

I FEEL CONNECTED: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LECTURERS' CREDIBILITY

PADMA PILLAI*
VIKANESWARI SHANMUGAM**

ABSTRACT

Communication is essential. Having the ability to communicate thoughts, ideas, and feelings is crucial in all environments. The education industry regards communication as a core business to transfer knowledge. This paper focuses on how two different groups of students at Sunway University, Malaysia, perceived Lecturers' Credibility (LC) in a class that enhances the Students' Engagement (SE). A group of 50 to 60 students from the Faculty of Arts (FoA) and School of Business (SoB) completed measures of LC and SE using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) Source Credibility Questionnaire (SCQ) and Students Engagement Survey from Indicators of Positive Development Conference, Child Trends. The variables for LC comprise competence, character and caring (CCC), and the variables for SE consist of cognitive, behaviour and emotion (CBE). The study aims to determine if there are any differences in SE between students from FoA and SoB with their perceived LC. Hopefully, the study sheds some light on the research question: "Are there any differences among Faculty of Arts students and School of Business students in the relationship between lecturers' credibility and students' engagement?"

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, Information Technology, Sociology, Political Science.

INTRODUCTION

Most lecturers aim to finish each semester feeling content with their subject delivery and believing that students have learned what they have been taught. Teaching is a noble profession and imparts knowledge to all other professions. However, as in any other profession, it may have its faults. In their haste to complete the task at hand lecturers may lack the passion that is often required in teaching. They become so task-oriented that they overlook the capacity and capability of students in engaging, understanding, and completing their tasks. As Barnes & Kohler-Evans (2013), "...as faculty members, we have to always remember and affirm our purpose, acknowledge

* Lecturer in Faculty of Arts, Department of Communication and Liberal Arts, Faculty of Arts, Sunway University, Malaysia. padmap@sunway.edu.my

** Senior Lecturer, Centre for American Education, Sunway University, Malaysia. vikanes@sunway.edu.my

the contributions we make in students' lives and professional pursuits, and respect the call or passion that brought each of us to the teaching profession" (para 1).

Barnes & Kohler-Evans (2013) further illustrated the importance of faculty members engaging in discussions that require students to reflect, analyse, and synthesize information in a larger context. This enables students to evaluate and organize this new information to challenge, expand, or replace old methods of thinking in the process of learning. To succeed in accomplishing one's teaching mission, it is crucial that lecturers bring some passion to it. With the right type of passion, lecturers may be able to create a positive relationship between themselves and their students. According to Barnes & Kohler-Evans (2013), through the creation of relationships with the students, various avenues open and honest conversations emerge about the students' needs, struggles, successes, and triumphs. It also allows faculty and students to work out strategies together to decide how best to bolster success and address challenges. This would thus lead to student engagement.

Students would also look up to lecturers they think are credible which, in turn, would enhance their engagement in class. Much research has been conducted in measuring lecturers' credibility and influencing students' academic success, but not enough has focused on their credibility being the sole factor for students' eventual success. Hence, lecturers' contributions tend to be either ignored, and if recognised, appears to be in isolated cases. There are other factors, of course, which influence a student's success but let us not neglect or diminish the role played by lecturers in their immense contribution to students' academic success.

A credible lecturer often reflects on his or her learning and teaching journey and when there are shortcomings, finds room for improvement. It is often the norm for students to energise, pay more attention, and feel connected to studies when the source of information is from someone who is credible—in this case their lecturer.

The need to address students' engagement is, therefore, crucial in any university environment, and this brings us to consider the research question: Are there any differences among Faculty of Arts students and School of Business students in the relationship between lecturers' credibility and students' engagement?

Literature Review

Lecturers' Credibility (LC)

From a layman's point of view, credibility is "the quality of being believed or accepted as true, real, or honest" (Merriam Webster). Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds (2009) drew from McCroskey and Teven's (1999) work on how teachers' credibility is perceived by students in the areas of competence, character, and caring. Mazer et al. further added that competence refers to the extent to which a teacher is perceived to know what he or she is talking about, character is the degree to which the teacher is perceived as honest, and caring refers to the extent to which the teacher is perceived to have the students' best interests in mind.

