

# Academic Customer Service Shouldn't be a Dirty Word

EARLIER THIS year, we kicked off the semester with a faculty development workshop on academic customer service. Academic customer service is a hot and contentious topic on many college campuses, with faculty often reeling at the suggestion that students are customers (and therefore “always right”) or that education is a product intended for consumption. The feedback from our session in August was prickly and some of the comments demonstrated that we were in worse shape than I imagined.

Contrary to what some in higher education believe, attending to students' needs does not erode the process of higher learning; it enhances it. The collaboration of educator and student, who each bring varied insights and experience to the educational process, is unique to the learning environment. But within the student/teacher dynamic is the opportunity for faculty to wield significant influence in students' perception that they are cared for by an institution that is responsive to their needs. Consider the customer service objectives outlined by the University of Texas at El Paso, which state:

In the classroom, on campus, and in the community, as UTEP representatives, we will:

- Interact with others respectfully and courteously.
- Listen carefully in an effort to understand others' points of view.
- Be knowledgeable problem solvers.
- Take responsibility for UTEP's continuous improvement.

These objectives do not suggest that students are “always right,” that their education is a commodity, or that faculty members are dedicated to pleasing them (and their parents). Instead, all members of the community are committed to ensuring that higher learning is a collaborative endeavor built on a foundation of respect, trust, and shared commitment to the values of education. Profound learning outcomes

can emerge from such a framework.

While much of students' “customer service” experience takes place in areas outside of the classroom, faculty can provide good academic service through a variety of mechanisms, most of which are simple and fairly intuitive. First, it's important to clearly outline the objectives of the course in a manner that students understand. Spending time at the beginning of the course explaining and outlining the context of the objectives provides a framework for the semester's activities, contributes to students' understanding of how the course material supports the learning objectives, and reinforces how the course itself relates to their field of study. Further, a clear explanation helps students understand what they need to do in order to have a successful academic experience.

Throughout the semester, providing timely answers to students' questions is an act of customer service. It's certainly a challenge in a 24/7 digital environment to keep up with the demands for communication. However, little makes a student feel less valued than a significant delay in a response to questions. One way to manage the communication demands is to post clear policies on the syllabus, including a stand-alone FAQ page (I teach an online class with enrollment of up to 125, and without the FAQs, I'd be answering email all day, every day). Helping students find the information they need on their own is important, but if students have questions about the course material, it should be a priority to answer it as quickly as we can, even if we're directing the student back to a course resource.

Regular feedback is another important academic customer service point. I am always surprised to hear from faculty who state that they can't submit midterm grades because none of their assignments is due yet. For a variety of reasons, six weeks of instruction without the benefit of feedback

is problematic. Even if course content and structure do not lend themselves to regularly graded assignments, it's important for students to know whether or not they are successfully meeting course objectives. Regular feedback not only contributes to improved learning, it also mitigates any potential misunderstandings regarding student performance that could emerge later in the semester.

A commitment to good customer service is not antithetical to the values of higher education. We can provide good customer service without relegating ourselves to the ranks of knowledge brokers. Employing simple, intuitive support strategies in the classroom will enhance students' learning and overall college experience.

*Christine M. Nowik; Academic Customer Service Shouldn't be a Dirty Word; Faculty Focus; December 3, 2012; [ <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/academic-customer-service-shouldnt-be-a-dirty-word/> ]; December 18, 2012.*

University Opens - Jan 2  
Classes Begin - Jan 7  
Registration & Drop/Add ends - Jan 11  
Martin L King Holiday - Jan 21  
Faculty Meeting - Jan 23  
Open House - Feb 2

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First Monday of the Month

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October 1	April 1
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# Interactive Lectures?

CLASSROOM LECTURES remain the most common and probably the most efficient way for teachers to provide information to students. However, the criticisms of lectures as “one-sided” may be justified, especially as we have grown accustomed to larger classes and students who may not be prepared to learn. The online or online hybrid options thus are tempting for students and professors. The idea that all we are doing is passing on information lends credence to the notion that students might as well pick up the material online through slides, videos, etc. However, I think an effective lecture can do much more than merely pass on information. Being in the same place at the same time allows for interactivity that can greatly stimulate learning, but how can we ensure that lectures are interactive?

