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THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION ON STUDENT COMMITMENT TO THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

In today's competitive world in which we witness how much effort people put in selling goods or services to others, education has become a business, too. Macedonia seems to follow this world trend in education. The number of universities has increased tremendously in the last 10 years. This means that universities have to struggle to attract students. While advertising their services, universities can use all the resources that are available to them: good facilities, attractive campuses, use of technology in the educational process, attractive study programs. But the critical component for the perception about the quality that people have about a particular university still appears to be a classroom and teachers. This paper aims to find out if there is a relationship between classroom communication and the commitment of students to their university. To be more precise, how efficient classroom communication can create positive emotions towards the university which on the other side has consequences on the way students feel about their university, how they present it to others and how they will relate to it in the future as members of the community in which it exists.

Introduction:

Prior research (Kareva, 2007) and the existing opinion show that there is indeed a relationship between the instruction students get at universities from professors as the "transmitters" of the knowledge and the main bearers of the academic function of universities (classroom communication being an important component of the teaching/learning process) and student opinion and attitude toward their university. Moreover, there is the evidence that this relationship is positive.

However, our definition of effective classroom communication as a necessary prerequisite resulting in positive student outcomes is very close to what the existing literature refers to as “effective teaching”. Although the term “effective teaching” was coined by researchers in the 1980s, studying, what makes teachers successful, began in 1960 with the research made by Medley and Mitzell’s (Mac Cracken, 1998) which led to the development of tools for systematically observing and measuring the attributes of teacher behaviors as they relate to changes in student achievement. The same author claims that effective teachers must possess many different characteristics such as good communication, management and organizational skills, but at the same time they should be able to help students to cope with their problems.

The existing studies also provide the evidence that as an analogy from the consumer behavior literature on the importance of customer satisfaction on profit making organizations, faculty performance, advising staff performance and classes do influence students’ academic experience, which in turn has impact on their satisfaction. (Kara, De Shields, 2004).

The relationship between classroom communication and student commitment to university

Classroom communication is a topic that covers two major experiences: communication and teaching and therefore, should be considered taking into account the complexity of both of them. Civikly explored the topic of classroom communication extensively in the sense that is in line with our understanding of classroom communication: “Teaching is a people-process and communication is our means for interacting”¹¹⁰.

The central role of communication in instruction was made clear by the definition of Hurt, Scott and McCroskey (1978): “Communication is the difference between knowing and teaching”¹¹¹. Having in mind the two broadest components of classroom communication, communication and teaching, we refer to classroom communication as to the complexity of the teacher-student interaction during the teaching process in and

¹¹⁰ Civikly J. M. p.11. Classroom Communication: Principles and Practice. Times Mirror Higher Education Group, Inc, 1995.

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 7.

outside the classroom, including verbal and non-verbal behavior and all other factors that influence it.

The idea for the concept of student commitment to university has been taken from the field of Organizational Behavior. “It is the study of what people think, feel and do in and around organizations¹¹²”. (Mc Shane, Von Glinow, (2004). Since according to these authors, organizations are groups of people who work interdependently towards some purpose, we believe that we can also refer to universities as organizations with students working (studying) in interrelationships with the teachers and with each other to achieve their goals. For the same reason, student behavior towards university can be referred to as a kind of organizational behavior.

Our main goal is to understand, predict and influence student behaviors. We want to know what our students think about their university, why do they have a certain opinion about different things related to their studies and what can be done to influence their current behavior or predict their future one; the last being especially important in today’s rigorous competition on the educational market.

Exploring the field of organizational behavior and management, Ivancevich, Konopake & Matteson (2005), defined commitment as “a sense of identification, involvement and loyalty expressed by an employee toward the company¹¹³.” Their view is that a committed employee perceives the value and importance of integrating individual and organizational goals and thinks of his or her goals and the organization’s goals in personal terms.

Although the study of commitment in the workplace distinguishes three types of commitment (Meyer and Allen 1997) - affective, continuance and normative, we consider only the affective component since the other two are more related to working organizations and are not so relevant for the examination of student behavior. We use the following definition of student commitment throughout this study: student emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the university; students with a strong commitment continue their links with the university because they want to do so.

