# Students as Mystery Shoppers
## Lowering Knowledge Sharing Barriers in Higher Education

**M. O. Tukiainen**
University Teacher
Language Centre, Tampere University of Technology
Tampere, Finland
E-mail: mika.tukiainen@tut.fi

Conference Key Areas: Engineering Education Research, Students Cooperation, Curriculum Development

Keywords: student engagement, mystery shopping, knowledge management

## INTRODUCTION

The quality and also cost of higher education is under constant scrutiny yet we seem to lack up-to-date qualitative research on student experience of teaching and learning. This paper is an attempt to offer a novel perspective to analysing student experience for their voice to be heard more forcefully in the on-going debate and development work. This novel perspective entails combining both knowledge management and teaching and learning in higher education (i.e. pedagogy) in its approach to student engagement in higher education. Knowledge management offers a framework for attempting to understand the interaction between students and their teachers especially through the concept of knowledge sharing.

The target for this paper is to present student solutions to lowering the knowledge sharing barriers. These solutions, then, may serve in discussing how both knowledge management and pedagogical approaches could lower such barriers even further. Additionally, combining different conceptual models may result in more innovative ways of developing teaching and learning practices.

More precisely, the focus in this study is on the interaction between teachers and students as perceived by the students. The empirical data is collected using Mystery Shopping (MS) method, thus the research approach is qualitative. There are elements of participant observation, too, the data collection setting being thus rather natural although also unilateral as the teacher perspective is entirely lacking. The teachers being observed were not aware of this project.

MS studies are mainly used in service industries for quality enhancement and staff development purposes [1,2]. In those settings either real customers, or individuals posing as such, observe real service situations genuinely participating in them and then report their experiences in exchange for compensation. In the context of teaching and learning in higher education this method has not been reported to have been used although e.g. Jacob et al. [2] report increased usage of MS in the public sector, too.

Tampere University of Technology carried out a MS study in the spring of 2015 in cooperation with the student union. This was done in order to survey how the students experience the university's and other campus stakeholder (e.g. catering) services.

This paper presents next some theoretical background. Then the current study is first described, followed by results and conclusions.

# 1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

## 1.1 Starting point

The theoretical point of departure for this study is that learning takes place in interaction which can be perceived as multichannel dialogue taking place regardless of time and place. To support, or scaffold, learning another person is warranted as the human mind develops by participating in social practises [3–5]. In this study, all the processes related to teaching in higher education represent such social practises. Wenger and Wenger et al. [6,7] present that learning and mental growth take place in communities of practise by not only belonging to the community but also actively and purposefully participating in its practises. I perceive the academic community as such a multi-layered social structure that promotes knowledge sharing. The student participants who generated the data form a community of practice whose experience of knowledge sharing practices may have an impact on the operations of another community of practice, that of teachers'. This impact promotes knowledge sharing and the development of a shared community of practice.

Learning in communities of practice then requires awareness of the ways other stakeholders perceive their experiences. This awareness can be reached by engaging in negotiations of meaning and collaborative knowledge building [8–11].

## 1.2 Knowledge Management

Knowledge management (KM) offers a fresh perspective for studying teaching and learning in higher education. This perspective complements those pedagogical approaches in which student engagement is emphasised. It is surprising how little concepts from within knowledge management have been used as theoretical lenses in this context although it would seem to be a well-founded approach in a community where the task is first to create knowledge through research and then share this knowledge through the means of instruction and other impact on the society. Laihonen et al [12] define KM as transferring knowledge and information where they will provide added value. This, in a nutshell, seems to be the task the society has given to institutions of higher learning. KM covers all the research and instruction related tasks of universities. From the KM point of view, students are considered as customers or a stakeholder group whose engagement and participation in developing the service, ie. teaching, further is essential. However, it is critical to understand that in Finland the students do not pay for their education as opposed to many other countries and thus the word customer is not used in its commercial sense. Learning as a part of human growth and maturation cannot be reduced to business transaction, or mere shopping, as many may fear in neoliberalism discussions, some of them recently reviewed by Budd [13]. Such fears are, nevertheless, in cases justified [14].

