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AUTHOR Bangura, Abdul Karim
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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that the survey research approach is limited for generating substantive data to improve college teaching, because it is impersonal, lacks opportunities for probing, suppresses the idea of discourse by offering fixed-choice and yes-no questions, disregards respondents' social and personal contexts of meaning, and is dependent on the competence of coders as ordinary language users. In effect, the role of language is ignored in collecting faculty evaluation data. Use of the focus group approach is presented as an alternative. Three in-class faculty evaluation survey instruments were completed by 468 university students, and focus group interviews were conducted with 86 students. Survey instruments had varying numbers of fixed-choice and/or open-ended questions and covered instructor performance, testing, and course objectives. Surveys revealed that faculty members were doing a good job, leaving unanswered the question of why students were dissatisfied with some of their professors and why students were not achieving. The focus group approach was more helpful in linking the conceptualization of the problem to the collection and analysis of data; delineating connections between causes and effects in student achievement; and specifying students' need for affection, empathy, or belonging to a subculture. (JDD)

THE FOCUS-GROUP APPROACH AS AN ALTERNATIVE FOR COLLECTING FACULTY EVALUATION DATA TO IMPROVE TEACHING

Abdul Karim Bangura
Bowie State University
Bowie, Maryland

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ABSTRACT

By examining the results from a number of in-class surveys used for collecting faculty evaluation data, this study takes the position that the survey research approach is quite limited for generating substantive data to improve teaching. The tenor of this study is that because survey research is molded on experimental control, quantitative measures, and statistical analysis, the role of **language** has been ignored in collecting faculty evaluation data. Thus, this study calls for the use of the ***focus-group*** approach, which embodies the view that **interview** is a form of **discourse**, as an alternative to the survey method.

INTRODUCTION

This study is about enhancing the collection of substantive faculty evaluation data to improve teaching. The concern over the usefulness of faculty evaluations in improving teaching has stimulated intense debate, research, and actions at various levels, and has led to the development of programs to address the need for improved data collection techniques. Nowhere is the concern more significant than at institutions emphasizing teaching.

While it is true that we must work quickly and vigorously to solve the inadequacy of the traditional faculty evaluation approach, it, nevertheless, behooves us to place the analysis of this problem on a firm methodological footing. Otherwise, the problem will not succumb to rational decision-making.

Perhaps a "simple folk story" will serve to illustrate the need for skepticism in our efforts to delineate those factors that underlie the ever-growing problem of collecting substantive faculty evaluation data to improve teaching.

There was once a man named Nasreddin Hodza who lived in a small, well-knit village community somewhere in the Balkan Peninsula. One day he woke up at daybreak and went out in the yard in front of his house, bent down on his knees, and began a vigorous and meticulous search--inch by inch--through his well-kept garden. Soon his neighbors and other passers-by stopped and watched him. Curious, they asked him what he was doing. He looked up momentarily and said that he had lost his precious gold coin the night before and was trying to find it. Now there were not too many such gold coins around the village, and the good neighbors, sympathizing with Nasreddin, volunteered to search with

him.

The search continued for hours with increasing urgency, but the gold coin was nowhere to be found. As sundown was approaching, one frustrated neighbor asked Nasreddin, "Now see here! Where approximately do you think you lost this famous coin of yours?" Nasreddin looked him straight in the eye and said, "I am sure I lost it inside the house." "Then why in Heaven's name are we searching for it out here?" snapped the exasperated neighbor. Nasreddin shook his head knowingly and muttered, "Because there is more light out here!"

As the preceding excerpt suggests, scholars investigating the problem of collecting substantive faculty evaluation data to improve teaching should remember that in their pursuit to be 'scientific' they too may be looking for the elusive concepts and causes of the problem in areas where there is more adequate light for them to conduct the search.

The present study calls, therefore, for the need of skepticism in our efforts to discern those factors that underlie the limitations of the survey approach used in faculty evaluations. Subsequently, the rest of this study is divided into five major sections: (1) the limitations of in-class surveys for collecting substantive faculty evaluation data to improve teaching, (2) the focus-group method, (3) results from in-class faculty evaluation surveys, (4) results from focus-group interviews, and (5) conclusions.