¹¹² McShane, S.L., Von Glinow, M.A. p. 4. Organizational Behavior. Irwin McGraw-Hill. 2000.

¹¹³ Ivancevich, J.M., Konopaske, R., Metteson, M.T. Organizational Behavior and Mangement. McGraw-Hill. 2005.

We assume that there is a direct correlation between classroom communication and student commitment to university. What happens between teachers and students during the teaching/learning process directly influences student commitment to university, their affection and loyalty, which further contributes to building university reputation.

In order to prove this hypothesis, the components of classroom communication (clarity, immediacy, use of language, facial expressions, vocal expressiveness, physical appearance, gestures and body movement, emotional intelligence) and the way in which these components reflect the quality of teaching in that particular university, are grouped in two main categories being effective interpersonal communication and good teaching practices. The focus is on how the students “experience” the classroom communication and how that experience influences their psychological connection with the university viewed by their affective commitment towards it.

There are two specific hypotheses that we also want to prove: if teachers during classroom communication demonstrate good teaching practices that result in better learning experiences and positive student outcomes, it will have a positive effect on student commitment to university; and, if classroom communication takes place in the friendly atmosphere, mutual respect and support provided by teachers who have qualities of effective interpersonal communicators, it will have a positive influence on student commitment to university.

At first we analyze the existing forms of classroom communication at the university (from the selected sample) and then we compare them to the most effective communication and teaching practices as gathered from the literature review. These methods enable us to have a clear picture of the dynamics of classroom communication at the university, how efficient it is and whether it has any influence in the creation of a relationship of affective commitment of students towards the particular university.

The instrument used is a Likert’s scale questionnaire containing information about students’ opinions and attitudes related to classroom communication and affective commitment towards the university. The relationship between classroom communication and affective student commitment is examined through the Pearson coefficient of linear correlation as well as with the canonical correlation.

The items that examine good classroom communication skills are divided into two categories: good teaching practices and effective interpersonal skills based on what the literature review defined as positive values. Each category contains 8 items. Based on the degree to which students agree or disagree with each statement, according to their perceptions of how their teachers manifested these practices in the classroom, they give their answers on the scale from 1 to 5 meaning: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree. By analyzing the values, we are able to measure the level of manifestation of the good teaching practices and effective interpersonal communication of the teachers at the South East European University (SEEU).

The instrument is created in such a way, that students give their answers twice: once for the perceptions of good teaching practices and effective interpersonal communication skills demonstrated by their English teachers and once for their perceptions about the same skills of the content subject teachers. The aim was to compare the values obtained from students' answers for the two types of teachers in order to prove another hypothesis: that English teachers demonstrate better teaching practices during the teaching and learning process and are more efficient interpersonal communicators than the teachers of professional courses. This article does not discuss those findings.

Totally 133 undergraduate students participate in the study at the South East European University (SEEU). Students from all departments are examined in order to obtain a representative sample of the whole university undergraduate population. They are all taken from their English for Specific Purposes 2 (ESP 2) classes obligatory at all departments: Business Administration (15 students), Law (35 students), Public Administration (33 students), Communication Sciences (13 students) and Computer Sciences (37 students). This group of students is chosen because they have the ESP courses in their second year of studies at SEEU and should have reached at least the lower intermediate level of English, which is the language of the questionnaire. Besides this, they have all had three semesters at the university to experience a number of teachers with different academic titles: assistant, docents, professors and lectors (the last being language skills teachers, as opposed to those teaching more 'academic' disciplines such as literature or syntax). The students are from different ethnic and social background and different parts of the country as well as students from Kosovo, Serbia and Albania. In order to

achieve objectivity with the answers, we do not ask students to put their names, but we do ask for their GPA, if they are willing to provide this information.

Good teaching practices and good communication skills have been identified as the two components of classroom communication. In order to prove that there is a direct correlation between classroom communication and student commitment to the university, we analyze the first two components of classroom communication separately. This analysis also serves as a tool to prove the two specific hypotheses: 1) good teaching practices that result in better learning experiences and positive student outcomes have a positive effect on student commitment to university; and 2) teachers who have better communication skills, i.e. are more efficient interpersonal communicators, contribute to creating better student satisfaction and commitment.