I always ask questions as I lecture to both prod students along and see if they are following the train of thought. Generally, a few good students become comfortable answering out loud and everyone else is silent. I think this interaction is great for those students, but it would be better to get more students involved. Some educators recommend the instructor calling on any student at random, but I have never been comfortable with the pressure that puts on students. So, I turned to technology, thanks to the investment of the College of Business and Public Affairs in IpadS for faculty.

A colleague pointed me to literature from



the field of Physics on interactive teaching using classroom response systems (clickers). I then found an Ipad app called Socrative clicker. It lets me post multiple choice or open-ended questions as well as pre-made quizzes for individuals or groups. Students login to a webpage with their smart phone or laptop and answer the questions in real time. The beauty of it is that all students can participate anonymously in class. No more pressure to speak up or heavy silence after I ask a question. Now I poll the class and within seconds have results.

I used Socrative in one section of Econ 201 this semester and did not use it in the other. In the Socrative section, I asked students to bring a smart phone or laptop to class every day. Contrary to my initial concerns that open laptops would be a distraction, I found that the students in this class were generally more engaged than those in the pure lecture (control) section. The simple action of answering a question every few minutes helped keep them on task, as well as providing me with valuable feedback about what they understood or did not and, with open-ended questions, how they were thinking about the material. I also used a wonderful feature called “exit ticket,” which asks students at the end of class how well they understood the material, what they learned, and the answer to a question I pose at the end of the lecture. The feedback from

the daily exit ticket was very valuable to me.

To test if this technique was effective, I carefully tracked the performance in both sections and made sure that all other class materials (lectures, slides, assignments, etc.) were the same. I gave each class a pretest of 19 questions and then embedded those same questions in the final exam. The control class was slightly stronger initially with an average score of 11.4 on the pretest versus 10.4 for the Socrative section. The control class had higher average scores on the first two tests of the semester as well. However, on the final exam, the Socrative class scored higher and on the posttest the Socrative class averaged 13.3 versus 12.2 for the control group. Regression analysis on the posttest scores indicates that, controlling for student characteristics, being in the Socrative group led to a posttest score that was 2.2 to 2.6 points higher than the control group. That is an average of 12-14% better score by the Socrative students. These results are very strong, especially given the relatively small sample.

Intuitively, this experiment with classroom clickers shows that when students are more engaged in the lecture they learn more. I enjoyed using Socrative in class and given the benefits shown in this assessment I plan to continue with it in the spring semester and hopefully improve further.

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## Student Clicker - Socrative By Socrative

*This app is designed for both iPhone and iPad.*

*Free*

*Category: Education*

*Updated: Dec 12, 2012*

*Version: 1.7; Size: 5.3 MB*

*Seller: Socrative, Inc.*

*© 2011, Socrative, Inc.*

### Description

Socrative brings smart clickers, student response and ease of use to a whole new level. Be engaged for the entire class with educational exercises and games. See all your classmates' ideas in real time and interact with the responses. Provide your

instructor feedback on the lessons and how well you understand the material. Ask your own poll questions for the entire class or build a premade activity for your whole class. Have Fun!

WORKS ON ANY DEVICE WITH A WEB BROWSER: Tablets, Smartphones & laptops (expect some types of blackberries)

### MOST POPULAR ACTIVITIES:

- Short Answer Questions
- Space Race
- Exit Tickets
- Quick Quiz
- Multiple Choice

### WHAT STUDENTS & TEACHERS ARE SAYING

“I wish we could use Socrative apps in all my classes.” - Boston High School Junior

“Once I saw the poll results that the rest of the class didn't understand the material, I felt

more comfortable asking questions.” - MIT Graduate Student

“Easiest and most user friendly site I have used, and it gives me so much feedback in an instant! The kids are very motivated. I am such a believer.” - 6th grade Math and ELA Teacher

“It was a blast. Socrative immediately engaged all the students in the class.” - Univ. Michigan Professor

“It saves me 80 minutes per week in grading.” - Boston High School Math Teacher

### ABOUT US

We're a team of educators, entrepreneurs, and engineers passionate about improving education. We know you are too, and thank you for joining us. We believe in super simple tech tools to enhance classroom engagement, interaction, learning, and fun.