Teaching the Concepts of Service Quality Through a Problem-Based Learning Approach: An Assessment of On-Line Reviews

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This article describes a teaching strategy which employs a problem-based learning approach in order for the students to critically assess service quality issues, categorize customer feedback, and develop a survey to assess customer perceptions of service quality. Customer feedback was assessed via on-line customer reviews and categorized through content analysis according to the constructs of the SERVQUAL model. By framing the class project into “real world” examples, students were able to dissect the problems, to identify situational constraints, and ascertain a clear understanding of the desired outcome. The consolidation of online comments for 60 U.S. based restaurants is also reported.

Key words: service quality, problem based learning, online reviews

Introduction

Service quality has been continually recognized as a significant research focus for the hospitality industry (Bojanic and Rosen, 1994; Fink and Ritchie, 1991; Kincaid et al., 2010; Min et al., 2002; Saleh & Ryan, 1991). It has been linked to attraction of new customers, customer loyalty, employee satisfaction and commitment, enhanced corporate image, positive word-of-mouth, reduced costs, and increased business performance (Berry et al., 1989; Sureshchander et al., 2002). Despite the increasing importance of the service sector and of the significance of quality as a competitive factor, service quality concepts are not well developed (Ghobadian et al., 1994). As such, there is considerable debate in the relevant literature as to how best to conceptualize this phenomenon (Akbaba, 2006). Given the lack of a clear consensus on the definition, it becomes difficult to teach this abstract topic to hospitality students.

There is growing concern with the theory that many students do not think critically and do not integrate what they are learning with what they already know (Athanassiou et al., 2003). Some lament that today’s students lack problem-solving and analytical skills, while others complain that new graduates often lack flexibility and adaptability to respond to the socio-technological changes that are taking place in the work place and society (Kivela & Kivela, 2005). In an effort to improve the students’ critical-thinking skills and prepare them to deal with the advanced technological challenges that impact the hospitality industry, this study describes a class project which
provided the students experience assessing service quality through problem-based learning (PBL). The main learning outcomes included interpreting on-line reviews made by customers and a synthesis of the SERVQUAL model.

On-line Reviews

The widespread application of the Internet has lead to a phenomenon known as eWOM, or electronic word of mouth. Stauss (2000) defined eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet.” According to this definition, eWOM can take place in many ways such as Web-based opinion platforms, discussion forums, news groups, etc. (Thurau et al., 2004). Travel sites such as Orbitz, Travelocity, and Expedia have not only made shopping for services easier, they have also given customers more tools to compare and contrast services before purchasing them (Smith, 2004). Most travel sites provide ratings as well as reviews of products and services. Giving the customer the opportunity to go into even more in-depth, blogs and sites reserved for customer opinions and ratings of products and services have been growing in popularity (Cheung & Law, 2009).

An issue of concern to the hospitality industry is that reviews online can be made anonymously and easily by anyone. Online customer reviews provide customers with an easy mechanism to spread their voice without fear of identification (Black and Kelley, 2009). Because of this anonymity, actual customers may be inclined to be more critical of their experiences than they would be in a face to face interaction. An online reviewer usually posts short comments about a service provider lacking important contextual information about their experience (Xie et al., 2011). These effects can be unfair to the companies, as well as confusing for new customers researching services online.

On-line reviews are often mixed with positive and negative messages about a specific service provider (Xie et al., 2011). Although perceived as negative by the customer, constructive reviews can be valuable tools for improving service, addressing and correcting service failures, as well as, enhancing performance internally (Wagner, 2008). Additionally, businesses can utilize positive reviews as a marketing tool to increase sales and boost reputation. By encouraging and rewarding loyal customers to spread their service experiences, hospitality companies can use on-line reviews to their strategic advantage (Black and Kelley, 2009).