In order to prove that there is a correlation between the components of classroom communication and student commitment to the university, students' commitment is measured through eight items, according to how the literature has identified committed individuals towards their organization. Then the values obtained from their answers are correlated with the Pearson coefficient of linear correlation to see if the correlation really exists between classroom communication as a whole and student commitment to the university and between the two separate components of classroom communication and student commitment.

The following tables represent the estimation of good teaching practices, good communication skills and student commitment to the university by giving the results obtained for each particular statement. Tables 1 and 3 refer to the English teachers and Table 2 and 4 refer to teachers of professional courses. Table 5 refers to student commitment:

Table 1: Perception of good teaching practices: English teachers

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

	Perception of good teaching practices	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	In most of the courses teachers try to relate theory to practice	2 1,50%	4 3,01%	24 18,05%	65 48,87 %	38 28,57 %

2	The course material usually relates previous knowledge to new knowledge	1 0,75%	8 6,02%	33 24,81%	56 42,11%	35 26,32%
3	We are required to explain our answers, i.e. to ask and answer “Why” questions	1 0,75%	7 5,26%	18 13,53%	58 43,61%	49 36,84%
4	Teachers understand well where we start learning from by getting the correct level and correcting gaps in our knowledge.	3 2,26%	10 7,52%	33 24,81%	51 38,35%	36 27,07%
5	Teachers teach in the way that we understand the new material.	4 3,01%	5 3,76%	16 12,03%	48 36,09%	60 45,11%
6	Teachers regularly check if we have understood the new concepts.	3 2,26%	13 9,77%	21 15,79%	47 35,34%	49 36,84%
7	We are always encouraged by the teachers to give our opinion.	2 1,50%	7 5,26%	31 6,77%	47 35,34%	46 34,59%
8	There is enough time for us to think about an answer before the teacher or another student answers it.	4 3,01%	17 12,78%	36 27,07%	46 34,59%	30 22,56%

Table 2: Perception of good teaching practices: teachers of professional courses

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

	Perception of the good teaching practices	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	In most of the courses teachers try to relate theory to practice	2 1,50%	12 9,02%	39 29,32%	55 41,35%	25 18,80%
2	The course material usually	2	13	41	57	20

	relates previous knowledge to new knowledge	1,50%	9,77%	30,83%	42,86%	15,04%
3	We are required to explain our answers, i.e. to ask and answer “Why” questions	6 4,51%	6 4,51%	38 28,57%	37 27,82%	46 34,59%
4	Teachers understand well where we start the learning from by getting the correct level and correcting gaps in our knowledge.	6 4,51%	17 12,78%	51 38,35%	40 30,08%	19 14,29%
5	Teachers teach in the way that we understand the new material.	9 6,77%	10 7,52%	29 21,80%	53 39,85%	32 24,06%
6	Teachers regularly check if we have understood the new concepts.	7 5,26%	21 15,79%	30 22,56%	42 31,58%	33 24,81%
7	We are always encouraged by the teachers to give our opinion.	12 9,02%	13 9,77%	40 30,08%	37 27,82%	31 23,31%
8	There is enough time for us to think about an answer before the teacher or another student answers it.	12 9,02%	21 15,79%	35 26,32%	46 34,59%	19 14,29%

Table 3: Perception of teachers’ communication skills (English teachers)

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

	Perception of teachers’ communication skills	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	Teachers are willing to engage in conversations with us before, after or outside the class.	6 4,51%	9 6,77%	32 24,06%	49 36,84%	37 27,82%
2	We feel good most of the time	3	9	27	48	46

	while we are in class.	2,26%	6,77%	20,30%	36,09%	34,59%
3	Teachers know from the first glance if we are bored or interested in the lesson.	0 0%	7 5,26%	33 24,81%	46 34,59%	47 35,34%
4	Teachers' appearance (look) is appropriate and professional.	0 0%	7 5,26%	19 14,29%	45 33,83%	62 46,62%
5	Teachers at SEEU care about their students: how they feel and how they learn.	13 9,77%	15 11,28%	30 22,56%	42 31,58%	33 24,81%
6	They always come prepared for the lessons.	2 1,50%	4 3,01%	15 11,28%	50 37,59%	62 46,62%
7	We are equally treated by the teachers no matter of the social, cultural and ethnical background.	2 1,50%	12 9,02%	32 24,06%	33 24,81%	54 40,60%
8	Teachers have understanding for our problems and feelings.	6 4,51%	17 12,78%	46 34,59%	39 29,32%	25 18,80%