Past research connects credibility to the attributes mentioned above. This has been tested further, using Teven and McCroskey's (1997) measure of credibility. The instrument is an 18-item semantic differential scale, with six questions each for the dimensions of competence (intelligent/unintelligent, inexpert/expert, competent/incompetent, uninformed/informed, bright/stupid [modified to less clever as not to sound too harsh], and untrained/trained); character (untrustworthy/trustworthy, phony/genuine, dishonest/honest, moral/immoral, honourable/dishonourable,

unethical/ethical); and caring (insensitive/sensitive, cares about me/does not care about me, self-centred/not self-centred, concerned with me/not concerned with me, not understanding/understanding, has my interests at heart/does not have my interests at heart) dimensions (Mazer et al., 2009).

Student Engagement (SE)

Student engagement is crucial in any educational institution. To excel in studies and perform better, students need to feel connected and engaged in the tasks they perform daily to accomplish their academic goals. According to Chapman (2003), student engagement is consists of student willingness to participate in routine school activities such as attending classes, submitting required work, and following teachers' instructions in class.

Scholars have developed student engagement as an academic concept during the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing student participation. After many models had emerged, Miller and associates (1996) stated that these models focused on the psychological or cognitive dimensions of engagement. Behaviour and emotional attachment towards studies also play an important role in students' engagement. According to Finn, Folger, and Cox (1991), student engagement occurs not just in class but outside as well. Student engagement is categorized into cognitive, behavioural, and affective indicators (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) indicated the categories as below:

- Cognitive engagement

Cognitively engaged students would be interested in their learning, seek to go beyond the requirements, and relish challenge. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), the examples of cognitive engagement are seen as having flexibility in problem solving, preference for hard work, investment in learning beyond mental effort, and desire to master a task.

- Behavioural engagement

Students who are behaviourally engaged would typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour. On another note, Fredericks et al. (2004), also mentioned that positive conduct consists of behaviours that illustrate effort, persistence, concentration, attention, asking questions, contributing to class discussion, following rules, studying, completing homework, participating in school-related activities and the absence of disruptive conduct in not skipping school and not getting into trouble.

- Emotional engagement

Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging. Skinner and Belmont (1993), indicate that students who are effectively engaged at school hold positive attitudes towards academic activities such as affective reactions in the classroom, attitudes towards school and

teachers, identification with school, and feelings of belonging and appreciation of success in school.

Engagement occurs when individuals undertake tasks related to their interests and competence, learn about them continuously, participate freely with (equal) associates, immerse themselves deeply, and continue the tasks with persistence and commitment because of the value they attribute to the work.

Therefore, this study aims to see the relationship between LC and SE for two different groups of students namely from FoA and SoB, and whether there is a significant difference in the mean score of LC and SE between the two groups.

Relationship between Lecturers' Credibility and Student Engagement

Matzler and Woessmann (2010) found that teacher subject knowledge was significantly related to student achievement. Without having subject knowledge, the lecturer is unable to teach the students with relevant knowledge and skills required to make the students comprehend the particular subject. Subject knowledge is essential for lecturers to enable students to meet the desired learning outcome and satisfaction with their learning.

In a study on the relationship between lecturer competencies and student satisfaction Choi, Ibrahim and Tan (2014) report that interaction with students was a significantly related to student satisfaction and performance. A diverse environment results when lecturers and students exchange notes for effective learning. Students see lecturers' credibility in their teaching style which comprises the competence, character, and caring nature of the lecturers. Students who perceived a high level of lecturers' credibility eventually increase their level of engagement. Brophy (2001), indicates that a lecturer's teaching style should include providing a structure of the course contents, giving feedback of accomplishments, stimulating students' motivation to process and reflect on the content, and assisting them to engage in learning activities.

Methodology

Participants

The study obtained a sample drawn from Faculty of Arts and School of Business students from Sunway University, Malaysia. A sample of undergraduate students was obtained (n = 116). There were 53 students from SoB (46%) and 63 (54%) students from FoA with 32% male and 62% female students. They represented 4% Malay, 79% Chinese, 5% Indian, and 12% others in ethnicity. Of these, 58% had completed at least seven semesters (year 3) in their respective programmes. Malaysians comprised 87% while the rest (13%) were international students. They came mainly from the age group of 20 – 24 years (84%).

Procedure

Participation was requested through direct contact with faculty. Two faculty members agreed to participate. Lecturers of the two members were then contacted to determine their interest in and availability for the research using their students. Three lecturers with large class numbers agreed to participate. The researchers obtained consent from the students, and the survey was completed during one class period in March 2016. The researchers, members of the Faculty of Arts, School of Communication, and Centre for American Education from Sunway University, Malaysia presented the survey forms to

students, provided clear instructions, fielded questions, and collected the completed surveys.

