"MY BEST COURSE…THANKS TO THE INSTRUCTOR!"

FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS TO STUDENTS' PERCEIVED VALUE OF COURSES*

Young people's academic motivation is a matter of constant concern in the college and university communities. Instructors are witnessing a lack of engagement in classroom, delays in graduating, changes in direction, dropping out, and so on. In order to better understand the dynamics of postsecondary-student motivation, Marie-France Noël, co-author of this article, conducted a study (Noël 2013) on the value students place on their studies, courses, and curriculum,[1] as well as the influence social relationships have on their perceptions of that value. In the light of this research, our article will deal specifically with faculty contributions to the subjective value of courses, shedding light on the forms such contributions can take.

A PROMISING CONCEPT: SUBJECTIVE VALUE

The study in question is based on the "expectancy-value" motivational model defined by Eccles (2007), in which two main factors are associated with student choices and behaviour, i.e., "expectations of success" and "subjective task value". The latter is associated with postsecondary students' degree of engagement, which is itself related to academic success (Neuville 2004). This relationship would indicate that students will be more engaged with respect to something they value.

The focal point of our research—the subjective value of courses—involves student opinions on four factors: course **interest, utility value, attainment value**, and **cost**. Table 1, which provides a few aspects of the definition for each factor, was inspired by the work of Eccles et al. (Eccles 2005; Wigfield and Eccles 2000) and certain findings in Noël's dissertation (2013). As will be seen later, faculty have an impact on student perceptions of course interest and utility, in particular.

METHOD

The above-mentioned dissertation, which provided the foundation for this article, is based on a qualitative analysis of 185 interviews conducted with 36 respondents, each of whom had participated in an average of five interviews as part of a study by Bourdon, Charbonneau, and al. (Bourdon et al. 2007).[2] Those interviews involved young people under age 24 (at the time the study commenced) enrolled for the first time in a Quebec CÉGEP associated with the study. Some participants were from the pre-university humanities program ("Individuals" specialization); others were enrolled in either the CÉGEP de Sherbrooke's accounting and management program or the CÉGEP du Vieux-Montréal's electrical engineering technology program. The technical programs were chosen by the partner institutions involved because student retention seemed lower in those fields (Bourdon et al. 2007). Data collection was staggered over five years, and continued regardless of whether participants changed majors, interrupted their studies, or otherwise deviated from their original academic path. Each interview focused primarily on studies, academic choices, and relationships with teachers. In a number of cases, respondents were also asked to identify the best and worse courses they had taken over the session preceding the interview.

FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS TO STUDENTS' SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF COURSES

Many statements made by the respondents in justifying what they qualified as their "best" and "worst" courses referred directly to their instructors. Largely associated with one or the other of the above four factors, these remarks had three main themes: the instructor's personality, subject-matter mastery, and teaching skills. Educators wishing to ensure their courses are highly valued by students could thus work on any of these aspects.

* The authors would like to thank the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir and du Sport and the Fonds de recherche Société et culture for their financial support of the survey, entitled *Famille, réseaux et persévérance au collégial*, data from which were analyzed as part of Marie-France Noël's dissertation (*Choix scolaires, perception de la valeur des études et relations sociales de jeunes québécois au postsecondaire: une analyse qualitative longitudinale* (2013)).

[1] This doctoral research was carried out under the supervision of Sylvain Bourdon and Anne Brault-Labbé, both of whom teach at the Université de Sherbrooke and co-authored this article.

[2] As previously mentioned, this research was funded by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport and the Fonds de recherche Société et culture, as part of the student retention and success research program (Programme de recherche sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires).

