

Ethic-related Messages in the Teaching Process within Higher Education Institutions and the Evaluation of University Teachers by Students

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of an experimental study, the goal of which was to compare the average evaluation scores of university teachers given by students on the basis of the manner of delivering lectures and organising the teaching process at the university. This empirical field was problematised using three ethics hidden in the organisation of the teaching activities: the ethic of justice (Kohlberg), the ethic of one-sided care (Gilligan), and the ethic of care and responsibility (Gilligan). The study encompassed three groups of students who attended an entire teaching series (lectures), after completion of which the experimenter was evaluated by the students. The only difference was belonging to a given group (i.e., the style of working with the students). The remaining aspects of the teaching activities were very uniform. The experimenter was given the lowest evaluation scores when being fair and balancing care with responsibility, and the highest scores when one-sidedly caring for the students' well-being.

Key words: Ethic of care, ethic of justice, styles of delivering a lecture, evaluation of university teachers by students

Problem

The evaluation of university teachers by students is one of the mechanisms by which a high standard of education can be maintained. When introduced into everyday teaching practice, this mechanism provides teachers with feedback regarding students' perceptions of their teaching activities. On the other hand, the evaluation process gives students significant power over their teachers. Given that power could, however, also influence teachers' attitude towards students, the evaluation mechanism functioning within the university system for awarding student grades (USOS) enables evaluations to be made no sooner than after a completed educational period. An educational period is deemed completed at the point of the final entry of grades into the aforementioned system. This means that students are only able to evaluate teachers after the end of their exams (in practice, in the next semester) and, often, in circumstances where the last class by a given teacher has already been held. This reduces the possibility of a potential negative reaction by teachers to any negative evaluations made by students. Put differently, the possibility of an unethical use of teachers' power over students is significantly reduced. At the same time, the possibility of students using their power over university teachers is increased. To date, this asymmetry has proved impossible to eliminate in the area of university education. However, the complete abandonment of the process of student evaluations of teachers in the context of education quality could bring back a situation where students' rights are disregarded. This problem poses both a teaching and an ethical dilemma.

In problematizing the aforementioned empirical field (i.e., student evaluations of teachers), two theories concerning the ethic of moral reasoning were used: Laurence Kohlberg's (1984) 'ethic of justice' and Carol Gilligan's (1993) 'ethic of care'. Such a theoretical presentation of the practice of students evaluating teachers should, as intended by the author, provide the premise for thinking about what should be done to weaken the previously mentioned student–teacher power asymmetry while not abandoning the practice of evaluation entirely. The aim, however, is not to verify these theories or fully operationalise them, but rather to treat them as a scientifically verified source of practices designed to structure the teaching process, based on the ethic of justice and the ethic of care.

Kohlberg's idea of justice emphasises reciprocity, equality and respect. Moral conflicts are seen as abstract logical problems, solving which requires a focus on laws and rules (Kohlberg 1984). Circumstances such as the subjects' personal situation, their emotional condition or personal involvement, or difficulties in performing tasks are eliminated from the reasoning. The ethic of justice corre-

sponds to acting according to a social contract and certain principles, which it is supposed will lead to effective solutions, where one faces the consequences of one's decisions. The central concept is therefore a judgement that is based on pure reasoning that, in turn, takes into account pre-established principles and paradigms (Rest et al. 1999).

The main elements of the second perspective (Gilligan's) are concern, care and openness to the needs of others. When making a moral decision, special attention is paid to the consequences that the decision will have for all the persons involved in a given situation, as well as to ensuring that the decision does not harm any of these persons (Gilligan 2003). Gilligan (1993) distinguished between two levels of using the ethic of care. The level that is simpler – in terms of moral development – is characterised by a great emphasis on obligations to others and on satisfying their needs. In such circumstances, being accepted by the participants in the interaction is key. To gain acceptance and create an atmosphere of being understood by others, individuals are ready to give up their own needs and expectations. The second – higher and proper – level of using the ethic of care in moral reasoning is marked by a shift from the previously mentioned one-sided approach towards obeying the rules of law under a contract created together with others, a contract based on respect for – and recognition of – the rights of all the parties (1993). The goal is to arrive at a situation where multiple factors are considered – factors that are important to many people, including oneself.

This conceptualisation generates three ethics of reasoning that can serve as a background to student evaluations of university teachers. It can therefore be assumed that a lecture series delivered in the context of the ethic of justice (EoJ), the ethic of one-sided care (EoC), and the ethic of care balanced with responsibility (EoCR) can constitute a varied experience from the perspective of which the students can evaluate their university teacher.

Method

Starting from this problematisation and gradually moving towards the operationalisation of the described study, questions can be asked concerning the differences between the averages of the evaluations given in the three experimental groups: lecture series with the EoJ message, lecture series with the EoC message, and lecture series with the EoCR message. When analysing such a research question as part of a natural experiment, the EoJ, EoC and EoCR messages in the lectures should be treated as the only difference. How was the study planned?