## 1.3 Students as Consumers in Higher Education

Seeing students as consumers or customers has been criticised in literature. Some consider it with suspicion, and even fear, as corrosive to academic learnedness and values. However, students in higher education cannot be considered mere consumers

as learning is not just receiving but rather active involvement and processing of knowledge. Customer perspective, either, does not accurately describe this as higher education does not necessarily provide immediate benefits and its entire value cannot be seen until later in the future[13].

Nevertheless, from the perspective of student engagement [15–17] students are an established stakeholder group and their experiences of current knowledge practises, i.e. processes related to teaching and learning, provide valuable insights to develop these processes further. Thus the concept of customer is here intended to be associated with student engagement in university studies as by doing less things that do not add real value one will have more time to develop the processes that really do add value. In other words, time spent, e.g., on boring routines that do not, after careful consideration also from the customer perspective, actually contribute to anyone's learning, could be spent planning, and teaching, something ideally more useful.

### 1.4 Knowledge Sharing Barriers

In KM literature knowledge sharing and especially knowledge sharing barriers have barriers been increasingly discussed [18–21]. Riege [22] carried out a comprehensive review on research on knowledge sharing barriers. He categorised the most typical on them into individual / personal, organisational and technological barriers. As this paper reports student experiences of teaching and learning the focus is on potential individual barriers.

Individual knowledge sharing barriers in the context of learning and teaching can also be conceptualised as destructive frictions [23] and their removal result in constructive alignment [24–26]. This means that the set learning goals, selected teaching and learning methods and the measuring of learning are all aligned which ideally results in enhanced quality of learning.

Riege [22] listed 17 potential individual knowledge sharing barriers and here the following barriers emerged as relevant categories for this study:

1. “general lack of time to share knowledge;
2. low awareness and realisation of the value and benefit of possessed knowledge to others;
3. dominance in sharing explicit over tacit knowledge such as know-how an experience that requires hands-on learning, observation, dialogue and interactive problem solving;
4. insufficient capture, evaluation, feedback, communication, and tolerance of past mistakes that would enhance individual and organisational learning effects;
5. differences in experience levels;
6. lack of contact time and interaction between knowledge sources and recipients;
7. poor verbal/ written communication and interpersonal skills;
8. differences in educational levels” [7, p. 23, numbering not as in source]

## 2 THE CURRENT STUDY

### 2.1 Background

Tampere University of Technology, in cooperation with its Student Union wanted to supplement more quantitative data on student experience on campus. After each course, to receive the course grade, every student must fill in a feedback questionnaire using centrally managed electronic system. The identity of the respondents is not, revealed to the teachers but the responses are reported only on a group level. It was

felt that this data is too much focused on numerical or sometimes verbal assessment of things having already happened in the past and as remembered at the very moment of responding to the questions. There was no data on more long-term experience and that would also focus on the student every-day campus life. This resulted in engaging 45 students, representing all faculties, to record their learning experiences informally in semi-structured diary format. This took place over six weeks in the spring of 2015. Most of the staff was not aware of this mystery shopping project until the typed and lightly edited diaries were made public within the university community in June 2015.

In this paper I will focus only on reporting the solutions to individual knowledge sharing barriers. These arose from one of the four predetermined diary topics, namely teaching and teaching staff, including pedagogical competence and teaching culture, instruction and guidance and course arrangements. The samples are freely translated from Finnish and there is no other data available on the background of the respondents but their faculty as initially this material was not collected for research purposes.

### 2.2 Analysis

The research approach represents qualitative content analysis in which knowledge-sharing barriers were first recognised from the qualitative mystery shopper data. Next those instances where the students offered their solution to lowering that barrier were selected for further analysis. Here the focus is on references in learning and teaching contexts that seemed to constitute an individual knowledge sharing barrier. These references were then further categorised as Riege's ([22] individual knowledge sharing barriers presented above.

## 3 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

In reporting the results Riege's [22] barriers are used as section subheadings as they adequately describe the barrier in question. The first is merged with another barrier related to lack of time.

### 3.1 General lack of time to share knowledge / lack of contact time and interaction between knowledge sources and recipients

Students suggested that more time should be allocated to asking questions and discussing during lectures. Also some suggested that it should be easier to reach teachers outside lectures and more time should be made available for supervision of projects and other larger assignments.