Table 4: Perception of teachers' communication skills (teachers of professional courses)

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

	Perception of teacher's communication skills	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	Teachers are willing to engage in conversations with us before, after or outside the class.	12 9,02%	15 11,28%	42 31,58%	44 33,08%	20 15,04%
2	We feel good most of the time while we are in class.	7 5,26%	16 12,03%	42 31,58%	41 30,83%	27 20,30%
3	Teachers know from the first	4	13	48	37	31

	glance us if we are bored or interested in the lesson.	3,01%	9,77%	36,09%	27,82%	23,31%
4	Teachers' appearance (look) is appropriate and professional.	4 3,01%	11 8,27%	35 26,32%	42 31,58%	41 30,83%
5	Teachers at SEEU care about their students: how they feel and how they learn.	27 20,30%	18 13,53%	38 28,57%	26 19,55%	24 18,05%
6	They always come prepared for the lessons.	5 3,76%	8 6,02%	37 27,82%	38 28,57%	45 33,83%
7	We are equally treated by the teachers no matter of the social, cultural and ethnical background.	3 2,26%	11 8,27%	42 31,58%	32 24,06%	45 33,83%
8	Teachers have understanding for our problems and feelings.	23 17,29%	20 15,04%	41 30,83%	34 25,56%	15 11,28%

Table 5: Student commitment to the university

1 strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 strongly agree

	Student commitment to the university	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
1	I am proud of being an SEEU student.	3 2,26%	12 9,02%	32 24,06%	27 20,30%	59 44,36%
2	I strongly recommend SEEU to my friends.	9 6,77%	11 8,27%	33 24,81%	27 20,30%	53 39,85%
3	I will continue my studies at SEEU after graduation from the first cycle.	15 11,28%	17 12,78%	46 34,59%	25 18,80%	30 22,56%

4	I am satisfied with the quality of teaching I am getting at SEEU.	4 3,01%	22 16,54%	34 25,56%	42 31,58%	31 23,31 %
5	I feel happy when I am at the University.	6 4,51%	13 9,77%	31 23,31%	41 30,83%	42 31,58 %
6	I am angry when somebody from outside speaks badly or criticizes my university.	10 7,52%	7 5,26%	34 25,56%	36 27,07%	46 34,59 %
7	I could describe SEEU with all its staff and students as one big family.	14 10,53%	13 9,77%	37 27,82%	41 30,83%	28 21,05 %
8	I feel responsible for the image of my university.	12 9,02%	6 4,51%	28 21,05%	46 34,59%	41 30,83 %

Classroom communication at SEEU, as composed by its two main factors (good teaching practices and teachers' communication skills) can be estimated as efficient. From all the calculated values of the means, only the one on item 16, about professional courses teachers, is lower than 3. This means that the majority of the examinees answered with neutral, agree and strongly agree. The distribution of results has normal values between 0 and +/-1. For all the items (questions) the prefix is negative, meaning that the students did not have problems in understanding the answers and that they were well constructed. One more proof for this is the heterogeneity of the answers, demonstrated by the flatness of the distribution of the results (Kurtosis). Since all the questions are composed to match the most effective communication and teaching practices as pointed out in the literature review, this gives us a clear picture of the dynamics of classroom communication at SEEU.

The affective commitment (dedication) to the organization (university) shows the emotional relationship of the student with his/her university. If students are committed to the university, it has general positive consequences for its reputation. The examinees in this study estimate themselves as committed and emotionally much attached to SEEU.

They demonstrate loyalty and are in high percentage (65%) proud to study there. Approximately the same percentage of the students say that they are happy when at the university (63%), that they recommend SEEU to their friends (60%) and that they feel responsible for the image of their university (66%). The last one means that they feel the university as their own and that they care about it. The demonstrated high affective commitment of students to SEEU presents a big benefit for themselves and the university.

