

# The Other Side of Teaching Assessment

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The article discusses how to improve the quality of teaching evaluation by determining class characteristics. The existing research on student written evaluations of the teaching performance of college and university instructors is reviewed to present arguments for and against the use of student written evaluations. The paper introduces a class evaluation instrument and presents recommendations on how to use the class evaluation instrument for teaching improvement.

*Keywords:* self-teaching assessment, class evaluation instrument, the instructor class evaluation form

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing concern about university teaching and a variety of procedures have been developed to appraise the quality of instruction. The most common procedures used in evaluating teaching effectiveness are self-appraisal, student ratings, videotaping and in-service education. Results from the appraisal process are expected to be used by instructors to improve their teaching skills. This article discusses how to improve the quality of teaching evaluation by determining class characteristics. The existing research on students' written evaluations of the teaching performance of college and university instructors is reviewed. Arguments are presented both for and against the use of students' written evaluations as a valid indicator of teaching effectiveness. The paper then introduces a class evaluation instrument and presents recommendations on how to use the class evaluation instrument for teaching improvement.

## Literature Review

There are many aspects of a student generated teaching evaluation that are uncontrollable due to characteristics of the students and the instructor and techniques that instructors use in class. Student evaluation instruments may be internally developed or commercially purchased. The evaluation form must be clearly written, so that students might respond in a manner that provides feedback to the instructor on those traits deemed important. The evaluation process is typically conducted during the last days of the semester and the results get back to the instructor one to two months later. The results of this evaluation can be used by instructors to identify areas of strength and weakness, and these same results can be used by administrators to rate/rank the different instructors.

Several authors argued that there are many problems in utilizing student evaluations. Each student is an individual and has unique perceptions. A student may hastily rate an instructor on the numbered items in the evaluation form. Accountability by the unknown respondent is completely lacking, and the instructor has no

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chance to discuss with the students why the diverse or negative ratings were given, since no opportunity exists for interaction between the instructor and the students after the term is finished. Students may not respond appropriately when vague, open-ended items appear in a questionnaire (Marsh & Roche, 1993). Overall, averages of all students' ratings provide little information as to the quality of instruction provided for any single teaching factor.

In spite of the extensive research supporting the validity of student evaluations of teaching, many writers still express reservations about their use particularly for personnel and tenure decisions or even oppose their use (Goldman, 1993), although some studies have found that student ratings are somewhat higher, if the stated purpose is for promotion and tenure (Feldman, 1993). There is abundant evidence of faculty hostility and cynicism towards the use of student ratings (Spencer, 1992). Some authors who are supportive of the use of student ratings believed that they alone will not automatically improve teaching but that other types of feedback are required to sustain improvement (Seldin, 1993).

Some authors argued that feedback from student ratings can help to improve instruction (Centra, 1997) and students rate most highly those instructors from whom they have learned the most (McKeachie, 1990). However, most critics of student ratings cite the fact that this correlation is only moderate or widely varying and argue against their validity (Koon & Murray, 1995). Feldman (1993) found that the time at which student evaluations are administered, whether in the middle of the course, or before, during or after the final examination, has no effect on the results. He also reported that ratings are somewhat higher when the instructor being evaluated is present in the room while the evaluation forms are being completed. Feldman (1993) reported that students tend to give somewhat higher ratings when they identify themselves compared to ratings given when they remain anonymous. The author concluded that the stated purpose of the evaluation had no significant effect on ratings. Open- and closed- ended items generate different types of responses. Open-ended items allow students to express an unconstrained opinion about some aspect of the class and/or instructor, and may provide vital information for formative evaluation (Centra, 1997).

Teachers of smaller classes and higher-level courses, elective or non-required courses tend to receive higher ratings (McKeachie, 1990). The subject matter area does indeed have an effect on student ratings stressing in such a way that a "poor" teacher presenting interesting material is rated consistently higher on some dimensions of effective teaching than a "good" teacher presenting boring material. The differences among disciplines are sufficiently large that comparisons in student ratings should not be made across disciplines. Several studies have shown that there is no relationship or a very weak positive relationship between research productivity and teaching (Feldman, 1993). Many authors contended that student ratings are biased against women instructors (Rutland, 1990) and several authors found that female students gave higher ratings than males (Feldman, 1993).

Evidence suggests that the single most important student characteristic affecting student ratings is student expectations. These expectations have been shown to influence course ratings (Prave & Baril, 1993). Other factors, such as emotional state, student age, reaction to the use of student evaluations, reaction by faculty, reaction from students and job satisfaction among many others, have also been examined to measure their impacts on students' evaluation rating (Prave & Baril, 1993). There is a broad consensus that students cannot effectively respond to student evaluation items that require them to make judgments, generalizations or inferences that are beyond their knowledge and experience. Some of the items related to teaching efforts and accomplishments that students are unable to assess effectively are the sufficiency of course content, whether

course materials are current, instructors' knowledge of the subject matter, appropriateness of course objectives and content and appropriateness of technology used in the course. Assessment of these items requires professional background (Seldin, 1993).

What is missing in all these studies of faculty evaluation is an evaluation of the other half of the process, the students. It has been acknowledged that student perceptions are unreliable in some cases and more reliable in others. Other uncontrollable factors like class size and student demographics can have a profound effect on the evaluation. A given faculty member could be teaching the same course using the same methods in two classes and end up with completely different student evaluations. It is vital that a method be devised to collect information relative to the characteristics of the students, if there is any hope to use student evaluations of instructors in a constructive manner.

