"Good Fences Make Good Classes:

Greek Tertiary Students' Preferences for Instructor Teaching Method"

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Abstract

The learning preferences of Greek students attending a two-semester undergraduate economics course at a Greek university were investigated. The course was taught by two instructors who initially used a student-centred teaching style combined with relaxed classroom management and teaching methods intended to help establish rapport with students. Near the end of the first semester, students were asked to assess their instructors' performance. Most students evaluated their instructors positively in regard to preparation, enthusiasm, and organization; however, most also rated the instructors negatively in regard to their ability to maintain control and discipline in the classroom, and the degree of respect the students had for them. Students' comments suggested disapproval of the teachers' relaxed teaching methods. Based on these results, the instructors decided to alter their teaching methods during the second semester to take into account the students' criticisms. In the second evaluation, students rated the instructors mostly positively in regard to strictness, discipline, and respect. These results suggest that Greek students expect their instructors to maintain a considerable degree of psychological distance, and that when they do not, the students perceive the instructors as lacking control in the classroom. The results further suggest that national culture plays an important role in shaping learning preferences, and unintended results can occur when instructors employ teaching methods which violate the cultural expectations of students. It is suggested that in Greek higher education, a gradual progression to a more student-centred teaching method be promulgated.

Key Words: Teaching Styles, Greece, Culture, Evaluation, Higher Education

Introduction

Among the factors that can affect a student's learning preferences is national culture (Hayes & Ellison, 1988; Hofstede, 1997; Yamazaki, 2005). National culture can vary on a number of dimensions, such as the degree to which individualism is favored over collectivism, and how much people appreciate the presence of clear rules of behavior over uncertain rules (Hofstede, 1986). Such cultural variables can help determine what students expect in the educational situation, including their preferences for how teachers should interact with students.

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Historically, Greek students of higher education have felt most comfortable in very structured learning environments. These are environments in which the teacher is viewed as an authority figure, an expert, and someone who remains at a considerable psychological distance from the students. This preference is due to several aspects of Greek culture. These include the culture's acceptance of the maintenance of considerable power distance between those who are in authority and those who are not, a tendency for Greeks to feel less comfortable with uncertainty than people in some other cultures, and a lower value given to individualism than is afforded by some other cultures (Hofstede, 1986).

Just as learning preferences are affected by national culture, so are teaching styles and methods. Thus, Greek teachers typically fulfill the role students expect of them, taking the position of authoritative experts in relation to their students. In terms of Grasha's (1998) five teaching styles, Greek tertiary teachers typically exhibit an expert/authority teaching style in which the instructor's role is basically to impart information to students in a teacher-centred classroom. One way this attitude is reflected is in the fact that Greek teachers are not very open to the idea of student evaluations. Here too, a certain reciprocity may be present, as Greek students may find the idea of evaluating their teachers to be somewhat uncomfortable.

However, it is also true that teaching and learning are always evolving, and thus it seems possible that in the two decades since Hofstede made his (1986) evaluation of Greek culture on several dimensions, teaching and learning preferences may have altered somewhat in Greece. To determine whether a change may have taken place in these respects, this study investigated Greek tertiary students' learning preferences in relation to instructors who employed a student-centred teaching style along with teaching methods intended to produce less psychological distance between teacher and student than is typical in Greece. Two questions were of prime interest. The first question was whether students would view instructors using such a style and methods positively or negatively, and if so, in what specific ways. The next question was whether, if the instructors retained a student-centred style but changed their methods to more traditional ones, which

involved greater psychological distance, this would affect the students' evaluations. By helping to determine whether today's Greek tertiary students are more comfortable with one or the other teaching methods, the investigation could provide insight into how more student-centred teaching styles in Greek higher education might best be designed to gain acceptance by students.

