS RELATED TO ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS**

### **Student Observations and Key Performance Criteria**

Student reports contained a subset of specific criteria that portrayed how students perceived this instructor. The Likert Scale evaluations were combined into positive or negative categories with the percentage of students in each category. The positive category was derived by combining Likert ratings of 1 or 2, and the negative category by combining the 3, 4, or 5 ratings. Undeclared UG student evaluations are from a course that teaches computing concepts and practical skills using MS Office applications. Eighty percent (80%) of these students perceived the instructor's performance as positive. Declared CS UG evaluations are from an introductory CS course in C++ programming. These students represent the type of student in the SA course and only 36% rated this instructor's performance as positive. Graduate students are taking first and second term IT courses and only 57% rated the instructor's performance as positive.

From the standpoint of customer satisfaction, the positive scores for CS and IT students are perceived to be very low and indicate the instructor is not satisfying the customer and may be delivering a "poor product." Further, declared UG and graduate student evaluations indicate a significant dissonance between students and the instructor.

### **Summary of Faculty Observations and Evaluation**

Faculty evaluations describe the instructor's behaviors and student responses exclusively in positive terms. All peer reviews, the Department Chair, and the Evaluation committee reports were positive. These evaluations were conducted in the same time window as student surveys. Faculty

commentary describes interactions in detail, finishing with constructive positive evaluative statements.

In order to compare faculty and student evaluations, faculty comments were analyzed in terms of the criteria used for the student surveys. Where appropriate, the commentary was mapped into these criteria. The mapped comments were compared in terms of whether or not students would rate the instructor negatively. The bottom line is that student responses would not be predicted based on faculty assessments.

### **Artifact Analysis of Tenure Track Evaluation Package**

An annual evaluation package is prepared for all non-tenured faculty members for review by the Dean. In this instructor's package student evaluation results were reported in detail. Being non-tenured, continuation of the instructor's contract depended on the outcome of the Dean's assessment.

What is surprising is the exceptional effort exhibited by the faculty evaluation committee and Department Chair to explain or mollify the potential negative impact of student results reported in the package. This defensive response is indicative of a phenomenon described as information biasing [5]. Skovira [5] describes the role of frameworks for directing and shaping the flow of low context information within a high context (tacit) environment. The phenomenon of preparing a defense, in response to a survey billed as a feedback mechanism for process improvement, is an example of biasing information.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The evidence in this study indicates that both faculty and students are aware of the "customer centric" model of using subjective measures of observation to assess instructor performance. Further, that students fall into two broad categories: active independent learners and passive dependent attendees. The latter group is leveraging the "students as customer" centrality to influence faculty and/or administration behavior. In response to this, faculty evaluation processes evidence counter-measures intended to balance reported student dissatisfaction. Passive attendees have developed a code to identify who they are and communicate their intention to withhold

involvement in the learning process. Of particular issue is an aversion to ambiguity and uncertainty, especially in regard to the introduction of a topic that exceeds their comfort zone and requires them to think on their own.

The attitude conveyed is that no-one, not even a teacher, has the right to challenge them to do so! In terms of PDI and UAI cultural characteristics, the alignments are mixed and expectations appear to be mixed: that is, passive students seem to be picking and choosing expectations based on a student centered model, except where those expectations hold them accountable. Directions for future research include investigating the apparent amalgamation of PDI and UAI expectations; identifying the factors that contribute to avoiding ambiguity as a learning opportunity, and determining the value of the passive learning stance to a significant number of students perceived to be practicing it.

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