The successful provision of a service begins with the ability of management to assess the consumer’s expectations correctly (Saleh & Ryan, 1991). Given the potential impact to the bottom line, hospitality students must be prepared to understand the nature of this feedback and learn to respond to these comments. In order to interpret the service quality of an organization, it becomes necessary for the students to be able to apply and evaluate the available resources which measure this.

Problem-Based Learning

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) was introduced in the late 1960s, as a result of research conducted by Howard Barrows to resolve problems associated with medical education (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). Medical students were having difficulty applying their pre-clinical knowledge to practice situations; as a consequence, the students were unable to correctly diagnose patients’ problems and symptoms. In addition, the abundance of information, the rapid development of new advances, and the changing needs in the medical profession demanded a new approach to effectively prepare students for their future profession (Zwaal & Otting, 2010).

Unlike traditional lecture-based instruction, where information is passively transferred from instructor to student, PBL students are active participants in their own learning, thrust into unknown learning situations where the parameters of the problem may not be well-defined and the task at hand ambiguous (Massa, 2008). PBL challenges students to seek meaningful solutions to real world problems (Duch et al., 2001). Students learn by solving problems
and reflecting on their experiences (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Students engage in inquiry-based questions, design investigations, gather and analyze data, construct explanations and arguments in light of empirical evidence, communicate their findings, and make connections among ideas (Minstrell & van Zee, 2000). Problem-based learning can help students to learn with complexity, to see that there are no straightforward answers to problem scenarios, but that learning and life takes place in contexts, contexts which affect the kinds of solutions that are available and possible (Savin-Baden, 2000). Transferable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and self-management strategies are described as important outcomes of the PBL method (Kivela & Kivela, 2005; Massa, 2008).

Since its introduction, many medical programs have widely utilized PBL (Taylor & Miflin, 2008). However, research regarding problem-based learning in hospitality education has only recently surfaced (Huang, 2005; Kivela & Kivela, 2005; Martin et al., 2008; Otting et al., 2009; Zwaal & Otting, 2010). Given the potential to simulate real life situations or events derived from customer experiences, PBL is widely applicable to hospitality education.

Purpose for the Study

The hospitality industry and higher education stress the importance of integrating knowing and doing, critical reflection and debate, individual and cooperative learning, and critical inquiry and independent thinking in providing students with the competencies that the industry really needs and expects (Otting et al., 2009). Consequently, this paper aims to develop a framework for the design of effectively teaching service quality models. Much like Barrow’s medical students, these students were given problem based scenarios, in this case on-line reviews, to encourage students to engage themselves in the learning process. The students of this study were required to utilize the SERVQUAL model in order to identify common themes for on-line reviews and comments. Therefore, this study has three main objectives:

1. To provide students a critical thinking assessment in order to comprehend the concepts of service quality.
2. To categorize the types of customer feedback made through on-line reviews.
3. To develop a customer survey that establishments could use for assessing if their facilities and services are in synch with customer expectations.

Methodology

This study was incorporated into the course requirements for an undergraduate and graduate service management course. The threshold for restaurant inclusion was table service. Quick-service and counter-service restaurants were excluded from the assigned properties. Budget and extended stay lodging categories were also excluded from the study. Site selection was geographically diverse within the United States. The course assignments and learning outcomes will be described through the four main stages of PBL.

Protocol through the steps of Problem Based Learning

Stage One: Problem Analysis

The process began with students being presented with an authentic problem to be solved. The problem may be posed by a particular industry based on real world events and data (Massa, 2008). In this case, students enrolled in a sophomore level undergraduate course entitled “Managing in the Service Environment,” were presented with a discussion facilitated by the instructor regarding service quality and how to assess customer feedback. The lecture concluded with a brief explanation of the SERVQUAL model. Each undergraduate student was assigned a single hotel or restaurant property and required to code five online customer comments. Independent resources such as B4UEat, Expedia, UrbanSpoon, Dine.com, and reviews from other independent resources were utilized. No comments from the actual properties’ web site were used in the analysis.
In a typical PBL learning scenario, students identify areas of knowledge and skills that need to be acquired, and apply these to the task(s) that need to be learned (Kivela & Kivela, 2005). This process also involves dissecting the problem to identify what is known, what is unknown, situational constraints, and a clear understanding of the desired outcome. By identifying these factors, students learn how to frame the problem and develop a plan for action. Following the process of identifying the factors, preliminary hypotheses may also be developed to help guide the learning process (Massa, 2008).