National Culture and Learning Style

Learning style consists of a student's characteristic way of learning and may vary along several dimensions, such as global versus analytic, feeling versus thinking, closure-oriented versus open, and preference for visual, auditory, or tactile-kinesthetic learning (Oxford, Hollaway, & Horton-Murillo, 1992). It is generally recognized that a student's national culture can influence his or her learning style (e.g., Hayes & Allison, 1988; Hofstede, 1997; Wierstra, Kanselaar, van der Linden, Lodewijks, & Vermunt, 2003; Yamazaki, 2005). Indeed, learning style may be affected by any of several major aspects in which cultures can vary. Hofstede (1986) defines four such aspects: individualism opposed to collectivism; the degree to which a society's less powerful people accept their position; the degree to which members of a culture tend to avoid uncertainty; and masculinity versus femininity.

A number of studies have linked various aspects of national culture to different dimensions of learning style. For example, the learning style of accounting students from the collectivist cultures of Hong Kong and Taiwan was found to be more abstract and reflective than that of students from more individualistic Australia, who were more concrete and active, and less reflective (Auyeung & Sands, 1996). Jackson (1996) found differences in learning style among management students from several nations. For instance, in relation to practical versus theoretical learning, French learners had no preference, German and Anglo-Irish learners had some preference for practical learning, and Spanish and East European learners had a strong preference for practical learning. Barmeyer (2004) found that German students preferred theoretical stimuli and logical orientation more than French and Quebecois students. Other factors can complicate the effect of culture on learning style. Among adult learners, these include class, gender, and

ethnicity (Merrill, 2001). A quantitative meta-analysis of the results of a number of studies done after 1980 suggested that women differ from men in regard to preference for abstract conceptualization (Severiens & ten Dam, 1994). Research also indicates that preferred learning approaches vary with national culture. Ramburuth & McCormick (2001) found that Asian international students differed from Australian students in several aspects of their learning approach, including motivation, strategies, and higher preference for group learning.

Littlewood (2000) notes that much is yet unknown about the effects of culture on learning styles and cautions against applying preconceived notions about the ways in which culture affects learning. Littlewood's (2000, 2001) study of students in eight Asian countries and three European countries suggested that both Asian and European students wanted to explore knowledge in a friendly and supportive atmosphere and that there were greater differences within national cultures than between them. At the same time, Littlewood (2000) agrees that national culture does affect learning styles in systematic ways.

Cultural Differences in Teaching Styles and Learning Approaches in Tertiary Education

Culture also affects teaching styles. Furthermore, teaching style can differ from students' learning approaches (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1997). In cross-cultural higher education, problems may arise when the instructor's teaching style does not match the student's preferred approach to learning. This may occur when students and teachers come from cultures which differ in their views about (1) social positions of teachers and students, (2) curriculum relevance, (3) cognitive profiles, or (4) patterns of teacher-student and student-student relations (Hofstede, 1986).

One important area in which incompatibilities may arise is in learning the language of a host country. Oxford, Hollaway, and Horton-Murillo (1992) note that many English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students come from cultures where a closure-oriented approach to learning is encouraged and ambiguity is not appreciated. They claim that Arabic-speaking students, for example, tend to find fault

with an open-styled instructor who accepts more than one correct answer to a question. Furthermore, Wallace and Oxford (1992) found that tertiary students in a multicultural ESL setting experienced style conflicts in 326 of 396 possible comparisons of teaching and learning style aspects.

Such incompatibilities are important to understand given the internationalization of communication, with English becoming increasingly important. Understanding that different discourse practices and languages can embody different issues of power and identity can help ESL and EFL students and teachers better understand how English can best serve the learner in his or her own discourse community (Mavor, 2001). Furthermore, the communicative approach to language teaching may not be fully suitable in some cultures, especially Asian cultures, without being attuned to the culture. The classroom teacher may need to modify the method and redefine the teacher-student relationship to make the method appropriate for local cultural norms (Ellis, 1996).

Also related to the internationalization of communication is the fact that the success of the national education systems of some countries is held up as a model by others. However, educational policies and practices of one nation do not necessarily translate well without amendment to another. The national setting and cultural context of the adopting nation and how these should modify educational practices must be taken into account (Broadfoot, 2001). Moreover, in the spread of English language, the individuality of other voices must not be lost. In the light of cultural differences, teachers should be proactive in determining whether their own academic goals and practices should be altered (Cadman, 2000).