After deciding which variable constitutes ‘the only difference’, it was ensured that the remaining aspects of the lecture series were as similar as possible. Firstly, three lecture series for one course (entitled ‘The Methodology of Social Research’) were included in similar – almost analogous – majors: Pedagogy, Early School Pedagogy, and Social Work. Secondly, apart from the identical content, the lectures were highly standardised in terms of teaching activities, including the methods for presenting materials. Each lecture was delivered by the same person (experimenter), based on identical literature, during the same semester, at one university and in one faculty. Thirdly, the structure of the student groups was similar in terms of gender, age and expectations with regard to the university. Fourthly, after the end of the lecture series, in the subsequent semester, and over a single period of time, data was collected by means of lecturer evaluation forms. Given that the students were not actively encouraged to make their university teacher evaluations, the study was repeated three times. This is associated with the generally low rate of returned forms (approx. 31 per cent). Therefore, in order to analyse the forms of the 120 students in each group, the data was collected over three lecture series. This extended the time of data collection to three semesters over a period of two years. This time was used to operationalise the set variable, i.e., ‘the ethic-related message in the lecture’, primarily by defining the conditions for holding the lecture, the students’ independent work, the conditions for using office hours, the conditions for taking the exam, the examination procedures, the method used for marking exam papers, the conditions for retaking exams, the style of the discussions held with the students, and the general atmosphere of the lecture. Each of these parameters was defined in three different ways: typical of EoJ, typical of EoC, and typical of EoCR. For example, in the EoJ group, sharing examination topics with the students or offering them office hours after a completed lecture series but *before* the exam date were not allowed, even though these were requested by the students. A total of 52 per cent of the students passed on their first attempt. The EoC group received the questions before the exam. The group’s request to hold office hours before the exam but *after* the end of the lecture series was accepted. During office hours, the content that constituted correct answers was discussed in detail. All of the students who used the first possible date for the exam passed on their first attempt. The EoCR group received examination topics similar to the questions but not in the form of questions. Office hours were *not* offered despite the request of the students, but this issue was addressed and the group was provided with a choice: office hours and cancelling the exam topics, or no office hours and keeping the exam topics. The exam was passed on the first attempt by approximately 90 per cent of the students who took it.

After the standard amount of time from the second exam date had passed, in the subsequent semester the students evaluated the teacher who had taught the course. They made their evaluations with the use of standard evaluation forms. The students' evaluation scores were then analysed. The average evaluation scores in the EoJ, EoC and EoCR groups were compared with respect to the categories listed on the forms.

Findings

Each group's average evaluation score with respect to nine criteria for evaluating university teachers was analysed. The analysed form included the following evaluation criteria:

1. The lecturer was always prepared.
2. The lecturer taught the course in a clear and understandable manner.
3. The lecturer used the time of the lecture effectively (the lecturer neither shortened nor prolonged the lecture time and always arrived on time).
4. The course topics included in the syllabus were fully covered.
5. The content of the course and the manner of teaching allowed for the learning outcomes included in the syllabus to be achieved.
6. The lecturer assessed students fairly.
7. The lecturer showed good manners.
8. The lecturer was available to the students during office hours.
9. The course was valuable.

The quality of the subject-matter of these criteria constitutes a separate research area, one that requires thorough critical analysis, from several perspectives. Nevertheless, this is the tool that the students had at their disposal to evaluate the quality of the taught course. In the described natural experiment, we verified whether the average evaluation scores given to the teachers by the students were dependant upon the lecture group that the students belonged to from the perspective of the ethic-related messages. What follows is a presentation of the results of the one-way analyses of variance for the pairs of variables (lecture groups), the statistical description and the homogeneity of variance tests. It should be noted that all of the Levene's tests were statistically insignificant, which means that the variances were homogeneous and ANOVA was an appropriate test in these cases.

Ethic of justice vs. ethic of care and university teacher evaluation scores

One can see at first glance that the mean values of both groups are distinctly different and have similar standard deviations that are not very high, which authenticates the calculated mean values.

Table 1. Statistical description of the evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoC groups

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	Minimum	Maximum
EoJ	9	3.4667	.53852	.17951	2.70	4.20
EoC	9	4.4667	.44721	.14907	3.60	5.00
Total	18	3.9667	.70377	.16588	2.70	5.00

Source: own research.

Table 2. Homogeneity of variance test of the evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoC groups

		Levene's test	df1	df2	Significance
Score	based on the mean	.512	1	16	.484

Source: own research.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA: evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoC groups

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
EoJ	4.500	1	4.500	18.367	.05
EoC	3.920	16	.245		
Total	8.420	17			

Source: own research.

This observation confirms statistical significance of the ANOVA results. According to the problematisation of this study, the difference should be attributed to the lecture ethic communicated to students. The ethic of justice, which requires the lecturer and students to obey rules without invoking exceptions or special circumstances, resulted in a distinctly lower teacher evaluation score than the ethic of care. With the latter ethic, almost everything that suits students' preferences is allowed. The students in this study received messages communicating full acceptance and understanding of their expectations and ideas concerning the exam. In

this instance, it was possible to cancel every rule. In the first group, the grade point average was satisfactory plus, and in the other group good plus. This difference emerged in a situation in which the experimenter reduced any differences in the mode of teaching of the course in order to expose only the differences resulting from the ethics of justice and care. As mentioned above, the exam grades were significantly worse in the EoJ group, as compared with the EoC group. Moreover, the degree of the students' comfort was seemingly higher in the EoC group than in the EoJ group.