> *The best lectures engage us and there is sufficient time for questions.*

### 3.2 Low awareness and realisation of the value and benefit of possessed knowledge to others

It seems that often students are not told, or it is not done well and/ or often enough, about the relevance of the subject being taught. They would like to learn how the matter at hand is related to the bigger picture and how it could be applied outside of their studies.

> *In the beginning of the course we are going too slow and then during the last two weeks there is this rush during which things studied are connected to a larger entity. This is naturally important but causes stress coming only just before the exam.*

### 3.3 Dominance in sharing explicit over tacit knowledge such as know-how and experience that requires hands-on learning, observation, dialogue and interactive problem solving

There were suggestions that instead of lecturing merely the facts it would be nice to hear more background information and (relevant) stories. So instead of covering mostly material that could have been easily read elsewhere there should be some added value in the lectures. Interestingly, though, there were also some who felt that the lectures should cover nothing but the very material later assessed in exam AND that exams should only be based on material covered during the lectures.

Guest lecturers evoked much praise and so did excursions and other activities that enhanced their understanding of how the knowledge being shared can be applied.

> *Guest lecturers add something good to the lectures if they stick to the topic and avoid marketing their businesses. It is also good if good examples are being told. It is also interesting when the lecturers explain how the learnt material can be used at work, this really motivates to learn.*

### 3.4 Insufficient capture, evaluation, feedback, communication, and tolerance of past mistakes that would enhance individual and organisational learning effects

Generally speaking, the respondents felt that they did not receive other feedback but their grade and throughout the report there were suggestions for different kinds of feedback. One architectural student pointed out that is should not always be about giving feedback on something that is ready but also space should be allowed for presenting problems for collective solving.

> *The weekly tutorials for practical course assignments are sometimes too much for show. We do not feel there is space for discussion but only for presenting unique and fantastic ideas. Tutorial is just as useful for presenting a problem.*

The obligatory electronic feedback was sometimes felt to be collected too late. Also there should be more questions tailored to specific courses instead the generic ones, this would motivate the students more. They hope to learn what has been done with the feedback not only in the form of teacher response through the system (which is possible and actually expected by the university) but also by the teachers sharing the feedback from previous implementations and telling what has been done based on that feedback.

There were suggestions for systematically collecting feedback also during the courses so that some perhaps necessary changes could be implemented immediately. This might result from a more open and dialogic general atmosphere in class which was also welcomed.

### 3.5 Differences in experience and educational levels

There was a comment on highlighting the importance of recruiting a new professor to a chair that has been vacant for several years, indirectly suggesting that instruction delivered by a teacher ranking lower is not quite as professional.

> *The department has been lacking a professor in XXX for several years and although YY (name withheld) has been doing a splendid job teaching it, hiring a professor is important.*

Also sometimes the lecturer is not aware of the prerequisites of the course communicated to the students and may expect them all be on equal background information level when they are not.

> *Sometimes the lecturer seems to consider all the students as majoring on the topic and then us who take it as a minor* do not always know what he is talking about.

### 3.6 Poor verbal/ written communication and interpersonal skills

Improving communication and interpersonal skills is an easy solution to many knowledge sharing barriers. Deficiencies in both were mentioned numerous times without offering any direct solutions. Indirectly, then, it could perhaps be deduced that from the student perspective improvement in both skills will result in lowering a knowledge sharing barrier. Here I consider pedagogical skills to be covered under interpersonal and communication skills, too.

> *Inspiring and pedagogically extremely proficient teachers in my major would result in working harder and more effective learning.*

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Higher level student engagement has been associated with increased motivation and improved learning [15–17]. Students as mystery shoppers supplement other student perspectives and add a genuine student voice on developing teaching and learning in higher education. In the context of this paper the most striking finding is perhaps the students' craving for feedback and interaction which seem to be lacking in their experience. Lack of feedback and interaction is certainly an individual knowledge sharing barrier and receiving more feedback, and allowing more time for interaction, would easily lower this barrier. Interaction here does not, however, mean each individual being separately addressed but rather using such pedagogical solutions that require more of the students than mere passive attendance. Meaningful learning requires both intellectual and emotional engagement. Student engagement could also be increased by increasingly associating theories and working life applications.