THE LIMITATIONS OF IN-CLASS SURVEYS FOR COLLECTING SUBSTANTIVE FACULTY EVALUATION DATA TO IMPROVE TEACHING

The in-class questionnaire is seen by institutional researchers as advantageous in collecting faculty evaluation data because of its relatively low cost, reduction in biasing error, greater anonymity, and considered answers and consultations. This type of questionnaire, however, is quite limited for ferreting out many of the not-so-obvious answers that would lead a teacher to improve his/her teaching skills because it (the questionnaire) is quite impersonal, lack opportunities for probing, and limited to influences that propel students toward passing or failing a course. Furthermore, in-class surveys do not explain why some students with all the characteristics for doing excellent work get lower grades and why those

who exhibit none of the characteristics of an excellent student get higher grades.

Furthermore, the in-class questionnaire, by virtue of being a survey tool, has a number of other notable shortcomings. First, in the mainstream tradition of survey research, the idea of discourse is suppressed in the in-class questionnaire. Questions and answers, for example, are regarded as analogues of stimuli and responses rather than as forms of expression. Thus, the overwhelming majority of the questions in an in-class survey are fixed-choice and yes-no types. The reason these types of questions are widely used in in-class surveys is to facilitate ease in coding. Open-ended questions are said to yield responses that may be too complex in intention and wording; such responses in turn make the job of the coder very difficult.

A number of problems emerge with fixed-choice and yes-no questions. Encountered with such questions, the respondent will try to interpret whatever statement that follows as meaning either yes or no. This does not imply that only the forms yes or no can occur; but that whatever occurs is already pre-classified as meaning yes or no, or if this is not possible, then as querying or refusing assumptions in the questions. The meanings yes or no may be selected simultaneously with choices from either systems, including $\pm$ certainty (Stubbs 1983:104-105). Yes-no and fixed-choice questions therefore provide a constraint in finding coherent answers that can be met by a respondent: no matter what one says/writes only confirms or denies a proposition (Schiffrin 1985:643).

Second, the suppression of discourse in in-class surveys is accompanied by an equally pervasive disregard of respondents' social and personal contexts of meaning, both in the questionnaire itself, where standardization overrules the particularities of individual and setting, and in the modes of interpretive theorizing about responses. (The interested reader can be well served by reading Milroy 1987.)

Third, in-class surveys entail the central problem for coding which may be stated as follows: because meaning is contextually grounded, inherently and irremediably, coding depends on the competence of coders as ordinary language users. Their task is to determine the meaning of an isolated response to an isolated question, that is, to code a response that has been stripped of its natural social context. Their competence consists in their being able to restore the missing varied assumptions they employ as ordinary language users. Although coders may share a common linguistic culture, there is considerable individual variation in frames of reference, values, and levels of understanding (Mishler 1986:3-4).

Finally, a related problem appears in the way statistical analyses enter into interpretation. Statistical techniques allow testing for significant differences across population subgroups, often distinguished from one another along social attributes, singly or in combination, such as gender, age, social class, etc. As is true of coding, interpretation of these differences relies on unexplicated assumptions about the meanings of questions and responses. For example, interpreting differences in the frequency among social classes of a particular response to a specific question depends on the assumption that the question meant the same thing to all respondents. Excluded from this line of reasoning is the possibility of variation among subgroups in their understandings of questions and in the intentional meanings of answers in how these are, in turn, related to variation in socio-cultural frameworks of language and meaning (Mishler 1986:5).

In sum, because the in-class survey is molded on the experimental method, which emphasizes standardized procedures, experimental control, quantitative measures, and statistical analysis, the role of **language** has not been given full consideration. This situation clearly calls for alternative approaches that will delineate the actual underpinnings for improving teaching through the use of faculty evaluations. These alternative approaches must embody the view that **interview** is a form of **discourse**. The contrast between this view and the assumptions of mainstream survey interviewing is to be used to develop a framework for systematic exposition of the alternative. One such approach that has proved to be quite useful in this vein, and is relatively inexpensive, is the ***focus-group*** approach used for this study.

THE FOCUS-GROUP METHOD

The ***focus-group*** method gained impetus from psychology's group dynamics approach. The ***focus-group*** approach is based upon the notion that talk is a relatively cheap from of feedback on everything from popcorn to nuclear bombs. It is a variation of the depth interview in which a small number of individuals are brought together for interviewing, rather than being interviewed one at a time as in the depth interview. The dynamics of the encounter are quite different from the individual interview, in which the flow of information is one way (from the respondent to the interviewer). The ***focus-group*** setting allows the comments of each person to be considered in group discussion.