Measures

Lecturer credibility was measured using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) Source Credibility Questionnaire (SCQ). The instrument is composed of 18, seven-step semantic-differential scales, six each for the competence (intelligent/unintelligent, inexpert/expert, competent/incompetent, uninformed/informed, bright/stupid (modified to less clever as not to sound too harsh), and untrained/trained); Character (untrustworthy/trustworthy, phony/genuine, dishonest/honest, moral/immoral, honourable/dishonourable, unethical/ethical); and caring (insensitive/sensitive, cares about me/does not care about me, self-centred/not self-centred, concerned with me/not concerned with me, not understanding/understanding, has my interests at heart/does not have my interests at heart) dimensions (Mazer et al.).

Student engagement was measured using the engagement survey from Indicators of Positive Development Conference, Child Trends. This measure was developed by Fredricks, et al. (2004) drawn from a number of studies (Finn et al., 1995; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993; Wellborn & Connell, 1987). It focuses on cognitive indicators with eight components, behavioural with five, and emotional with six. The measure has previously been tested for validity and reliability.

Results & Discussion

The findings provide a valuable insight into the nature of the phenomenon under investigation: is there a significant difference in the LC and SE ratings between FoA and SoB students? The results indicate no significant difference between FoA and SoB students in how they respond to LC and SE components. However, both groups of students' ratings revealed a positive relationship between LC and SE.

Descriptive analyses were conducted on each of the components for LC and SE. For all three positive attributes of LC, a mean score of more than five was deemed to be strong positive attributes. However, a mean response below three for reversely coded attributes was deemed to be strong. The mean scores indicated similar patterns for both groups.

Generally, both groups of students found their lecturers to be competent with the following attributes: intelligent, bright, informed, expert, competent, and trained. Furthermore, students also indicated their lecturers to be of good character. However, it is interesting to note that for the component "caring" the mean score was below five and above three (for reverse coding) for both groups of students which indicate positive attributes (see Table 1).

The study also established that mean scores for SE components were almost similar for both groups of students, with a slight difference in the order of importance of SE components. As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, both FoA and SoB students rated high for "If I don't know what a word means when I'm reading, I do something to figure it out, like look it up in the dictionary or ask someone." However, the lowest score differed in the Cognitive Engagement. Similarly, the difference was apparent in the highest and lowest ratings for other SE components Behavioural and Emotional engagement.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics comparison of Lecturers' Credibility scores.

	Communication			Business		
	(n=63)			(n=53)		
Competence	Mean	SD	Skewness	Mean	SD	Skewness
Intelligent_Unintelligent*	2.65	1.322	0.939	2.36	1.242	0.776
Bright_Less clever*	2.79	1.310	1.064	2.79	1.419	0.634
Informed_uninformed*	2.92	1.383	0.864	2.70	1.395	0.700
Inexpert_Expert	5.10	1.088	-0.0504	5.34	1.270	-0.620
Incompetent_competent	5.14	1.014	-0.392	5.38	1.333	-0.889
Untrained_Trained	5.17	1.212	-1.245	5.19	1.481	-0.670
Character						
Honest_dishonest*	2.75	1.425	.742	2.36	1.257	.665
Honorable_Dishonorable*	2.78	1.373	1.034	2.60	1.459	1.042
Moral_Immoral*	2.87	1.476	1.066	2.62	1.431	1.196
Phony_Genuine	5.22	1.054	-.293	5.17	1.424	-.685
Untrustworthy Trustworthy	5.22	1.250	-.642	5.28	1.622	-1.014
Unethical_Ethical	5.43	1.011	-.765	5.45	1.234	-1.32
Caring						
Understanding_Not understanding*	2.92	1.222	.320	2.92	1.591	.812
Concerned_unconcerned with me*	3.49	1.256	.549	3.23	1.601	.608
Has_doesn't have my interest*	3.59	1.499	.093	3.32	1.397	.319
Cares_doesn't care about me*	3.70	1.541	.145	3.36	1.766	.472
Self-centred_ Not Self- centred	4.38	1.580	-.280	4.45	1.462	-.076
Insensitive_sensitive	4.57	1.088	.005	4.51	1.660	-.371

*Reverse coding

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Student Engagement Scores of Faculty of Arts (FoA)