Based on the mystery shopper report Riege's [22] individual knowledge sharing barriers presented above do seem valid in the context of learning and teaching in higher education. Lowering these barriers does not necessarily require dramatic changes but mostly more careful planning and execution of teaching. Seeing it as a dialogue and then facilitating it, and trying to explain the big picture, is a great start for genuine knowledge sharing.

## REFERENCES

[1] Douglas, J. (2015), Mystery shoppers: an evaluation of their use in monitoring performance, *The TQM Journal*, 27, pp. 705–15.

[2] Jacob, S., Schiffino, N. and Biard, B. (2016), The mystery shopper: a tool to measure public service delivery? *International Review of Administrative Sciences.*

[3] Bruner, J.S. (1996), The culture of education, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.).

[4] Alanen, R. (2002), Lev Vygotski - kieli ja ajattelu ihmisen kehityksessä. In: Dufva

H, and Lähteenmäki M, editors. Kielentutkimuksen Klassikoita, Soveltavan kielentutkimuksen keskus, Jyväskylä.

[5] Vygotsky, L. (1978), Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, Harvard University Press, Camridge, Ma.

[6] Wenger, E. (1998), Communities of practice : learning, meaning, and identity, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[7] Wenger, E., McDermott, R.A. and Snyder, W. (2002), Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge, Harvard Business Press.

[8] Paavola, S., Lipponen, L. and Hakkarainen, K. (2004), Models of innovative knowledge communities and three metaphors of learning, *Review of Educational Research*, 74, pp. 557–76.

[9] Paavola, S. and Hakkarainen, K. (2005), The knowledge creation metaphor–An emergent epistemological approach to learning, *Science & Education*, 14, pp. 535–57.

[10] Hakkarainen, K.P., Palonen, T., Paavola, S. and Lehtinen, E. (2004), Communities of networked expertise: Professional and educational perspectives, Elsevier Science.

[11] Scardamalia, M. and Bereiter, C. (1987), Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming in written composition, *Advances in Applied Psycholinguistics*, 2, pp. 142–75.

[12] Laihonen, H., Hannula, M., Helander, N., Ilvonen, I., Jussila, J., Kukko, M. et al. (2013), Tietojohtaminen, Tampereen teknillinen yliopisto - Tiedonhallinnan ja logistiikan laitos, Tampere.

[13] Budd, R. (2016), Undergraduate orientations towards higher education in Germany and England: problematizing the notion of `student as customer', *Higher Education*, pp. 1–15.

[14] Lomas, L. (2007), Are Students Customers? Perceptions of Academic Staff, *Quality in Higher Education*, 13, pp. 31–44.

[15] Mäkinen, M., Korhonen, V., Annala, J., Kalli, P., Svärd, P. and Värri, V.-M. (2011), Korkeajännityksiä-Kohti osallisuutta luovaa korkeakoulutusta, Tampere University Press.

[16] Mäkinen, M. (2012), Osallistava korkeakoulutus, Tampere University Press, Tampere.

[17] van Rossum, E.J. and Hamer, R. (2010), The Meaning of Learning and Knowing, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

[18] van den Hooff, B. and Huysman, M. (2009), Managing knowledge sharing: Emergent and engineering approaches, *Information & Management*, 46, pp. 1–8.

[19] Massingham, P. (2014), An evaluation of knowledge management tools: Part 1 – managing knowledge resources, *J of Knowledge Management*, 18, pp. 1075–100.

[20] Massingham, P. (2014), An evaluation of knowledge management tools: Part 2 – managing knowledge flows and enablers, *J of Knowledge Management*, 18, pp. 1101–26.

[21] Holdt Christensen, P. (2007), Knowledge sharing: moving away from the obsession with best practices, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 11, pp. 36–47.

[22] Riege, A. (2005), Three-dozen knowledge-sharing barriers managers must consider, *J of Knowledge Management*, 9, pp. 18–35.

[23] Vermunt, J.D. and Verloop, N. (1999), Congruence and friction between learning and teaching, *Learning and Instruction*, 9, pp. 257–80.

[24] Biggs, J. (1996), Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment, *Higher Education*, 32, pp. 347–64.

[25] Biggs, J. (1999), What the Student Does: teaching for enhanced learnin, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18, pp. 57–75.

[26] Biggs, J. (2003), Aligning teaching and assessing to course objectives, *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: New Trends and Innovations*, 2, pp. 13–7.