After gathering comments from the websites, students began to frame each according to the content. Content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Krippendorf, 1980). The “Categories must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive” (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Coding was based on the most widely recognized approach to measure service quality: SERVQUAL. These dimensions include: Tangibles, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance, and Empathy plus an “Other” category. (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry 1988).

At this point in the process, the preliminary data gathered by the undergraduate students was given to a graduate students enrolled in, “Services Management.” These graduate students were placed into teams of six members and were required to collaboratively analyze and frame the problem.

**Stage Two: Self-Directed Learning**

Self-directed learning involves students taking responsibility for acquiring the knowledge and skills identified as needed in the problem analysis phase. It entails setting specific learning goals, identifying the necessary resources to solve the problem, monitoring comprehension of the requisite knowledge and skills being acquired and evaluating the extent to which the newly acquired knowledge and skills apply in solving the problem at hand (Massa, 2008). Learning issues, knowledge gaps, and appropriate resources are identified in this stage.

Each graduate group was assigned the task of consolidating comments from twenty different hotels or twenty different restaurants. Three of the groups were assigned a mutually exclusive group of hotels and three of the groups were assigned a mutually exclusive group of restaurants. Each group consolidated the coding for their respective properties. During this stage, using online discussions are effective in facilitating regular contact between group members, especially given the hectic study and work schedules of the current students.

**Stage Three: Brainstorming**

During the brainstorming stage, students reconvene to integrate discuss what they have learned in the self-directed learning phase. The objective is a convergence of the learning outcome with a possible solution to the problem. Individual contributions are presented without criticism or judgment. By expressing ideas and listening to what others say, students are able to gauge their own level of knowledge, absorb new information, increase their levels of understanding and awareness, and converge on a solution that represents the collective knowledge of the group (Massa, 2008). At this stage, further learning issues may become evident and require more information to be gathered. The accumulated knowledge is then applied to the problem.

Each student group developed a set of variables based on their observations and categorization of the data. The group summaries are presented in Table 1. These were placed into categories of on-line comments based on the SERVQUAL Model. This table represents consolidation coding for the online comments of 60 US based restaurants.

https://scholarworks.umass.edu/refereed/ICHRIE_2011/Friday/1
Table 1: Categories of On-line Comments based on SERVQUAL Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tangibles</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th>Assurance</th>
<th>Empathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taste of Food, Taste of Beverage</td>
<td>Wait time for table/food</td>
<td>Responsiveness of Parking Staff/ Valet, Responsiveness of Host</td>
<td>Staff knowledge of menu</td>
<td>Attention to special request (menu alterations, special occasions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Food, Variety of Beverage</td>
<td>Accuracy of Reservations</td>
<td>Involvement of Chef/Manager</td>
<td>Other customers’ behaviors (drunk, crowded)</td>
<td>Genuine or courteous service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food procedure/temperature</td>
<td>Accuracy of Order</td>
<td>Waitstaff performance</td>
<td>Safety of Location</td>
<td>Remembering repeat customers (name, habits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Texture</td>
<td>Accuracy of Bill</td>
<td>Sincere and timely correction of errors</td>
<td>Safety and safety standards upheld</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Décor</td>
<td>Consistency of Marketing</td>
<td>Pace of Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio (Noise, Music)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Response/delivery on customer personal request</td>
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<td>Lighting</td>
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<td>Temperature</td>
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<td>Cleanliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenience of Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee appearance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portion size/value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Price/gratuity</td>
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Stage Four: Solution Testing

The final stage in the problem solving process is solution testing. Once a tentative solution has been agreed upon by the group, it must be evaluated to determine if it satisfies the desired outcome criteria established in the problem analysis phase. A formal presentation of the solution is presented in which peer review is used to validate the problem solution (Massa, 2008). In the case of this project, the graduate students formulated customer surveys that establishments could use for assessing if their facilities and services are in synch with customer expectations.

