Empowering learners and instructors through online class evaluations

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Introduction

"Teacher evaluations are at the very center of the education enterprise and can be catalysts for teacher and school improvement" (Toch, 2008). In fact, it has been suggested by organizational psychologists that people within an organization, such as a university, that lack feedback will actively seek it out (Ashford & Cummings, 2008). Most educators agree and understand that evaluations help in teacher development and provide necessary feedback for this process. However, exactly what teacher evaluations involve remains a controversial issue for educators and those responsible for maintaining the academic integrity of an educational program (i.e., administrators). Some of the issues surrounding teacher evaluations concern exactly who gives the evaluations, what teachers will be evaluated on, and how frequently they will be evaluated. This paper will look at these issues with reference to the role of online student evaluations of classes and their advantages and disadvantages as addressed by a university in Tokyo from the perspectives of the chair and assistant director of its English department. It will also discuss aspects for further development of such evaluation.

Review of the literature

Regarding the issue of who evaluates instructors in practice, we find that most commonly the person involved in the evaluation has the least invested in the course receiving the evaluation. In most cases, the administrator of a particular program or institution handles the responsibility of doing the evaluating (Oliva, Mathers & Laine, 2009). Working in administration, the authors understand firsthand how evaluations completed by administrators are often problematic. For one thing, administrators commonly neglect to set or have clear expectations for the assessment procedure. They understand the need for assessing the

teaching staff; however, with little training in how to effectively evaluate staff and usually armed with a standardized checklist of items to observe that does not take into account the current environment that the administrator will examine the given instructor in, the evaluations end up lacking the essential constructive feedback the instructor needs from the assessor. For instance, a US study completed by the New Teacher Project in 2007 of Chicago area schools (Toch, 2008) determined that evaluations completed by principals often provided little if any assistance to educators on how to enhance instruction and student success. The study also found that quite frequently the principals neglected to share their findings from the evaluations with the instructors involved. Another problematic factor of administrative evaluation stems from the fact that the mere presence of an administrator in a classroom drastically alters the environment within the class, thereby affecting the evaluation process. Working in administration, the authors of this paper have witnessed this phenomenon repeatedly as they entered a classroom to assess an instructor's performance and observed the changed behavior in the students (and the instructor) from the moment they entered the room.

In an ideal world, instructors would receive feedback from multiple sources including administrators, their peers and students. The feedback would become amalgamated into a common format for easy access and analysis by the instructors to assist them in further developing their ability to teach their particular courses and assist learners with mastering the content of the course. In order to bring the reality of teacher evaluation closer to the best practice, many tertiary institutions around the world have instituted student evaluations of faculty as standard procedure (Moore & Kuol, 2005; Silva et al., 2008). Having students as part of the evaluation process ensures that instructors receive feedback that reflects learners' needs and wants, and allows the instructor the opportunity to consider how to improve on instruction in a way that will affect learners. Student evaluations also allow students the opportunity to play a direct role in how a course progresses, thus, giving them a sense of empowerment in their education. Harrison et al. (2004) also found evidence that based on wholistic scoring of performance student evaluations did not significantly differ from other faculty evaluation of instructor performance. This suggests that student evaluations of their teachers' performance provide both relevant and reliable feedback.

Besides who does the evaluating, what educators get evaluated on is an issue. In standardized evaluations carried out by administrators, the criteria for assessment may include such points as whether the material "occupies" the learners (Toch, 2008), or whether the evaluator feels the teacher has the appropriate attire on. According to Ardalan et al. (2007), the objective of student evaluations on teachers is to obtain information valuable in the adjustment of class content and delivery methods and as essential feedback into the performance of specific teaching staff. Students offer educators feedback that relates directly to the efficacy of their instruction and the appropriateness of its presentation. Comparatively speaking, the student evaluation provides more in depth and relevant information to instructors during the course of a term than the standardized type evaluation given by an administrator.

In connection to the differences between administrators' feedback and students', we see a marked difference in the amount of feedback offered. As for administrative evaluations, how often an instructor receives an evaluation may depend on their position within an educational institution. Brandt et al. (2007) found that non-tenured instructors within the US received evaluations twice a year, whereas their tenured counterparts were evaluated once every two to five years, unless they received an unsatisfactory evaluation previously. Yet, if we return to the research completed by the New Teacher Project in 2007 of Chicago area schools we find that not a single educator in the district received a rating of "unsatisfactory" between 2003 and 2006. Based on this information, we can deduce that many tenured instructors throughout the US receive evaluations from the administration on average once every two to five years. This may seem hard to grasp at first; however, if one considers the numerous responsibilities administrators have and the time constraints they work under, their inability to make time to frequently assess each instructor within their department may become understandable. In contrast, student evaluations may take place multiple times within a term. According to Looney (2008), both beginning and veteran educators seek out students'

opinions on their courses at the onset, middle and end of the term. Based on the students' assessments of the course, the faculty members can adjust components of the course to better suit the needs and wants of the given students. The greater frequency of student assessment gives the educators the opportunity to improve their teaching skills.

