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ABSTRACT

The influence of three sets of instructions on teacher/course evaluation by student raters was investigated. Students did not differ in their teacher/course evaluation ratings when the instructions specified the evaluation results would be used: (1) only by the instructor; (2) by the administration; or (3) by students for course selection purposes. Secondarily, the effects of rank and class level were also examined. It was found that the evaluation of graduate courses was significantly higher than that of undergraduate courses. With respect to academic rank, graduate teaching assistants received higher ratings than did either assistant or full professors. (Author/LBH)

The Effects of Different Instructions on Student Ratings of Faculty

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of three sets of instructions on teacher/course evaluation by student raters. Students did not differ in their teacher/course evaluation ratings when the instructions specified the evaluation results would be used: (a) only by the instructor; (b) by the administration; or (c) by students for course selection purposes. Secondarily, we examined the effects of rank and class level. We found that the evaluation of graduate courses was significantly higher than that of undergraduate courses. With respect to academic rank, graduate teaching assistants received higher ratings than did either assistant or full professors.

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Statement of the problem

It is a rare college or university that has not experimented with some system of student ratings of instruction. Such teacher/course evaluations serve a variety of functions. Prominent among these functions is that of providing administrators with comparative data on faculty personnel for the purposes of determining salary increases, promotions, and tenure. A second major function or purpose of student ratings is to give teaching faculty feed-back for improving instruction. Still another function is to offer students information useful for selecting courses--if the data are published. Often, the same instrument serves all functions.

Given that student ratings of instruction can serve at least three functions, do differences in the stated purposes for such evaluation influence student ratings? For example, do students rate professors differently if they are told that the ratings will be used by superiors for administrative decisions than if they are instructed that the ratings will be used solely by the professor being evaluated for his own self-improvement? The primary thrust of this study was to compare evaluations which were obtained under three

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different purpose-instruction conditions.

We have been unable to find a published study that investigated the effects of instructions upon student ratings. Aleamoni and Hexner (1973) compared the ratings of one professor under two different sets of instruction. During one semester students completed a course/instruction questionnaire with no instructions besides those relating to the form. During the other semester the students were told that the purpose of the instrument was both to improve instruction and to provide data which would be used " ... for salary and promotion consideration of your instructor by his department head" (p. 6). Students who received these latter instructions rated the professor significantly higher than those who received no instruction. An obvious limitation of the Aleamoni and Hexner (1973) study is that the improvement of instruction and administrative use purposes were confounded.

In addition to the impact of instructions on student ratings, we were concerned with two other variables, which might plausibly interact with "instructions" and which are of intrinsic interest themselves. Costin, Greenough, and Menges (1971) discuss several variables that have been shown to differentially influence evaluations by students. The two of particular interest to us were the rank of the instructor and the class level of the student.

Both Downie (1952) and Gage (1961) indicated that professors receive higher ratings than instructors at lower ranks. Several investigators have found that upper level students tend to assign more favorable ratings to their instructors than do lower level students (e.g., Downie, 1952 and Gage, 1961). Data from the University of

Illinois (Aleamoni, 1972) suggest that the higher the level of the class, the more positive the student ratings. Some investigators, however, have reported that class level failed to make a difference in evaluations (e.g. Heilman & Armentrout, 1936; Rayder, 1968).

The purposes of this study were to determine the influence of three variables (a) instruction/purpose, (b) academic rank, and (c) class level on course/teacher evaluations.

Method

Subjects. A total of 40 instructors at a southern urban university were evaluated by their students during a regular academic quarter. The proportion of instructors by academic rank and class level taught was: eight graduate teaching assistants teaching undergraduate classes; eight assistant professors teaching undergraduate classes; eight assistant professors teaching graduate classes; eight professors teaching undergraduate classes and eight professors teaching graduate classes. In each category but the last, the sex of instructors was balanced. The average number of students per class was about 21.

Instrument. The Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire (Aleamoni & Spencer, 1973) was the instrument used for faculty evaluation. This instrument contains 50 Likert scaled items divided into six subtests each of which provides a subscore. Additionally, there is a "Total" score. The "Method of Instruction" subtest and the subtest labeled "Instructor" were most representative of the teaching/course characteristics in which we were interested.