Changing Pedagogical Methods to Address Cultural Differences

There appears to be universal agreement across all cultures that education requires comprehending the meaning of learning materials and not simply reproducing them (Richardson, 1994). To accomplish this goal in cross-cultural education, instructors should understand their own teaching preferences and the learning preferences of their students. They must then be open to developing a broader spectrum of teaching methods to meet

their students' educational needs. Prior beliefs about teaching and learning can be tenacious, but there is evidence that teachers can adapt to the needs of learners even if changes conflict with prior beliefs (Kennedy, 2000).

Developing students' ability to learn on their own is a value embraced by many educators. However, ease in obtaining the skills and attitudes which accompany learner autonomy may be conditioned by culture. This may require learners to redefine their ideas about the proper roles of teachers and learners (Ho & Crookall, 1995). To help learners gain autonomy, teachers, too, may be required to examine their teaching and learning styles. Language teachers should assess their own learning styles and help their students to recognise their learning styles and operate outside their usual style (Oxford & Anderson, 1995). Being prepared to alter teaching styles in cross-cultural education is consistent with basic principles of sound teaching. Such principles include using effective teaching and learning strategies, helping students connect learning experiences, and exhibiting a strong desire for students to learn (Pennsylvania State University Faculty Senate, 2001).

Evaluation is a key to determining teaching effectiveness. Student evaluations are an important source of feedback for teachers and should be part of the evaluation process (Gallagher, 2000). However, culture can affect teachers' acceptance of student evaluations. For example, teachers from nations with low tolerance for ambiguity may find the idea of student evaluations difficult to accept. Hofstede (1986) cites the example of a visiting Italian professor who complained "bitterly" (p. 301) at the idea of being evaluated by his American students. It should be noted that a number of factors other than teaching performance itself may also affect student evaluations, such as subject area and student age, gender, and ethnicity (Worthington, 2002).

Levander and Repo-Kaarento (2004) maintain that reflection on and evaluation of teaching practices is a university-wide function. This suggests that cross-cultural teaching and learning issues should be addressed at the institutional level as a matter of staff development. Guidelines for staff development in relation to teaching particular subjects have been outlined by Ho, Watkins, and Kelly (2001). These guidelines include critically reflecting on both present and alternative teaching conceptions and practices, identifying

current inconsistencies, examining examples of alternative practices, and redesigning the teaching of a topic in the light of reflection and analysis.

Greek National Learning and Teaching Cultures

On his four dimensions of culture, Hofstede (1986) ranks Greece as being a generally masculine culture that is somewhat low in individualism, somewhat high in power distance, and very strong in uncertainty avoidance. These qualities suggest that Greek tertiary students feel most comfortable in structured learning situations in which there are clear objectives, detailed assignments, and strict timetables, and that Greek students expect teachers to be experts in their fields with all the answers (Hofstede, 1986). Other factors found to affect Greek undergraduates' approaches to studying include gender, gender combined with handedness, and gender combined with age and handedness (Andreou, Vlacho,& Andreou, 2006).

Given the high power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance of Greek culture (Hofstede, 1986), teachers, too, typically assume a more authoritarian position in Greece than in some other cultures, assuming the role of expert information-giver. Consistent with this attitude, today's Greek professors are not very open to evaluation by students or colleagues. Strong reactions by teachers against very harsh application of evaluations in the past resulted in the elimination of teacher evaluation in Greece in 1981 (McIntosh, 2001). Today, a formal evaluation process is still lacking in Greek tertiary education (Stamoulas, 2006). However, an evaluation system is now being implemented (OECD, 2007). It remains to be seen how well Greek professors will accept this change.

Method

This section explains the method used to investigate the learning preferences of a sample of Greek university students who were taught by instructors employing a student-centred teaching style along with a relaxed classroom management approach. Typically in Greek tertiary education, a teacher-centred, authoritative, rather rigid teaching style is employed,

in which the instructor is viewed as an expert whose role is to establish classroom structure, clarify expectations, and transfer information to students. Questions by students during lessons are often discouraged, sometimes by ridiculing the student for asking a question. In contrast, instructors in this study employed a student-centred teaching style characterized by a focus on explaining each lesson so that every student in the class understood it. Questions by students were allowed and answered by the instructors, and no mockery of any student was allowed for any question, no matter how simple.