The case of Digital Hollywood University

While being English instructors themselves, the authors of this paper have worked as administrators of the English department at Digital Hollywood University, a university that started in April, 2005. Since its beginning, the university has employed online student evaluation on their registered courses. The following introduces the history of its development.

When establishing Digital Hollywood University, the founders felt the need to employ new concepts that other schools had not attempted in order to thrive in Japan's highly competitive higher education market. They employed a range of catchy ideas in order to differentiate themselves from other institutions. For example, they hold the university entrance ceremony overseas every year to give the new students international experience with the main educational purpose of broadening their awareness of the world outside Japan. Aware that universities from the US, UK, Australia and many European countries use student evaluations of teaching as a means to improve faculty instruction, the administration developed an online evaluation system where every student provides feedback on every class they attend in order to allow them the opportunity to have a voice in how their courses progress, as another attempt to differentiate the university from others in Japan.

The developers of the system, Matsuzaki being one of the developers, set up a series of questions for students to answer about the classes they attend. The questionnaire was then uploaded onto the school's website. Every week, students fill in the survey immediately after a class for each of their registered classes. As for the portion of the survey that contains multiple choice answers, the results become available as charts for easy visual reading by instructors. This way, instructors do not need to spend an extensive amount of time interpreting the results. They can focus more on the individual comments provided to address specific points discussed by students about the particular class and make adjustments as needed.

The first survey developed included the following seven questions in order of appearance: 1) "One the whole, how was today's lesson? Choose from 'very satisfactory,' 'satisfactory,' 'so-so,' 'not so good,' or 'bad'"; 2) "Write about the good points of the lesson."; 3) "Write about the bad points of the lesson."; 4) "What can be done to improve on the 'bad points'?"; 5) Did you actively participate in the lesson?"; 6) "Write your comments on today's lesson."; and 7) "Let us know if you noticed anything pertinent to the classroom surroundings, administrative and clerical supports, etc."

The original format was used during the university's first three academic years between 2005 and 2007. In 2007, the university reviewed this original survey form, and, after thorough discussion, the reviewers, again Matsuzaki being a member, concluded that some of the original questions and the organization of the survey needed changing. Accordingly, the school devised a modified version, and this second version has been used since the start of the 2008 academic year.

The following ten questions in order of appearance comprise the second version: 1) "Were you prepared for the lesson? (e.g., Had you done the preview, review, and any given assignments?)"; 2) "Did you observe proper etiquette before and after the lesson? (e.g., Were you punctual? Did you follow the instructor's directions?)"; 3) "Did you observe proper conduct during the lesson? (e.g., Did you refrain from leaving the classroom unnecessarily in the middle of the lesson, interrupting the lesson by untimely chatting, sleeping during the lesson, etc.?)"; 4) "Did you actively participate in the lesson? (e.g., Did you ask questions about

the material to the instructor? Were the comments you made during group works constructive? Did you encourage your classmates to actively engage in the group work given?)"; 5) "Was the lesson interesting?"; 6) "How much of what was covered do you think you have acquired?"; 7) "What was the most impressive point for you?"; 8) "Was there anything that was hard for you to understand or that you were not sure about?"; 9) "Do you have any messages, requests, or suggestions to the instructor?"; and 10) "Do you have any messages to the school? (e.g., Is there anything regarding the classroom surroundings that needs improvement?)"

The reviewers applied different wording of the questions and ordering from the original format with specific intentions. The main intentions were twofold. First, they broke down the first question in the original format (i.e., "On the whole, how was today's lesson?") because of its vagueness into two rather specific questions (Questions 5 and 6) in order to provide instructors with more pertinent and useful feedback. Second, they placed a series of questions meant to ask students about their participatory attitude first (Questions 1 through 4) rather than later as in the original format. They wanted to lead the students into reflecting on their performance before passing any judgments on the lesson or the instructor. This way, they hoped that students unable to provide constructive feedback on the lesson would not take anything wrong with the lesson out (solely) on the instructor (or the school) having reflected on their performance first. It is important to mention that the evaluation system is meant to reflect on the class as a whole, not just the teacher's performance within the class, which is why we require students to reflect on their performance within the class also.

Advantages of utilizing online teacher evaluation

As professional learning theories illustrate, performance evaluations encourage teacher development, creating "reflective practitioner(s)" (Chung, 2008). Having utilized this student evaluation system for a number of years now, we have recognized and made use of several significant benefits.