MARIE-FRANCE NOËL
Education Professional
Université de Sherbrooke

SYLVAIN BOURDON
Full Professor
Université de Sherbrooke

ANNE BRAULT-LABBÉ
Associate Professor
Université de Sherbrooke

TABLE 1 **FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF COURSES**

FACTOR	DEFINITION
INTEREST	Interest is the enjoyment associated with participation in an activity; it is experienced in the present. It may, for example, be felt in relation to the course content, class, or general atmosphere.
UTILITY VALUE	Students view a course as useful when they feel it reflects their own goals and are able to integrate what they have learned, whether in the future (in a workplace context) or the present (e.g., in their personal lives, during a practicum, or at an existing job). The perception of utility value can occasionally be hypothetical in nature: young people think a course will be useful in their career, but cannot be completely sure. In other words, the perception of this quality may be based on an "act of faith": students assume content is being taught because it will eventually prove useful (thanks to their bond of trust with the curriculum or institution concerned).
ATTAINMENT	The perception of the opportunities for attainment provided by a given course is based on the "fit" between that course and students' personal or occupational identity. Some, for example, may value a course because it helps them grow and develop as individuals or become "good people" in general; others may appreciate a course because it is a good "fit" for their chosen career path.
COST	According to Eccles et al. (Eccles 2005; Wigfield and Eccles 2000), cost includes factors that negatively impact students' perceptions of a course: effort, sacrifice, time, and financial or psychological expenditure. The findings discussed by Noël in her dissertation, however, indicate that the time and effort put into a course can actually be "neutral", or even have a positive influence on those perceptions (Noël 2013). This is true especially when other beneficial factors are observed; many young people will value useful courses that are demanding more than useful courses that are too easy; such "bird" courses are also often dimly viewed if they are useless or uninteresting, or do not provide opportunities for attainment.

PERSONALITY

As shown in the example provided by Laurie,[3] faculty members' personal qualities occasionally seem to capture students' interest in a course. Finding one of her instructors truly "fascinating", this student felt that his sense of humour enhanced the value of the course and that his jokes were well incorporated into the course content. She also appreciated the congenial nature of teacher-student interactions. However, some remarks in this regard were less flattering: the qualities of some instructors, or certain aspects of their personality, had a negative influence on students' interest in a course. Jennifer, for example, found her philosophy teacher "boring", which decreased her interest in the course.

SUBJECT-MATTER MASTERY

The instructor's knowledge and skills as related to course content can have an influence on how **useful** students perceive the course to be. By way of illustration, Nadia said one of her teachers not only knew his subject "inside out", but, thanks to his professional experience in the field, was also able to provide "practical examples". In the same spirit, Anna gave her "best course" rating to one for which the teacher was "extremely intelligent" and "knowledgeable".

Young people also like learning in order to develop or validate, build, or confirm their personal or occupational identity (**attainment**). Accordingly, courses tend to be criticized if

[3] All first names in this article are pseudonyms.



they do not help students learn or understand the subject matter because of what students perceive as the instructor's lack of competence: their views of the teacher's knowledge can influence their perception of the course's value.

TEACHING SKILLS

Students may also judge a course based on the instructor's teaching skills. Megan really appreciated the fact that one of her teachers was very "specific and clear". Michelle, however, deplored that fact that one of her instructors did not speak loudly enough, and thought the course was "disjointed" and the material hard to decipher.

There was no consensus on lectures, in particular: some students liked them, others preferred more "active" methods. This was true for Mina, whose "best course" reflected, not only her interest in the subject matter, but also the fact that it was "more dynamic" than the rest, involving more exercises and fewer lectures. This student thus distinguished between her **interest** in the course content and what she felt toward the teaching method used.

Opinions also favoured "dynamic" interaction among students or between the latter and the instructor; this factor seems essential to stimulating **interest** in the classroom. Specific, real-life, and humorous examples help educators capture students' interest, as does emphasizing course **utility value**, since the proper context demonstrates the relevance of the content.

Course workload and the time required to do the work also affect students' perception of course value (the **cost** factor). Here, too, teachers' choices count. The effect of those choices on students, however, is variable: the time and effort expended in taking a course can differ from person to person, and students' perception of these constraints can be neutral, positive, or negative, as shown in Table 1. That said, it should be remembered that "bird" courses will not necessarily be the ones deemed most valuable—in fact, the opposite often occurs. Even though Hugo, for example, spent an enormous amount of time studying for his favourite course, he really loved every minute of it.

FACTORS BEYOND THE INSTRUCTOR'S CONTROL

As seen above, the work done by faculty undeniably affects students' perception of course value. Some young people, however, blame instructors for aspects that are actually beyond their control. Course context and class size can affect the learning context and group dynamic. These factors can also have an effect on the relationship students have with a teacher. In one of Thomas's courses, for example, in addition to the quality of the instructional approach used and interesting subject matter, a small class made for a good climate.