	FoA (n=63)		
	Mean	SD	Skewness
Cognitive Engagement			
I study at home even when I don't have a test.	2.25	1.062	.552
I read extra books to learn more about things we do in school.	2.48	1.148	.556
I try to watch TV shows about things we are doing in school.	2.76	1.088	.185
When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about.	3.25	1.135	-.796
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning in class.	3.57	1.088	-.616
If I don't understand what I read, I go back and read it over again.	3.71	1.128	-.801
I check my schoolwork for mistakes	3.73	1.194	-.863
If I don't know what a word means when I'm reading, I do something to figure it out, like look it up in the dictionary or ask someone.	4.35	.883	-1.630
Behavioural Engagement			
I get in trouble in school*	2.19	1.120	.821
When I'm in class, I just act as if I am working*	2.59	1.026	.266
I pay attention in class.	3.54	.820	-.585
I follow the rules at school.	3.54	.981	-.644
I complete my work on time.	4.08	.829	-1.029
Emotional Engagement			
I feel excited by the work in school	3.03	.861	.095
I feel bored in school*	3.06	.931	-.005
I like being at school	3.13	.942	-.141
I am interested in the work at school	3.21	.883	-.713
My classroom is fun place to be	3.37	1.036	-.524
I feel happy in school	3.46	.895	-.644

*Reverse coding

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics: Student Engagement Scores of School of Business (SoB)

	SoB		
	(n=53)		
Cognitive Engagement	Mean	SD	Skewness
I try to watch TV shows about things we are doing in school.	2.64	1.194	0.390
I read extra books to learn more about things we do in school.	2.92	1.035	-0.385
I study at home even when I don't have a test.	3.15	1.133	-0.143
I talk with people outside of school about what I am learning in class.	3.34	1.037	-0.305
If I don't understand what I read, I go back and read it over again	3.64	0.922	-0.894
When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about.	3.74	0.812	-0.143
I check my schoolwork for mistakes.	3.87	0.962	-0.401
If I don't know what a word means when I'm reading, I do something to figure it out, like look it up in the dictionary or ask someone.	4.25	0.677	-0.342
Behavioural Engagement			
I get in trouble in school*	2.09	1.244	0.811
When I'm in class, I just act as if I am working*	2.53	0.953	-0.015
I complete my work on time.	3.70	0.932	-0.978
I pay attention in class.	3.81	1.001	-0.919
I follow the rules at school.	4.02	0.693	-0.745
Emotional Engagement			
I feel excited by the work in school	2.91	1.148	-0.523
I am interested in the work at school	3.09	1.061	-0.395
I feel bored in school*	3.11	1.086	-0.326
My classroom is fun place to be	3.13	1.127	-0.526
I like being at school	3.15	1.081	-0.406
I feel happy in school	3.25	1.125	-0.592

*Reverse coding

Table 4: Independent Samples Test

	n	LC			SE		
		Mean	Sd	Sig	Mean	Sd	Sig
FoA	63	40.24	6.093	0.696	47.27	6.687	0.582
FoB	53	40.77	8.245		48.04	8.043	

Table 4 suggests that overall mean scores for LC and SE are similar for both groups of students. The t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the two groups in their LC and SE ratings.

To evaluate the research question, a two-sample t-test was conducted. The means and standard deviations for both combined (positive and reverse coding) LC and SE components for both groups are displayed in Table 4. The mean score for the combined LC and SE was about the same, at 40 and 47, for both groups respectively. However, the standard deviation for combined LC and SE was slightly higher for SoB students. As expected, based on previous results (Table 1, 2 and 3), there was no significant difference in the mean score (see Table 4) on the LC ratings between the two groups of students ($p = 0.696$). Table 4 results also indicate that SE ratings were not significantly different ($p = 0.582$) for the two groups.

The study also established LC being an attribute for SE. Therefore, to identify the relationship between LC and SE, the reversely coded components were eliminated and other variables were combined to see the possible relationship by using regression and correlation analysis, one of the most commonly used bivariate relationship techniques.

Scatter plots (see Figure 1 and 2) indicated a linear relation between LC and SE for the two groups.

