Service Recovery Encounters in the Classroom: Exploring the Attributes of Professors Desired by Male and Female Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of service recovery encounters, particularly the qualities and behaviours that male and female students expect from professors in personal service recovery encounters. For this purpose, 40 semi-standardized laddering interviews were conducted (with 20 male and 20 female respondents) in order to gain a deeper understanding of student expectations and the values that drive these expectations. The analysis and findings enrich the existing limited stock of knowledge on desired attributes of professors in service recovery encounters in higher education by developing a deeper understanding of the attributes of professors that dissatisfied female and male students’ desire, as well as the underlying values for these expectations. Results show that the professor’s active listening skills, expertise, friendliness, concern for students, and being empathetic were important to both male and female students. However, gender differences are important in a service-recovery encounter in a classroom, which suggests differential treatment. While men place more importance on a quick problem solution, women seem to prefer a more communal approach.

Keywords: Gender Differences, Higher Education, Laddering, Means-End Approach, Service Recovery

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, higher education (HE) institutions take the view that higher education could be regarded as a business-like service industry, and they are starting to focus more on meeting or even exceeding the needs of their students. In the last decade, the dramatic growth in the HE sector in the UK has seen an increasing use of marketing strategies as universities compete for revenues and try to attract the best available talent (Angell, Heffernan, & Megicks, 2008). The Higher Education sector in the UK has witnessed considerable changes in recent years. The UK has 71 universities that generate revenue of £150m or greater (Universities UK, 2011). The rapid increase in the number of students accepted into universities is evidence of the growth of the UK Education sector. The
Like regular firms in the business sector, there are advantages associated with successful recovery in the HE sector. Previous research (e.g., Voss et al., 2007) has found that increase in student satisfaction from recovery encounters results in loyalty and positive word-of-mouth communication. Studies by Swanson and Davis (2000) and Iyer and Muncy (2008) showed that understanding students’ recovery expectations could result in effective recovery by professors, leading to greater student satisfaction.

Despite this, extant literature offers surprisingly little guidance about what student expectations are regarding professors’ qualities and behaviours during these ‘critical moments of truth.’ Moreover, Corbyn (2009) reports that universities as service providers are still complacent when it comes to learning from students’ problems. It is thus more important than ever for higher education institutions to develop appropriate service recovery strategies. Moreover, Davis and Swanson (2001) suggest that students who experience service failures in the classroom demonstrate a strong propensity to share negative information about their experience. They argue that, since students today have the opportunity to communicate with an unlimited number of others via the internet, by not recovering from failures professors risk having their reputation damaged. Consequently, both higher education institutions and professors should be interested in understanding how to respond when students are dissatisfied, and attempt to move them toward voice behaviour (Mukherjee, Pinto, & Malhotra, 2009) by ensuring good recovery systems.

### SERVICE FAILURE AND RECOVERY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Service failures are not uncommon in higher education. Like in any other service industry, things can sometimes go wrong in the process of teaching. For example, exam questions may be set ambiguously, answers might be graded wrongly or students may be given improper marks.
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