Furthermore, faculty are not completely free to determine the content taught, which is determined by government requirements, framework plans, and the teams attached to each department or curriculum. Students are not necessarily aware of this structure, and sometimes blame their instructors for decisions on content they actually do not make. Mina believed that teachers selected "the material to be covered" in a course; this misconception led her to conclude that the quality of course-content quality, whether "good" or "bad", depended on decisions made only by the instructor, which is not the case.

This being said, while students often closely associate course value with the efforts of faculty, they may also evaluate content separately. Although her teachers seemed interesting, Mina was dubious about the **interest** and **utility value** of their courses, saying she wondered about the worth of what she was learning.

Although the preceding examples confirm that instructors or their way of teaching seem to influence students' perception of course value, the opposite is also true. Getting back to Thomas as our example, this student, who really liked the instructors he had during the year, wondered if this was due to the fact that he had taken more courses in his field of interest.

Specific, real-life, and humorous examples help educators capture students' interest, as does emphasizing course utility value, since the proper context demonstrates the relevance of the content.

As demonstrated above, according to respondents, a "bad" teacher (as they saw it) can negatively impact a course's overall value, even if the subject matter is interesting—and vice-versa. Perceived course value may therefore be associated with the instructor's efforts, the content taught, or both. Sam is a good illustration of this phenomenon: according to him, a course must transmit interesting knowledge and be given by an inspiring teacher; otherwise, its value could be significantly compromised.

OTHER INFLUENCES

Educators can also influence their charges' career choices, by enhancing students' opinion of a given field or program and

encouraging them to continue with their studies, thereby influencing the academic and occupational path they take. And, although not as common, some instructors actually influence students' decisions as to where (i.e., at which institution) they intend to pursue their education.

In other situations, instructors can act as role models. Anna, for example, said it was because of the "intelligent and interesting" teachers she had in high school that she decided to become a French teacher. For her, the development of a professional identity was influenced by these role models. It should be noted that, even if the high-school milieu was concerned here, there is no reason to believe a similar influence cannot be exerted by college or university instructors.

In short, faculty can influence the subjective value of courses in a number of ways. Table 2 breaks down the factors previously examined to provide a summary of the many forms that influence can take, and suggests a few questions to assist educators in their deliberations on the issue.

TABLE 2 — **FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS TO STUDENTS' SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF COURSES** (continued on next page)

FACTOR	POSSIBLE INFLUENCES AND QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED IN ASSESSING ONE'S CONTRIBUTION
INTEREST	**The instructor's vitality, personality, humour, and passion—as well as the classroom atmosphere—all help increase students' interest in a given course.**
	Questions educators might ask:
	• Am I interested in and excited by the subject I teach? • Does that subject seem important with respect to the related curriculum and/or occupations? • How can I convey my enthusiasm to my students, and make it obvious? • Are my courses engaging? • Are the classroom climate and relationship among students, as well as their relationship with me, positive and respectful? • Is there room for humour and enjoyment in my courses? • Are students able to make some decisions based on their personal interests (e.g., choose the topics that will be dealt with in their assignments)?
UTILITY VALUE	**Educators' teaching choices, classroom examples, and dialogue with students have an impact, inter alia, on the extent to which the latter feel the material, program, and diploma are useful.**
	Questions educators might ask:
	• Am I doing enough to show students the relevance of course content? • Do students understand how my courses fit into the curriculum? • Do students understand the relevance of the subject matter with respect to the labour market? • Do I give students specific examples that are related to the profession? • Could I put greater emphasis on these issues via certain activities or assessments?
ATTAINMENT	**As role models, educators also influence young people's image of themselves. The learning taught in their courses helps forge, not only students' identity, but also their general culture.**
	Questions educators might ask:
	• Are my courses likely to influence students' identity development? • Could my courses give my students an opportunity to explore a career path or particular field? • Do my courses help students develop particular qualities and ask questions? • Does my way of teaching give young people a better understanding of themselves and the world? • Am I a good role model for my students? • Do I influence their perceptions of a given occupation or field?



TABLE 2	FACULTY CONTRIBUTIONS TO STUDENTS' SUBJECTIVE VALUE OF COURSES
FACTOR	**POSSIBLE INFLUENCES AND QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED IN ASSESSING ONE'S CONTRIBUTION**
COST	**Teachers choose instructional methods, assign work, determine the course level of difficulty, and decide how and based on what criteria student assessments are conducted. All this influences how they view the time and effort students must invest to take and pass the course.**
	Questions educators might ask:
	• Is the workload appropriate, or is it excessive? • Do my readings, assignments, and exams involve a suitable degree of difficulty? • How do my students react to the level of difficulty or workload involved? • Are my courses sufficiently challenging? • Are the time and effort students must invest to pass my courses appropriate, given the knowledge they have to master?