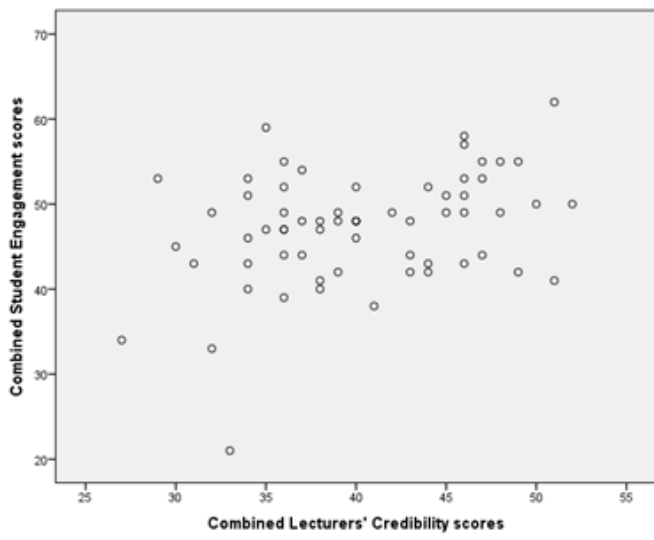


Figure 1: Scatter plot for FoA

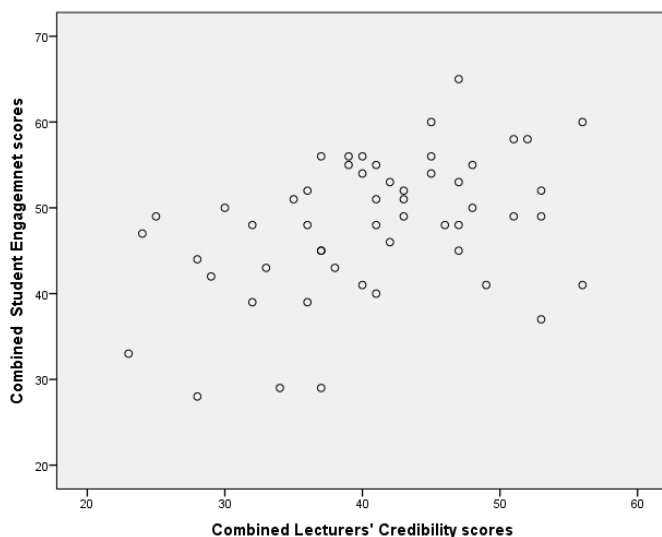


Figure 2: Scatter plot for SoB

Table 5: Relationship between LC and SE (Model Summary)

	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Standard Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
FoA	0.353	0.124	0.110	6.308	8.667	0.005
BS	0.408	0.167	0.150	7.414	10.193	0.002

Predictors: (Constant), LC. Dependent Variable: SE

From Table 5, it can be deduced that lecturers' credibility is positively correlated ($r = .353$ and $r = 0.408$, both $p = <0.01$) with students' engagement. Hence, it is one of the significant factors in influencing students' engagement. Since the F-value exceeds 4 (shows a value of 8.667 and 10.193) and the significance value is lower than .05, this is sufficient evidence there is a linear relationship between LC and SE.

It has been previously supported that for students to have better understanding, satisfaction, and achieve the learning outcomes, it is important for lecturers to teach in a clear and effective manner (Good, (1994).

Table 6: Lecturers' Credibility on Student Engagement (coefficients)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
FoA	31.692	5.351	0.353	5.923	0.000
	0.387	0.131		2.944	0.005
BS	31.805	5.125	0.408	6.134	0.000
	.398	0.125		3.193	0.002

Table 6 shows the impact of LC on SE. The t-test for the Beta coefficient is a test of relationship between the dependent variable and a specific independent variable, and in this case, between LC and SE. From Table 6, it is known that both Beta values have positive signs. This indicates that the relationship between independent variable (LC) and dependent variable (SE) is direct and it moves in the same direction. In determining the significance level of the independent variable, as shown in Table 6, the significance value has to be lower than 0.05 to be termed as significant. Based on the table, LC has a significant impact on SE.

Conclusion

Lecturers' credibility is an important element in student engagement, which is a complex construct that continues to promote positive outcomes for students. Researchers do still feel challenged conceptualising and measuring this construct to see if all the components are to be measured at once or individually. Having said that, the discussions revealed in this paper indicate that there are no differences between two different groups of students (FoA and SoB) on the relationship between lecturers' credibility and students' engagement. Nevertheless, this paper shows a strong relationship exists between lecturers' credibility and students' engagement. Future research will hope to test the credibility variables that contribute more towards students' engagement.

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