Student Feedback

Feedback on this exercise was gathered in two ways. First, through an instructor lead discussion on analyzing customer comments via the SERVQUAL model. The students felt it was an applied synthesis of information combining a ‘services theory model (SERVQUAL)’ to what the customers were actually reporting in their comments. The model enabled the students to organize and analyze customer comments. Secondly, the graduate project required students to write an executive summary which integrated their overall approach to this assignment along with their conclusions. With regards to the learning outcomes one of the groups stated, “The process involved with measuring the service characteristics was very enlightening and gave our team a look in to how highly regarded each element is.” Another reported, “In the discussions amongst the group, the most important lesson derived from this project includes the lessons from going through the process of evaluating what customers are saying and how the details are important in some areas, guests generally come to a restaurant to have a good meal.”

The student comments regarding the overall approach to the project included the various stages problem-based learning. They are as follows:

“Each member took four restaurant reviews and pulled out the individual characteristics based on the main ones. Our team then met and decided which items were the most notable and where they fit. This part of the process created a lot of good discussion for our group to help us determine what actually makes a difference to the guest.”

“The websites of each of the restaurants in our material were accessed by the members of our group in order to familiarize ourselves with the menu, pricing format, décor, etc.. We used this information as the benchmark for assessing customers’ reviews on the reliability characteristic and it corresponding variables.”

The overall conclusions on this project included:

“Consumers base their reviews on primarily tangible issues. Food quality and taste were among the top variables, followed by ambiance. Our hypothesis holds, as consumers are primarily concerned with meal quality and service when dining out. While a significant portion of consumers wrote to mark an unusual occurrence of abnormal event, the majority of the comments focus on the most popular variables.”

Discussion

Clearly, an understanding of service quality is essential for hospitality graduates. The development of students’ competencies cannot sufficiently be brought about by traditional approaches to education that just focus on reproduction of knowledge applied to existing situations (Tribe, 2002). PBL offers students the opportunity to critically think and link learning with their own interests and motivations. It helps students learn in the context of “real life” and focus the investigations they are undertaking (Savin-Baden, 2000).

The teaching strategy described in this study enabled students to directly apply the learning objectives through something that they are very familiar with in their daily lives. Many of the students commented that they themselves go to these on-line sites to ascertain the feedback from previous guest experiences before trying new a
restaurant or staying at a new hotel. Through PBL students were able to objectively look at the guest perspective and determine the concepts that make-up service quality.

Hospitality managers cannot prevent customers from posting on hundreds of blogs or websites, but they can learn to fix the service errors, to inform customers how the problem will be fixed, and to make their service better. As future leaders in this industry, students should grasp the concept of service recovery in order to encourage dissatisfied customers to come back and experience changes based upon their feedback. They should also realize as managers, they can try to minimize the online presence of negative eWOM through maintaining a high level of service quality and providing timely service recoveries (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

This class project offers opportunities for future research. Future class assignments could be applied using the service gap model or even the servicescape model for students to organize and analyze service quality. The results of the student projects have implications for the hospitality industry as well. Frequency of the customer comments and solutions to these issues should be addressed.

New conceptions of teaching and learning are needed to satisfy the hospitality industry’s demand for competent practitioners who not only combine action and reflection but are also able to contribute to the creation of new knowledge (Tribe, 2002). By assessing service quality, categorizing guest feedback via the SERVQUAL model, and developing a customer survey, these students will be prepared to not only handle the challenges of managing service, but have also been taught the value of critical reflection of issues related to the industry.

References


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