Ethic of care vs. ethic of care and responsibility and university teacher evaluation scores

The data from the statistical description shows a smaller (than in the previous case) difference between the average evaluation scores given by the students from the ethic of care group and the ethic of care and responsibility group. Standard deviations were, however, similar. This observation is confirmed by the ANOVA results shown in Table 6, which indicate that the differences between these mean values were not accidental, stemming instead from the applied procedures; they were statistically significant. The analytical trope assumed herein

Table 4. Statistical description of the evaluation scores from the EoC and EoCR groups

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	Minimum	Maximum
EoC	9	4.4667	.44721	.14907	3.60	5.00
EoCR	9	3.9000	.36056	.12019	3.40	4.40
Total	18	4.1833	.49020	.11554	3.40	5.00

Source: own research.

Table 5. Homogeneity of variance test of the evaluation scores from the EoC and EoCR groups

		Levene's test	df1	df2	Significance
Score	based on the mean	.317	1	16	.581

Source: own research.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA: evaluation scores from the EoC and EoCR groups

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Between groups	1.445	1	1.445	8.758	0.05
Within groups	2.640	16	.165		
Total	4.085	17			

Source: own research.

suggest that the lower mean value of the evaluation scores given by the students from the ethic of care and responsibility group – as compared with the ethic of care group – stems from the teaching mode and the expectations about the exam communicated by the experimenter to the students. The experimenter attempted to balance his/her trust in the students with trust in himself/herself, and his/her concern for respecting their rights with concern for respecting his/her own rights. By giving the students choice and then respecting their decision, the experimenter made them face the consequences of their decisions. The students, in turn, experienced this in the form of disillusionment or disappointment. As shown, shifting the care towards a more symmetric relationship – inherent in the EoCR ethic – modified (lowered) the students' evaluation by over half a score, even though the style of the instructor's teaching was similar in both groups.

Ethic of justice vs. ethic of care and responsibility and university teacher evaluation scores

Table 7 shows that the average evaluation scores from both groups were different but this difference was below half a score. The standard deviations authenticate these means as realistic. The results of the one-way ANOVA were not statistically significant, which means that they may stem from a measurement error rather than from the experimental procedures. Therefore, it can be said that the means do not differ. One must, however, be particularly careful in this case. The plan of the entire study assumed, before the commencement of the study, that the null hypotheses could be rejected if alpha was greater than or equal to 95 per cent. In the present case, as shown in Table 9, alpha was 94 per cent. The statistical decision in such cases is obvious – the null hypothesis is not rejected. Due to the fact that this result was close to the limit, however, this issue needs to be double-checked. If one sticks to the formal

Table 7. Statistical description of the evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoCR groups

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	Minimum	Maximum
EoJ	9	3.4667	.53852	.17951	2.70	4.20
EoCR	9	3.9000	.36056	.12019	3.40	4.40
Total	18	3.6833	.49735	.11723	2.70	4.40

Source: own research.

Table 8. Homogeneity of variance test of the evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoCR groups

	Levene's test	df1	df2	Significance
Score based on the mean	1.776	1	16	.201

Source: own research.

Table 9. One-way ANOVA: evaluation scores from the EoJ and EoCR groups

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Between groups	.845	1	.845	4.024	.062
Within groups	3.360	16	.210		
Total	4.205	17			

Source: own research.

Results, both groups should be treated as evaluating the university teacher in a similar way – more negatively than the ethic of care group. Perhaps the common denominator of these ethics (different, after all) of delivering the lectures is a relative symmetry of the rights of both parties in the teaching process. This is a particularly relevant statement with respect to the asymmetric relationship in the ethic of care group. In the case of the EoCR group, the students had more obligations and less certainty as regards their privileged position, while they simultaneously felt that their rights were at the centre of the teacher's attention and that they could negotiate with the teacher on the shape of the reality of delivering the lectures and taking the exams. The latter privileges were not enjoyed by the students of the EoJ group, whose relationship with the university teacher was also symmetric. And it seems that the common feature of both ethics – the students'

obligations – overrode the openness towards them, since both ethics lowered the evaluation scores of the teaching activities of the experimenter in the study.

Conclusion

Out of the three ethics of delivering lectures, the ethic of care and responsibility seems to be the most functional and egalitarian one. The least functional and most one-sided one is the ethic of care. By contrast, the most demanding and formalised one is the ethic of justice. In the described experiment, the experimenter got the lowest evaluation scores when behaving fairly and balancing care with responsibility, and the highest scores when one-sidedly caring for the students' well-being. One can say that this is to a certain extent logical in that good is rewarded with good. This is not, however, a logic of a proper concern for the quality of education. A recommendation stemming from this study would perhaps be to stress the need for improving the ethic of care and responsibility and associating it with the relevant criteria for student evaluations of teachers.

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