A challenging issue is the result on item 19 in the questionnaire (item 3, Table 5) which shows that quite a big number of students have still not decided whether they will continue their studies from the second cycle at SEEU (35%), although about 42% of the students answered positively to this question. This is an area which demands further investigation and work.

The correlation between classroom communication and student commitment to the university was estimated with two coefficients of correlation: the Pierson coefficient of linear correlation to examine the correlation between classroom communication in general and affective commitment to the university, and canonical correlation to examine the relationship between two groups of variables: good teaching practices and communication skills, separately with the commitment to the university. All the estimated values of coefficients vary from $+0,70$ to $+1,00$ and are statistically relevant. Statistically, this means that there is a high or very high correlation between any two variables examined in the study and that the main hypothesis is proved. There is a direct correlation between classroom communication and student commitment to the university. What happens between teachers and students during the teaching/learning process directly influences student commitment to the university, their affection and loyalty, which further contributes to building the university reputation.

When the estimated values of the Pierson coefficient are positive, as in this statistical analysis, the two variables that are examined are ideally positively correlated with each other. In other words, the more successful and efficient classroom communication results in stronger affective commitment to the university.

Classroom communication is examined by measuring its two components: good teaching practices and teachers' communication skills. Since the results from testing of both of these variables show high positive correlation with the affective commitment to

the university, this proves the next two specific hypotheses that refer to different components of classroom communication: if teachers during classroom communication demonstrate good teaching practices that result in better learning experiences and positive student outcomes, it will have a positive effect on student commitment to university; and: if classroom communication takes place in the friendly atmosphere, mutual respect and support, provided by teachers who have qualities of effective interpersonal communicators, it will have a positive influence on student commitment to the university.

Conclusion:

According to the results, SEEU teachers are generally perceived by their students as good teachers and their teaching can be qualified as a quality teaching. By quality teaching we mean designing learning experiences that sustain interest, motivation and enthusiasm with students; that promote both self-awareness and cooperation with others and that ensure practical application of the knowledge.

Next, the results also showed high level of commitment of SEEU students to the university. That commitment was demonstrated through the ways they felt about the university: being proud of SEEU, feeling happy there, recommending it to their friends, considering themselves responsible for the image of the university; in one word, being loyal to the university.

But, the findings provided the evidence for one challenging issue from this area: Considerable number of SEEU undergraduate students (35%) were still not sure whether they would continue their studies at SEEU in the third and second cycle. This result might be due to financial issues (the tuition fee for one semester in the second cycle at SEEU costs about 1200 Euros; for comparison, the average salary in the country in 2009 was 350 Euros) (State Statistical Office of RM p. 35). Nonetheless, this is still an area where more attention should be paid in order to make sure that such values were not gained because of some negative experiences that students had at SEEU regarding any possible aspect.

Further on, the research results undoubtedly lead to the conclusion that the affective commitment to the university is a dependent variable on classroom communication and that more efficient classroom communication has positive influence

on student commitment to the university. The stronger the commitment is, as an emotional relationship between the student and the university, the more students are attached to it, which further reflects the increasing of the university reputation and attracting new students. Teachers should understand that student satisfaction, as their subjective perception of how well a learning environment supports academic success, concerns the role of the instructor and the students; these elements may be central in student learning.

In contemporary higher education, a student's role has switched from that of a passive receiver of information to that of an active learner and the teachers must find ways to adapt to the new situation. The new learning environments need to include a variety of learning activities and opportunities that have been proven to bring positive learning outcomes.

With this research we wanted to prove that teachers, the way they teach, the way they act, the way they talk to students, the way they approach them, the way they give feedback, report grades, give information, answer emails, listen to complaints, praise and punish students, the way they dress, position of their body and hands, the way they talk, correct mistakes, give instructions and many, many other things that teachers do as parts of the everyday teaching routine are the most important external factor for student achievement. Achievement brings happiness and satisfaction and positive attitude towards the university to which teachers are attached. According to Ramsden, "Teaching is one of the most delightful and exciting of all human activities when it is done well"¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁴ Hartley, P., Woods, A., Pill, M. (Eds). p.11, Enhancing Teaching in Higher Education, Routledge, London and New York. 2005.

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