Most focus groups consist of eight to twelve members. Smaller groups are too easily dominated by one or two participants, while frustration and boredom can set in with larger groups as individuals have to wait their turns to respond or get involved. (For more on this approach, see, for example, Krueger 1988, Stewart and Shamdasani 1990.)

RESULTS FROM IN-CLASS FACULTY EVALUATION SURVEYS

The results from three different in-class faculty evaluation survey instruments used at three different universities were examined. The first survey questionnaire comprised ten (62%) fixed-choice and six (38%) open-ended questions; the second had fourteen (78%) fixed-choice and four (22%) open-ended questions; the third had thirty nine (100%) fixed-choice questions. The fixed-choice questions of all three survey instruments were to be answered using a scale from five to one, where five means "strongly agree" and one means "strongly disagree."

The survey questionnaires examined were completed by 468 students. More than four-fifths of those students who completed questionnaires with open-ended questions did not bother to answer those questions. Of those who provided answers to such questions, many gave one-word responses such as "None." The surveys generally had three parts: (1) instructor performance, (2) testing, and (3) course objectives.

The results from one of the survey instruments comprised means and standard deviations for the factors identified by factor analysis of the questions. The questions comprising each factor were indicated in order of factor loading. Means were based upon the total responses within each of the indicated summary levels. The professor's means were then compared to those of his unit, his university, and a national sample of 200,000.

For the other two survey instruments, the average scores and percentages of the responses to each question were provided. These statistics were then reported side-by-side those of the professor's unit.

An analysis of the results from the computer runs for the 468 completed questionnaires can be summarized as follows: Out of possible means of 5.0, (a) the mean for instructor performance was 4.03, (b) the mean for testing was 4.01, and (c) the mean for course objectives was 4.07. In sum, these scores indicate that respondents generally perceived faculty members at all three universities

examined to be doing a good job. This finding leaves unanswered, however, why so many students were dissatisfied with some of their professors and why a number of students were not being successful in their courses as revealed in the focus group interviews.

Furthermore, a faculty evaluation report typically outlined three general purposes for the evaluation: (1) to help the professor improve his/her teaching ability by pinpointing potential weaknesses; (2) to forward to the appropriate committees which make decisions on course offerings, faculty hiring, promotions, and tenure; (3) to enable future students to make judgments on whether or not to take the course or the professor. Here again, an important question emerges: How will faculty evaluation reports which present only means direct a professor on how to improve his teaching strategies?

RESULTS FROM FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEWS

Eight focus-group (each group comprised from nine to twelve students) interviews, involving eighty six students, were conducted for this study. Each of the groups was led by two faculty members. The faculty members followed a list of questions as a discussion guide, asked appropriate follow-up questions, prevented any one participant from dominating the group, and ensured that every member participated. The results that follow are based on discussions with the eighty six students who participated in the focus groups. Thus, it is important to note that no attempt is made to generalize from these results.

None of the results discussed in this section, which are neither exhaustive nor mentioned in any particular order, would surprise professionals working in academia. Throughout the focus-group data collected, there were several recurring themes.

Students particularly liked professors who (a) outlined key points, (b) covered just enough material in detail, (c) compared present developments with those of the past, (d) encouraged a relaxed atmosphere, (e) provided feedback in a timely manner, (f) used a mixture of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic teaching strategies, and (g) displayed "affection" or "empathy." Most of the students' comments, however, were about evaluating student performances and the learning environment.

Evaluating Student Performances

Most students suggested that in order to effectively evaluate their cognitive, metacognitive, and social affective skills, which are crucial to the successful learner, a mixture of in-class examinations and take-home assignments is called for. They noted that the following presuppositions seem to support their suggestion:

1. Examinations are to acquaint those unfamiliar with time limit and written directions but without disaster, and take-homes are not timed. Grades, individual notes, and comparing the comments should give a better idea of what is expected.

2. Questions presuppose facts involved are familiar and so set a framework for discussion. Many questions have no one solution, and sometimes the 'best' answers are those with no single answer everyone would accept.

3. The lectures presuppose students have studied the texts beforehand and read other sources referred to, just as tests presuppose they have thought about the topics and discussed them with others. It is taken for granted that the students' initial, sole, and final acquaintance with the subject matter is not just the lectures.