In addition, in the first semester of the class, the instructors assumed a relaxed "pal-like" classroom management approach, which included methods such as telling a joke or a story from one's life to illustrate a point; calling students by their first name and allowing them to do the same with the instructor; and displaying a personal interest in students' learning, including talking to them after class about non-academic matters.

Participants consisted of 235 third- and fourth-year students attending a two-semester undergraduate economics course at a Greek university. The course was taught by two instructors, both of Greek origin. Near the end of the first semester, students were administered an instructor evaluation form which has been widely used in Greek universities since 1999. Since instructor evaluation is not compulsory in Greece, no formal evaluation tool for all courses and instructors has been developed; thus, the form used had an unofficial character. However, the evaluation form was pre-tested by the course instructors in a group of approximately 50 students, 35 of whom were Greek and the remainder from other countries. The pre-test suggested that foreign students had no issues with the relaxed teaching method; thus, it was decided to include only replies of Greek students in the study's analysis.

The form consisted of three parts. The first asked for the student's age, gender, semester, and country of origination, but the students were instructed not to put down their name on the form. The second part of the evaluation form was a questionnaire asking students to assess their instructors' performance on a five-point scale in regard to 11 aspects of the instructors' teaching methods. In response to each question, students could reply "Not at all," "No," "Enough," "Yes," or "Yes a lot." The third part of the evaluation form asked

students to state their views about the lecture syllabus and/or the instructors' teaching methods. Following the first administration of the survey, student responses were calculated and comments were recorded. The results of the survey were then reported to the instructors. The instructors could then use these results to adapt their teaching style for the second semester.

Near the end of the second semester, the survey was re-administered to the students. Again, their responses were calculated and comments recorded. Again, the surveys were completed anonymously. The mean age of the students completing the survey was 20.5 years old and the gender breakdown of the student population was 117 male and 118 females. All survey participants were of Greek origin.

Findings

Responses to the first administration of the survey showed that the majority of the students in the first semester evaluated their instructors very positively in regard to characteristics such as preparation, enthusiasm, and organization. However, the majority of the students rated the instructors negatively in regard to their ability to maintain control and discipline in the classroom, and the degree of respect the students had for them (see Table 1). Some of the students' comments provided insight into their negative ratings in regard to some issues. These comments included criticisms of the actions of the instructors in allowing students to call them by their first names and conversing with students about general issues such as university life and problems with other instructors and other courses. Some students also complained about having limited access to handouts and other teaching material.

Table 1. First survey administration – Basic Outcomes

Questions	Answers (%)				
	Not at all	No	Enough	Yes	Yes a lot
They show a positive profile to the students	—	—	—	32.1	67.9
They are well prepared for the lecture	—	—	—	21.4	78.6
They are enthusiastic about the lecture	—	—	3.5	17.9	78.6
They are available to help students in their queries	—	—	17.8	35.8	46.4
They show respect for the needs of the student	—	—	3.7	44.4	51.9
I would like them to teach more classes	—	—	7.7	42.3	50
They are able to communicate their knowledge clearly	—	—	14.3	60.7	25
They are organised	—	—	3.6	35.7	60.7
They are typical in their teaching requirements	—	—	11.2	40.7	48.1
They are qualified for this scientific discipline	—	—	—	64.3	35.7
They are capable of control and have discipline and respect	14.3	53.6	28.5	3.6	—

Based on feedback from these results, both instructors decided to change their teaching methods to take into account the students' criticisms. The instructors continued employing the student-centred model, which they had used during the first semester. However, they also decided to behave in a somewhat more authoritarian and psychologically distant manner in the classroom, instead of the friendlier, more "pal-like" way in which they had presented themselves in the first semester. This included entering into conversations with the students only if they were related to lectures and coursework. In addition, the instructors introduced the use of an asynchronous e-learning platform used to upload all

the necessary material about the lecture so that students could download and have the material during lectures.