First, similarly to what we found in reviewing the literature on teacher evaluation, we have determined that frequent student feedback allows teachers to adjust what and how they teach with better results than administrative evaluations. For example, an instructor may present material of a technical level that may challenge a particular student population beyond their ability. If student feedback on the material comes back positive, the instructor can rest assured that that population can keep up with that level of expertise. Conversely, if the feedback shows that the students have difficulty comprehending the material, then the instructor may lower the difficulty level of the content based on the student feedback. This type of immediate and relevant evaluation of classes provides educators with extremely valuable information. Here is another example. Consider a situation where a teacher covers some content in a certain manner (e.g., employing small group work). Again, if the teacher receives positive feedback, the teacher understands that that particular manner works well (for the particular student population), and if it is negative, the teacher may have to either resort to a different instructive means or start by teaching the positive learning effects of that particular mode of learning (in this case, small group work). A student quote from Ghedin and Aquario (2008) effectively portrays the benefits of this aspect of online student evaluations of teachers:

> " … in my opinion, if these forms are used to improve the teaching they are an important evaluation resource because we are all asked to fill them in […] it has happened to me several times that the teacher says: 'listen, I have read the forms and I have understood that maybe there are some things that I need to improve, let's try this way' and so these forms have been useful…"

A related plus of frequent student evaluation is that it acts as a very useful tool for educators, especially those teaching large classes, to grasp the overall attitude of the students. In other words, educators, frequently viewing students' feedback, can gain a basic understanding of whether the students feel

generally positive or negative about the class. In large-scale, lecture-style classes, educators can find it difficult to judge the reaction of the students as they sit supposedly or expectedly listening to the lecture. Having an online evaluation tool that provides easy-to-analyze, constructive feedback in a timely manner allows teachers to get a broad sense of the progression of the course.

Online student evaluations also allow reticent or quiet students to provide information they may not otherwise volunteer in class. They also provide students with a forum for questioning and commenting on more receptive lecture style courses. For example, the authors have witnessed a number of occasions where students who did not speak out in class expressed their voices, both positive and negative, through online evaluations. Thus, feedback from evaluations in these situations helps teachers direct attention to students in need of assistance.

The fact that students complete the evaluation surveys online also allows them more freedom to respond than the traditional in-class, paper-based evaluations that some institutions or instructors still use. Based on our personal experience, having instructors present and possibly strolling around the room while the students evaluate their performance does affect students' willingness to provide accurate feedback. Moreover, the online surveys have the added bonus of not occupying the class time as the traditional paper-based surveys do. Students receive an email request for completion of their given class survey and respond to the request within the next 48 hours. Results from the completed surveys get posted for the instructor on the secured portion of the university website for the instructor to view at his or her convenience. This provides for more precise evaluations, as long as students do give feedback, and does not occupy valuable course time.

Most importantly, frequent student evaluations aid the school or administrators in maintaining or even improving teachers' instruction quality. After all, as we have observed from reviewing the literature on teacher evaluations, administrators cannot assess their teacher's performance with any regularity, or even provide instructors with the essential information they require to make the needed changes within their courses. The students, on the other hand, spend the most time with the instructors and, therefore, have far greater insight into how well the instructor performs his or her duties. Thus, teachers may appreciate feedback directly given from their students more than from their supervisors who they do not think know what takes place in (and also outside of) the classroom. Of course, some teachers may not be so appreciative of student feedback, but then our administrative experience tells us that such teachers will doubtfully appreciate their supervisors' advice or suggestions on their teaching too.

As you can see, our institution has gained tremendously from online student evaluations of classes. By having the students abundantly evaluate their classes, we have enabled our instructors to provide effective, pertinent lessons to their students. However, all the pluses described above have also come with some negative sides, which we will now discuss.

Disadvantages of utilizing online teacher evaluation

Some instructors at our institution reluctantly observe their students' feedback, and with some research suggesting that positive student evaluations of instructors in part stem from teacher interactions with the students, grading leniency and the physical appeal of the instructor (Silva et al., 2008), we can understand how some educators may disregard student evaluations of their performance. When discussing student evaluations with faculty, instructors often comment that "students are simply not in a position to evaluate their teachers' performance" (Moore & Kuol, 2005), which is one major reason why we designed our evaluation system in such a way that both teachers and students can see it as a tool to improve their classes cooperatively. Although our online evaluation system has operated since the founding of the

university in 2005, we did not monitor instructors' use of the system until the second year of operation, and once we began monitoring their use of the system within the English department, we quickly became aware of the faculty's aversion to the feedback.