4. Take-homes are to help, not annoy. They are done at students' pace, with any kind of aids they find helpful. They are to be taken as learning opportunities, not just chores. Cooperation is to be indicated: a single student should not have to answer every question, but group-members can cover the lot. Hardy workers can take on questions where the answer is not obvious, since that is how people learn. Comparing results helps; preparing for likely questions helps even more.

5. Every student has his/her personal ways to study and review, but it is sensible to go review what s/he has spent time on, by keeping, reading, and revising what s/he has written. If one's work is not worth rereading and reworking, it was not worth doing in the first place. Knowledge is cumulative--a student should be his/her own severest critic. Regarding assignments as something to be forgotten when handed in wastes a

student's time. Rewriting isolates essentials, shows what is peripheral, and which writing habits waste time. Supplementary reading illuminates what was obscure, provides better examples, and brings up references a student could not consult when s/he first discussed it with others.

6. Cooperative reading can be even more profitable than cooperative study: an individual reports in minutes what took hours to read, tell others what s/he thinks is not worth reading, or what they just have to read for themselves. Setting brief but regular times for informal reports about supplementary readings multiplies a student's reading--there is only so much one student can do alone.

The essence of these presuppositions is that to foster some kind of discipline, an obligatory take-home format forces students to make their own work re-identifiable, reliable, and worth rereading. The take-home assignments then constitute a text for a student's final examination review, future study, and updating. Duplicating and exchanging results with others makes them complete.

The Learning Environment

In talking with students who participated in the focus groups, it was discovered that these students clearly desired to perform well in their courses. This finding was not unrelated to those of other scholars who talk about the 'poor student performance syndrome.' Yet until the focus-group discussions were held and students talked about their own personal situations, it was not realized that the rate of poor performance among some students was the desire and need for "empathy" and "affection" that were not forthcoming from a number of professors. A matter of fact, some students who were performing poorly were giving so much "love" at home by taking care of grandparents, parents, siblings, spouses, etc. that they received relatively little "love" in return. Some saw the university as a domain in which they could receive at least some "empathy," if not "affection."

"Students caring about other students," as some students frequently stated, ranked the highest on the lists of focus-group participants, and explained more of the variance in students' expectations of faculty members. This situation clearly highlights the difficulty of employing any type of analysis that hinges on

in-class faculty evaluation surveys in conceptualizing basic explanatory variables.

Another important finding from the focus-group discussions was that the larger university culture displays a lower degree of integration with a number of elements that do not fit well together. Thus, there exist "subcultures" which are distinctive variations of the larger university culture: a professional attitude in the pursuit of higher education. Focus-group participants described several types of "subcultures," each one with its own set of behavior patterns operating at universities. Consequently, some students become confused and frustrated when faced with the situation of having to determine exactly where they fit. Sometimes, the behavior of a "subculture" runs directly counter to those of the larger university culture.

One of these "subcultures" can be referred to as a "classroom subculture." Almost all interviewees suggest that there exist beliefs and behavior patterns in some classrooms that differ with those of others. The "subculture" of some classrooms was described as "very professional and businesslike." Respondents also noted that because some classrooms were new and cleaner, they conjure up an atmosphere of "professionalism": professors and students treat each other with "dignity and respect." Some classrooms, on the other hand, were described by respondents as having a "high school atmosphere." Students pointed out untidy surroundings and "unprofessional" attitudes of many professors and students as attributes endemic of a "high school environment."

Also prevalent at universities is what can be called a "group subculture": a set of students who interact with one another and share some joint activities. A frequently mentioned "group culture" is the athletic one. A number of interviewees spoke of athletes, cheerleaders, and physical education professors belonging in an "exclusive club." While two athletes and a cheerleader in one of the focus groups spoke highly of the camaraderie between athletes, cheerleaders, and physical education professors being one of their positive experiences at the university, other participants complained that the group behavior of this "exclusive club" sometimes becomes counter-productive. One interviewee put it this way: "If you are a cheerleader or an athlete in one of the physical education classes, you can get away with murder." Another interviewee stated that in one of her physical education classes, athletes hardly did their work, clowned during lectures, and still ended up with good grades.