Results from the second evaluation differed from the first in regard to perceptions of strictness, discipline, and respect, which were rated mostly positive instead of mostly negative as in the first administration. For all other items, more students evaluated the instructors in the highest positive category than they did in the first administration of the survey (see Table 2).

Table 2. Second survey administration – Basic Outcomes

Questions	Answers (%)				
	Not at all	No	Enough	Yes	Yes a lot
They show a positive profile to the student	—	—	2.8	22.9	74.3
They are well prepared for the lecture	—	—	—	20	80
They are enthusiastic about the lecture	—	—	—	20	80
They are available to help students in their queries	—	—	—	34.3	65.7
They respect the needs of the student	—	—	8.6	37.1	54.3
I would like them to teach more classes	—	—	2.9	45.7	51.4
They are able to communicate their knowledge clearly	—	—	8.5	42.9	48.6
They are organized	—	—	—	31.4	68.6
They are typical in their teaching requirements	—	—	5.9	41.2	52.9
They are qualified for this scientific discipline	—	—	—	54.3	45.7
They are capable of control and have discipline and respect	—	5.6	22.9	65.8	5.7

Discussion

Both instructors had studied outside Greece, and interviews with them suggested that this experience had given them a broad vision about other teaching cultures. Each instructor believed that the best choice of teaching method was the student-centred model. Furthermore, in applying that model during the first semester, they felt it would be valuable to create a friendly and relaxed learning environment.

However, was that particular model what the students really expected? In a large power distance society such as Greece, students expect teachers to use academic language when they are lecturing (Jambor, 2005). They do not expect their instructors to be telling jokes or personal stories. Our results suggest that the relaxed, friendly teaching style of the instructors during the first semester of the course led the students to perceive the instructors as lacking in control and discipline in the classroom, and lowered the respect the students felt for the instructors. Following feedback from the first administration of the survey, the instructors discovered that many of their students rated them negatively in regard to control, discipline, and respect. As a result, they modified their teaching style to present a more authoritarian and psychologically distant stance to their students. Given the results of the second survey, this modified teaching method led to higher evaluations of the instructors in terms of classroom control and discipline, and increased the students' respect for their instructors.

As mentioned in the review of literature, Hofstede (1986) claims that Greece is a culture low in individualism, high in power distance, very strong in uncertainty avoidance, and somewhat high in masculinity. In societies characterized by low individualism, people believe that only young people should be entitled to learn, whereas adults are expected to have learned everything that had to be learned and therefore cannot assume the role of a student. Students in such societies expect their teachers to have all the correct answers ready for them. Furthermore, since in collectivist societies individual effort, standing-out, and initiative are rather frowned upon, students will speak up in class only when the teacher personally invites each one of them to speak.

On the same note, Hofstede (1986) also asserts that large power distance societies favour teacher-centred education (Németh, Máté, Németh, Pozsgai, Kivés, & Sütö, 2009). Respect for the teacher emanates from his or her perceived power distance, expertise, and age. The teacher is considered as "the authority" and is expected to direct students along certain paths and lead off any communication with a student. Bjørge (2006) found that even e-mail communications between students and academic staff are sensitive to power distance, with students from cultures higher in power distance using more formal language in their e-mail communications than other students.

Under such circumstances, a student-centred education system is difficult to apply. Such a system requires both the teacher's and the students' participation during the teaching/learning procedure. It presupposes that both the teacher and the student learn from each other through a two-way communication. The perceived inequality among them is rather low, and students are inclined to participate and take initiative. Students expect the teacher to show them the way to find their own paths and not lead them to predetermined ones. Respect for the teacher does not stem from his/her status and power but from his/her behaviour, character, knowledge, and capabilities.

Our findings are in line with the belief that national culture plays an important role in shaping learning and teaching preferences. Given the aforementioned characteristics of the Greek culture according to Hofstede (1986), Greek tertiary students generally prefer a learning atmosphere in which there are clear objectives and strict timetables in order to reduce uncertainty, and where a considerable psychological distance is kept between student and instructor. This is in accordance with the view that in masculine societies, students favour brilliance in teachers rather than friendliness.