We added a final item ("Person") to the instrument which read as follows: "Disregarding his characteristics as a teacher, how do you feel about your instructor as a person?" The alternatives were Likert scaled.

The dependent variables were subscores for the "Method of Instruction" and "Instructor" subtests, the "Total" score, and the score for the "Person" item.

Procedure. The evaluation was carried out in class, during class time in the last three weeks of the quarter. The students were given a package which included instructions, the Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire, and a separate answer sheet.

The experimenter, the same in each case, passed out the packets to the students sequentially so that every fourth student received the same set of instructions, after which the experimenter gave some additional general instructions pertaining to the answer sheet. The instructions for the professor only condition were:

> The purpose of this evaluation is to provide your instructor with your feelings about him/her as an instructor and his/her course. Only the instructor will receive the results of this evaluation. The results will communicate what you perceive as his/her strengths and weaknesses for the course improvement.

The instructions for the use by the administration condition were:

> The purpose of this evaluation is to provide the University administration with information to make important decisions about each member of the faculty. The evaluation will provide the administration with data from which promotion, salary-raises, tenure and job retention decisions can be made.

The instructions for the use by the students condition were:

> The purpose of this evaluation is to gather information from students about the courses and instructors on this campus.

A student committee will publish the results in a booklet containing evaluation data on all the instructors. This booklet will be made available to the students in the student center so that they may consult it in making decisions regarding courses and faculty selection at the time of registration.

Results

The unit of analysis was the "instructional set" group mean within each of the 40 classes. That is, within each class students were randomly assigned to one of three sets of instructions. In effect, we formed three groups per class and the mean of each group, by class, provided the data for our analysis. Since we sampled 40 classes, we obtained a total of 120 group means.

Correlations among the dependent variables ranged from .69 to .94. This inter-dependency suggested that a multivariate analyses was appropriate. Consequently, two multivariate analysis of variance were calculated.

Analysis I. The first MANOVA analysis was a three-way factorial design with four dependent variables. For factor A (instruction effect) there were three levels of instructions; for factor B (rank effect) there were two levels---professors and assistant professors; and for factor C (class effect) there were two levels---graduate and undergraduate classes. Each cell contained eight replications.

The instruction effect and the rank effect did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$) but the class effect was found to be significant ($p < .05$). None of the interactions was significant.

To probe the significant main effect of class, univariate 3x2x2

analyses of variance were computed for each of the four dependent variables. In each analysis the F-ratios for class effect were significant ($p < .05$) but nonsignificant for the instruction effect, the rank effect and the interactions ($p > .05$). For each dependent variable, the mean for the graduate classes exceeded the mean for the undergraduate classes.

Analysis 2. The second MANOVA was a two-way factorial design with the same four dependent variables. This analysis compared the graduate teaching assistants, who taught undergraduate classes only, with assistant professors and full professors, who were also teaching undergraduate classes. Thus, for factor A (instruction effect) there were three levels of instruction. For factor B (rank effect) there were also three levels: professors, assistant professors, and graduate teaching assistants. Each cell contained eight replications.

The instruction effect and the interaction effect were found to be statistically non-significant whereas the rank effect was found to be significant at the .05 level.

The significant rank effect suggested follow-up univariate analyses for each of the four dependent vairables. The F-ratios for the rank effect were significant at the .05 level, but did not reach significance for the instruction effect and the interaction.

The Newman-Keuls tests for pair-wise comparisons was calculated for the rank effect means. The tests indicated that on the "Total", "Method of Instruction" and "Person" scores the graduate teaching assistants received significantly higher ratings than both assistant professors and professors ($p < .05$). There was no significant difference

between the ratings given the assistant professors and the professors. On the "Instructor" score, however, both graduate teaching assistants and assistant professors were assigned significantly higher ratings than professors ($p < .05$); the difference in the ratings of assistant professors and the graduate teaching assistants was not statistically significant ($p > .05$).

Conclusion

In summary, it may be stated that the intended use of the results of the teacher/course evaluation did not seem to influence the student evaluation. Apparently whatever set the students were using was sufficiently powerful to not be differentially influenced by the supposed purposes of the evaluation. The effects of instructor rank and class level upon student ratings suggest that institutional norms should take these two variables into account.

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