### **Class Evaluation**

The purpose of the class evaluation is to complete the informational picture of the entire teaching process. Teaching is interactive, and considering only one side of an interactive process, is inappropriate. This is especially true when personnel decisions like promotion and tenure are based on this information. The class evaluation is thus fundamental in the development and application of any teaching assessment process.

The class evaluation form presented in Appendix attempts to capture learning characteristics of the class. Instructors of advanced classes depend on the instructors of introductory classes to prepare students for work at the advanced level. It could be that an introductory level instructor is new to the job or attempting to curry favor with the students in hopes of a "good" student evaluation that might lead to promotion and/or tenure. In such cases, the students might be incapable of performing at the advanced level. The instructor of the upper level class who conscientiously assigns fair, though low, grades may receive criticism on student evaluations for being too hard. This first question allows the instructor to identify whether or not the class as a whole is properly prepared. If the class is not capable of working at the advanced level, remedial actions need to be taken with the instructors of the introductory courses.

The next four questions focus on attendance and participation. Classroom time is limited, and an instructor has the right to expect students to be on time, pay attention and participate in the educational process. The most talented teacher in the world will make little impression on students who are habitually tardy or absent or who daydream away class time. The answers to these questions can be used to help structure a class in a way to correct these problems. Tardiness and absence can be addressed by scheduling gradable activities early in the class. If such activities are defined unambiguously, students know that being late will affect their grade, and the instructor has placed this burden directly on each student. Changing the method of instruction may increase student attention and participation. There are many different interactive learning strategies that compel students to become involved in the educational process. It is the instructor's responsibility to identify and implement those techniques most appropriate to the subject materials.

Questions six through eight are an indication of student involvement outside the classroom. Students today are faced with many demands on their time, yet such demands are beyond the control of the instructor. Not all relevant work can be done during assigned class hours, especially the type of problem-solving work that requires students to delve into concepts and techniques and their applications. Students who allow themselves to be distracted from their studies are not likely to do well on tests or papers. A fair instructor would be forced to reward such low quality work with a low grade, and it is unfair that a student's lack of application should

reflect on an instructor's evaluation. Instructors can address this problem by requiring homework and papers and having such work comprise a substantial portion of the student's grade.

It is unfortunate that despite of the best efforts of an instructor, some student simply do not want to be in the class. These may be required courses for which the student has no interest or courses that conflict with other activities that the student would rather pursue. It is said that you can lead a horse to water but not make it drink, and similarly, a student that does not want to learn will not do so. Should this problem arise frequently, it might be appropriate to evaluate the course being offered and its appropriateness to the curriculum. While an occasional student is an individual problem, widespread lack of interest could indicate an inherent problem with the course content or curriculum design.

Instruction is not accomplished solely in the classroom. Even the best students may have questions concerning details of the material being presented. Instructors maintain office hours, so students have the opportunity to work on an individual basis. But, even if the door is open 24 hours a day, it is no good, if students do not avail themselves of this opportunity. Students may claim that the instructor was "never there" as an excuse for their own failure to stop by the office. Most student evaluations ask a question concerning the availability of the faculty member, and this question considers the dedication of the students. If there is a major difference of opinion on the subject of availability between the student evaluation and the class evaluation, it may be appropriate to review office hours being held to assure that they meet the needs of the class. "The comments" section allows the instructor to identify any special characteristics that might have a bearing on class performance. This could include habitability items like heating, lighting or the condition of the room. It might be that the course is held in the evening and all or most of the students are working parents. A class that has a sizable number of non-native English speakers could also present a challenge to the instructor. Any such qualitative factor that could reflect on the students' evaluation of the instructor is appropriate for this section.

It is suggested that the instructor class evaluation form be used in tandem with student evaluation forms. Any time the students fill out evaluation forms concerning the instructor, the instructor should complete this form concerning the class. This will help assure that the comments recorded on this form are independent from and contemporary with the student comments. Comparison of the two sets of evaluations can thus provide a more complete picture of the class at a given point in time.

### **Conclusions**

Teaching is not an inherently easy profession. There is always room for improvement, and instructors use evaluation instruments to identify areas that may need work. Instructors must be open to criticism and be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and be willing to affect changes in their teaching performance. But, it is also critically important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the students and the entire evaluation process. Changing teaching techniques in response to inappropriate or improper evaluation comments may be counterproductive to the overall teaching process.

The instructor class evaluation form presented here attempts to identify those characteristics of a class that could affect the overall learning process and be reflected on the students' evaluation of the teacher. No suggestion is made that this form is to be used for the instructor to deflect legitimate criticism, but there should also be no reason for an instructor to take the blame for class factors that cannot be controlled. By providing a means to create a more complete picture of the overall class environment, it should be possible to make the entire evaluation process more meaningful and beneficial.

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## Appendix

### Instructor Class Evaluation Form

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**Class/Term:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please circle the answer that best describes this class:**

**SA = Strongly agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly disagree**

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1. This class demonstrated appropriate background knowledge for successful completion of this course.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

2. This class participated when appropriate for class material.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

3. Class members attended class regularly.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

4. Class members were present at the beginning of the class period.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

5. Class members were attentive throughout the class.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

6. Class members showed evidence of completing assigned readings.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

7. Class members showed evidence of completing assigned homework.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

8. Class members turned in assigned work on time.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

9. Class members seemed interested in the subject material.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_ D\_\_\_\_\_ SD\_\_\_\_\_

10. Class members sought additional help during office hours or at other times.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ N\_\_\_\_\_ D\_\_\_\_\_ SD\_\_\_\_\_

Other comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructor/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_