By attempting to reduce psychological distance by acting in a friendly manner toward their students in the first semester, the instructors violated the students' expectations and preferences. Simply put, the students' replies to the first survey administration suggested that they felt that their instructors should keep their "proper place" in the student-instructor system. When the instructors changed their teaching style to adhere more closely to the students' cultural expectations, the students' ratings became more positive in

their perception of the instructors' ability to maintain control and discipline. Their reported respect for their instructors also increased.

The results of the study therefore help corroborate the idea that unintended results can occur when instructors employ teaching methods which violate the cultural expectations of students. National culture does indeed appear to affect learning culture. Greek students are not used to educational procedures and methods in which instructors attempt to get psychologically close to or overly friendly with their students. When the instructors in this study decided to reduce the psychological distance from students by being very friendly instead of using their position in an authoritarian way to attempt to provoke respect and even fear from students, they were rated negatively by the students in some respects. This is somewhat ironic for a nation which gave birth to the Socratic Method, a method which typically employs a friendly atmosphere for the exchange of ideas between instructor and student. Today's Greek tertiary students appear to find fault when an instructor attempts to generate a very friendly classroom atmosphere; rather than friendly persuasion from instructors, they prefer the instructor to take control of the classroom.

The Proposed Education Method

In the case that the instructor decides to face rather than ignore the challenges of different cultural teaching environments, there are two options available: to learn how to teach within a particular setting or to teach the students how to learn (Hofstede, 1986). In the case examined in the present study, instructors chose the first option, since it was less difficult and time consuming for them to adapt their teaching method to suit the students' expectations than to teach their students how to learn within a non-traditional classroom context. The teacher-centred method that characterises the Greek educational system has arguably been the product of Greek culture; it has been going on for many years, and students since elementary school have been socialized and educated through it.

It may be time for Greek education to evolve to a more student-centred system. However, as the results of the present study make clear, this may not be easy given not only many instructors' customary teaching style, but also the expectations of Greek students.

Santangelo and Tomlinson (2009) argue that to promote student success, tertiary education instructors should design instruction to meet their students' diverse and individual needs. Furthermore, they agree with Hall, Strangman, and Meyer (2003) that class content and presentation should be adjusted to the students. However, if adjusting to the students includes adjusting to their expectations, then following this advice in the case of Greek tertiary education would result in continuing with teacher-centred classrooms since that is what students generally expect to find.

It is therefore not only instructors, but students who must change their customary practices and expectations if Greek tertiary education is to evolve to a more student-centred environment. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to change the Greek system in a short period of time. What can be done, however, is a slow adaptation of the student-centred teaching method to Greek students' learning preferences, by way of mixing characteristics of both student and teacher-centred methods. That is what occurred in the second semester in the present study. The instructors continued using a student-centred teaching style in the sense that it allowed student questions and focused on ensuring that the students learned the course content; but at the same time, it incorporated a more authoritarian and less relaxed classroom management atmosphere than had been present in the first semester. Such a hybrid method could be derived after several trial-and-error attempts on behalf of the instructor, with the help of student evaluations. At the same time, the instructor could aim to gradually make the students realise the positive aspects of the student-centred approach, prior to or while embarking on that approach.

Conclusion

The discussion of our results provides evidence that the education method that should be followed in a given cultural setting is not arbitrary. It may be the result of long-lived cultural characteristics and importantly related to students' expectations and preferences. Education and teaching methods that have naturally evolved in certain academic/cultural

settings, however effective they may be in those settings, may not have the same impact when applied in a different setting. This became evident during the course of our research by analysing the evaluation data. As a result, instructors tried to improve teaching effectiveness by adapting their methods to students' learning preferences. The first student evaluation thus proved to be a powerful tool facilitating the adaptation of instructors' teaching methods to the students' learning preferences. Since student evaluations can be affected by considerations other than teaching performance (Worthington, 2002), they should not be used as the only determinant of teaching style and methods. However, they can often play an important role in determining the most effective ways to engage a class of students.

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