Chapter 16
Service Recovery Encounters in the Classroom:
Exploring the Attributes of Professors Desired by Male and Female Students

Sneha Chandra
The University of Manchester, UK

Thorsten Gruber
The University of Manchester, UK

Anthony Lowrie
Minnesota State University, USA

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.

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 student population grew from 1,567,313 in 1994/95 to 2,493,420 in 2009/10, representing a growth rate of 59%. In the same time period, the number of postgraduate students increased from 335,325 to 578,705, representing a 73% growth rate. Non EU postgraduate students alone contributed £2.6bn GBP in 2009/10 to the UK economy in fees, increasing from £455m in 1994/95. The total number of students was 2,493,420, of which postgraduate students were 578,710 or 23.2% of the total student population (Universities UK, 2011). This sector has shown an upward trend in attracting postgraduate students in the last decade. The statistics indicate the growth of the economic contribution at fee level from the higher education sector to the UK and that it has a major role to play in the broader economy. With the government switching the University income source from a centralized block grant source to 'customer' fees, there is increased pressure and importance given to student satisfaction. This is particularly the case if all student fees align, as circa £22.5bn (i.e., 2.5m students x £9000) of University income would derive directly from students. Moreover, the postgraduate market could be differentiated even further by the introduction of even higher fees. There is increasing pressure and importance attached to satisfying existing students and attracting new ones to sustain or even increase the sector's income and growth.

Hence, there has been an increase in studies conducted into service quality in HE—what students perceive as quality, what leads to student satisfaction and their expectations from professors (e.g., Cooper, 2007; Hill, Lomas, & MacGregor, 2003; Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007). Such studies indicate that importance is being placed on achieving student satisfaction through superior service delivery so that the student's learning experience can be a satisfactory one (Swanson & Davis, 2000). However, teaching being a service is not immune from service failures, but surprisingly, relatively few studies have been conducted to explore service recovery when a service failure occurs in a classroom setting.

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

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