The lack of information was mentioned several times as a problem encountered by participants. One student on a university's basketball team

expressed his surprise at the amount of work required for a typical course. He reported that his schedule and course load were too heavy, given his athletics, even though his schedule had been put together by his faculty advisor. He said that had he known the amount of work required for his course load, he would have taken fewer courses. Whether he had been told that a three-credit course typically requires a minimum of nine hours of work per week is, perhaps, irrelevant; the point is that he did not know this rule of university life. Such basic information might have been passed on through an orientation session, but few of the participants recalled attending one.

Students expressed their surprise at the cost of books. One participant had a scholarship that covered her tuition. Coming from a public school system where books tend to be borrowed, rather than purchased, and uninformed of the cost of books required for her four courses, she was unprepared for the financial difficulties encountered the first week of her university career. Another complained about the need to purchase several textbooks for a given course when only one was actually used by the professor. The changing of textbooks from semester to semester was also mentioned as a problem, since this practice reduced the number of used textbooks that could be purchased and used again. A participant recalled how he had fallen behind in course-work because he could not afford a textbook during the first few weeks of the semester.

What was intriguing was that a number of interviewees admitted that they were academically ill-prepared for university life. But they were also quick to point out that not having faculty advisors when they needed them, or having to talk to a different faculty advisor each time, did not help their situation. Some also noted that certain professors found it burdensome when students requested additional help with their assignments. One interviewee recalled a professor saying: "I've got mine, you need yours. If you want it badly enough, you would have to get it yourself. I am not here to baby any student." On the other hand, one student spoke most highly of one of her professors who caringly chided her for any tardiness, got students to call her when absent, and--by saying the right things at the right times--taught her the importance of promptness.

To summarize, the focus groups provided additional information related to improving teaching. "Facts" suggested through the cold analysis of dry statistics dealing with in-class faculty evaluation survey data can be fleshed out by further details in discussion groups focusing upon specific topics. The additional information supports, to name a few recommendations, the need for setting up

a more supportive learning environment, improving the dissemination of basic information for academic survival, devising ways to reduce the cost of books, and training faculty members in methods that enhance, rather than diminish, student success.

CONCLUSIONS

Both careful speculation and informal data collection were needed in using the focus-group approach in this study. In order to see enough of the whole picture, adequate conceptualization of the major explanatory variables underlying the problem of using in-class faculty evaluation surveys to collect substantive data to improve teaching was required. It also involved operationalizing certain concepts in ways that adequately represented "affection," "empathy," and "subcultures" in diverse communities of students, determining the complex linkages between the variables examined, and deriving the basic propositions tested. It is this stage where researchers on faculty evaluation find or construct empirical indicators and proceed. This is why they miss important elements in their investigations.

A missing element in a number of faculty evaluation surveys is coherence: the issue of using results gleaned from these surveys to help improve teaching is often poorly conceptualized and then data are collected that have little or nothing to do with resolving the problem. The requirements for focus-group interviews, on the other hand, helped in the initial conceptualization of the problem and linking the conceptualization to the collection and analysis of the data.

Another way the focus-group approach became very useful was in the specification of certain relationships between ideas. We were able to delineate logical connections between causes and effects on the student success problem that made it possible for us to see clearly what we were talking about and how we were thinking. After linking together pertinent ideas from our focus-group interviews, we were able to generate deductions from them. This forced us to specify relationships for the concepts of "affection," "empathy," and "subcultures," which our ordinary usage of the English language normally slides over. Once we grasped the underlying factors for the student success problem, we were able to specify relationships between what students expected and their need for "affection," "empathy," or belonging to a "subculture" in ways that

otherwise would have been merely assumed in a survey study.

In addition, the focus-group interviews helped us make deductions from ideas we otherwise would not have thought about. This is one reason it became evident, throughout the data analysis, that a number of our findings ran against standard findings of scholars using "behaviorist" methods is studying the student success problem in higher education.

Indeed, the focus-group approach helped us pinpoint what our investigation was and what we needed to ferret out. They provided us with a way of thinking that helped us through the problem of understanding what a university meant to the students interviewed and what professors and students need to do in order to combat the ever-growing student success problem. This was no small feat!

By recognizing the centrality of language in our research, we were able to demonstrate that language is the most significant and colossal work that can help us grapple with the problem of student success in higher education. But because language is one of the most characteristic forms of human behavior, it is so familiar a feature of our daily life that many researchers rarely pause to think that it is the source for our answers to the ever-growing student success problem in higher education.

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