CONCLUSION

The research on which this article was based (Noël 2013) clearly shows that the instructor's personality, teaching skills, and subject-matter mastery can all affect student perceptions of course value—a fact also mentioned by other authors (in particular, Neuville and Frenay 2012). This will doubtless inspire several academic institutions to continue their efforts to recruit, support, and train faculty, both in an initial and continuing capacity. We hope it will also encourage instructors committed to enhancing their teaching practices to pursue their endeavours.

Some hypotheses students have about curriculum or course value are also founded, especially concerning utility value, on impressions, hearsay, and information from peers or other individuals in their social network. Bolstering, qualifying, or correcting this interpretation could help adjust some expectations, which would be a worthwhile avenue for anyone desiring to mentor students and clear up questions they have about their academic or career path. Having access to pertinent, credible information is likely to affect student perceptions as regards graduate-placement rates, for example, or the workplace realities in a given field.

Explaining how curriculum and course content is organized could also help students understand the related logic and objectives. Therefore, this presupposes that instructors have good knowledge of program content and structure, the objectives involved, and the way curricula are designed and implemented—which can represent a sizeable challenge in a context characterized by frequent staff turnover and the ever-increasing use of temporary hires.

REFERENCES

BOURDON, S. and collab. 2007. *Famille, réseaux et persévérance au collégial. Phase 1.* Research Report. Sherbrooke: Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage.

ECCLES, J. S. 2005. Subjective Task Value and the Eccles et al. Model of Achievement-Related Choices. In *Handbook of Competence and Motivation,* ed. A. J. Elliot and C. S. Dweck. New York: Guilford Press, 105-121.

ECCLES, J. S. 2007. Families, Schools, and Developing Achievement-Related Motivations and Engagement. In *Handbook of Socialization,* ed. J. E. Grusec and P. D. Hastings. New York: Guilford Press, 665-691.

NEUVILLE, S. 2004. *La perception de la valeur des activités d'apprentissage : étude des déterminants et effets.* Ph.D. diss. Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain.

NEUVILLE, S. and M. FRENAY. 2012. La persévérance des étudiants de 1er baccalauréat à la lumière du modèle *expectancy-value.* In *Réussite, échec et abandon dans l'enseignement supérieur,* ed. M. Romainville and C. Michaut. Bruxelles: De Boeck, 157-175.

NOËL, M.-F. 2013. *Choix scolaires, perception de la valeur des études et relations sociales de jeunes québécois au postsecondaire : une analyse qualitative longitudinale.* Ph.D. diss. Sherbrooke: Université de Sherbrooke.

WIGFIELD, A. and J. S. ECCLES. 2000. Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement Motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25, 1 (January): 68-81.

Marie-France NOËL holds a Master's and a Doctorate in Education, and has conducted research on postsecondary (college and university) student motivation. For about ten years, she has been working as an education professional in the Université de Sherbrooke's faculty of education, providing support for research, curriculum coordination, and various research-based curricula.

Marie-France.Noel@usherbrooke.ca

Sylvain BOURDON is a full professor in the Université de Sherbrooke's faculty of education and director of the Centre d'études et de recherches sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (CERTA). His research, which is aimed at shedding light on policies and action for populations at risk, focuses, in particular, on educational pathways and academic persistence, alternative forms of schooling, adult basic education, lifelong learning, and the social and occupational integration of young people.

Sylvain.Bourdon@usherbrooke.ca

Anne BRAULT-LABBÉ is an associate professor in the Université de Sherbrooke's psychology department, and also a clinical psychologist. Over the past ten years, her research has dealt primarily with postsecondary students' motivation and engagement, as well as the professional engagement of high-school teachers. As a clinician, she has been mainly interested in the identity issues and questions that characterize various spheres of life in adolescents and young adults.

Anne.Brault-Labbe@usherbrooke.ca

Both the English- and French-language versions of this article have been published on the AQPC website with the financial support of the Quebec-Canada Entente for Minority Language Education.