There also have been concerns from those instructors who have tried to make use of the online evaluation results. One of their concerns pertains to the usefulness of student feedback. For example, if instructors receive negative feedback, they can quickly determine that something did not work well in a particular class because of the results of questions 5 and 6 on the evaluation survey (i.e., "Was the lesson interesting?" and "How much of what was covered do you think you have acquired?"). So, instructors understand that some aspect(s) of their lesson did not hold the students interest, or the material may have not been clear to them. However, we have observed that student comments regarding the lesson tend to lack the critical information needed to make the required modifications to subsequent lessons. In some cases, students discuss matters that may have nothing to do with teacher performance. In either case, their comments tend to make an insignificant contribution to teacher development other than leaving them guessing as to what went wrong. When provided with such feedback, we can understand the instructors' frustration (and the claims of those instructors who oppose online students' evaluations of their performance).

Another issue our instructors have with the feedback originates from how sparingly students offer it. As Ardalan et al. (2007) suggest, a large portion of a given class should respond to the surveys in order to provide accurate results for the teacher. If you have only one respondent to your survey, the results do not reflect the overall class perception. This problem exists at our institution. It often happens that at the beginning of a term many students proffer feedback on their classes, but from about mid-term the entire process seems to become overwhelming or bothersome and student evaluation numbers drop off considerably. This, once again, imparts very little information onto the instructor for use in teacher development or assisting students in succeeding.

In fact, many educational institutions struggle with maintaining their response rate for their online student evaluations of teaching. Some suggestions for accomplishing this include bonus points, awards or increasing the number and sources of reminders to complete the online surveys (Ardalan et al., 2007). We have considered including the evaluations as part of students' grading criteria; however, this may skew the results of the evaluations, as students may tend to give more positive evaluations with the hope that by doing so it will get reciprocated by the instructor during their assessment of the students. We have also considered the option of awards or certificates for students regularly completing the surveys but have yet to attempt this practice. Either way, we need to implement some means of increasing student reporting.

Still another aspect of student evaluations that our teachers find frustrating comes from the occasions when overall ratings of the class show student satisfaction, but a small group or a single individual remain unsatisfied with the course. A case in point, for one of the large-scale English communication courses that one of the authors used to teach, he continually received negative evaluations from a single student that had a very different idea of what an English communication course should entail. This student continued to provide the author with very low ratings and details about how the instruction should contain grammar lessons along with memorization. The course as a whole had an approval rating of ninety percent; however, the continual negative feedback provided by the single student drew much of the author's attention. So, the author spoke with the student individually regarding the objectives of the particular course, which made little difference in the feedback. Educators want to assist all learners within their courses in grasping the content they teach and further the students' knowledge of the material; however, when receiving frequent negative feedback from a particular student or group of students an instructor may begin to focus on their wants (not to say, needs) to the detriment of the remainder of the class. The significance of this problem would lessen if administrators would avoid focusing on the select malcontents, but these select few tend to be very vocal, which presents a problem for all involved.

Concluding Remarks

There remain issues that need addressing in order for the feedback provided by students to effectively assist instructors in improving their teaching quality and further enhancing students' ability to perform in a given content area. One such issue might be anonymity of the evaluations. Currently, our system identifies which students provide comments for instructors. This allows instructors to address the concerns of the specific students. However, by identifying the student leaving the feedback, students may not be leaving more critical comments that instructors need to read when issues arise in a class. By making the comments section anonymous, students may leave the critical feedback they currently tend not to; however, the severity or harshness of the feedback may increase to the extent that will negatively affect the student-teacher relationship.

To address the issue related to student comments, we may need to educate the students on how to properly use the evaluation system. Having instructors provide lessons on constructive criticism and having them request specific feedback on areas they would like to have addressed by students might improve on the current system. By focusing students' attention on specific aspects of lessons, educators may be able to receive the information they need to enhance their instruction and better assist the students with mastering the content area.

The system could also be used to ensure professional conduct among instructors. Students could provide feedback on whether instructors are meeting administrative expectations such as arriving on time to classes by reporting on this performance issue through the evaluation system.

In doing the research for this paper, we found that many other tertiary institutions share the advantages they experience from having online student evaluations of faculty instruction. This process helps empower students, as they can witness the effects their feedback has on the education they receive, and it helps empower the educators by providing them with essential information for improving their teaching skills and therefore better helping their students to thrive in the subject. Student evaluations do have issues that need addressing, but considering the alternative of only limited administrative evaluations of instructor performance, one can see the necessity of student assessments of teaching. As this form of assessment and teacher development continues to evolve, it will become more and more prevalent throughout education.[1]

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[1] For those readers that do not have access to such a system currently but would like to begin implementing student evaluations of their performance, they can develop their own survey for their classes, free of charge, using SurveyMonkey.com (Looney, 2008). This tool will allow them to create short surveys of no more than 10 items and compile the data from the first 100 respondents on each survey they create.

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