

On Student Evaluation of Faculty

A brief survey of the literature on students' evaluation of faculty suggests several substantial issues. As one study said, "student opinions should not be used as the basis for evaluating teaching effectiveness because these aggregated opinions are invalid measures of quality teaching, provide no empirical evidence in this regard, are incomparable across different courses and different faculty members, and promote faculty gaming and competition" (Martin, 1998).

The general consensus seems to be that students are not properly trained to evaluate teaching. Furthermore, as Martin points out, "if some of the characteristics of high quality teaching tend to cause low student ratings and some of the characteristics of low quality teaching tend to cause high student ratings, the theory is flawed and the measurement is invalid."

And don't get me started on all the variables that have been shown to affect student opinion survey validity - there are dozens. To give you just an inkling...

- size and time of class
- teacher dress, sex, age, and "expressiveness"
- student GPA and expected grade

Felton et al. examined the relations between quality, easiness, and sexiness for 3190 professors at 25 universities. "For faculty with at least ten student posts, the correlation between quality and easiness is 0.61, and the correlation between quality and sexiness is 0.30. Using simple linear regression, we find that about half of the variation in quality is a function of easiness and sexiness."

So unless one can control for things such as these variables and students' lack of training in evaluation, I cannot believe that even a survey that is touted as "valid" can be especially meaningful.

Another study noted, "Deficiencies include: their use as the sole measure of teaching effectiveness, the tendency for universities to rely on unmoderated student opinion without tempering the results with contextual factors, and a lack of testing for reliability and validity that renders the data of unknown precision" (Bedggood and Pollard, 1999).

And consider this, "many faculty believe that the incentive system (using student evaluations for promotion and tenure decisions) puts them in a conflict of interest between making changes that would improve student learning and making changes that would improve student evaluations" (Birnbaum, 1998).

But with that being said, how students *feel* isn't entirely unimportant. The surveys may not accurately reflect the quality of your teaching or the course, but they do tell you something about how students are feeling. As Gooding et al put it, "Student opinion surveys are snapshots of students' emotional dispositions toward courses and instructors taken before the full impact of the material or method of delivery can be known" (2012). If you can recognize them for what they are, and you don't put too much stock in them, they can give you feedback that can be useful, if taken with a grain of salt.

A very recent meta-analysis (Uttl et al, 2016) truly is the nail in the coffin. *Inside Higher Education* published these findings under the title, "Zero Correlation Between Evaluations and Learning: New study adds to evidence that student reviews of professors have limited validity." That kind of says it all.

Taking Teaching Seriously

- Perhaps part of the reason that teaching isn't taken as seriously as many would like in terms of IFR's and T&P is that we don't collect evidence of teaching quality in a serious way
- Quality teaching involves reflection, planning, taking risks, development, documenting progress, and addressing weaknesses, but to what extent are we asked to document these on IFR's or really even in the T&P process?
- (By the way, "Skilled researchers and effective teachers are neither substitutes nor complements for each other -- in fact, they have no relationship at all, according to a study published by the Brookings Institution" in January 2017.)

Even the "best" student opinion forms are problematic

- See handout
- Furthermore, they are sometimes costly

What student opinion forms *can* do

- Allow students to provide some open ended feedback (which is occasionally insightful and valuable)
- Allow students to share their *feelings of satisfaction* (or lack thereof) with the course and the instructor (and student satisfaction IS a small and not entirely insignificant piece in the overall picture)

Student opinion survey recommendation

- 2-5 simple questions that students could be expected to answer accurately
- We wouldn't go overboard in viewing the results as trustworthy, but use them as points of reference, as minor evidence

Possible questions

- This course increased my interest in the subject matter
- I felt respected by my instructor
- I feel this course changed me to some degree as a person, thinker, or learner
- This course felt rigorous to me

A Possible Alternative: A Draft

Would take into consideration a variety of *factors* such as:

- Student learning
- Efforts at development and applying new learning
- Willingness to take reasonable, research-based risks
- Student satisfaction
- Quality of course and lesson design
- Recognition of strengths and weaknesses/addressing those

Would involve a variety of evidence determined by the individual instructor to make his or her case

- Collecting information on student learning and student satisfaction
- Reflection on strengths and challenges, implementation results, etc.
- Artifacts: syllabi, sample lessons, etc.
- Other evidence

At agenda setting time, the chair (and perhaps others) could give feedback on the proposed plan for evidence collection in general and the methodology for tracking students learning specifically

Would require a reflection

- What strategies do you regularly use and what is the research that supports them?
- What teaching risks are you taking, why do you feel they are worth taking, how are you managing those risks over time, and how are you working out the kinks? What evidence are you seeing that the risk is either paying off or needs to be overhauled or retired?
- What evidence do you have that your students are making significant learning gains?
- What are your current strengths as an instructor? How do you know? How are you building on these strengths?
- What do you most need to work on as an instructor? How do you know? What steps have you already taken to work on this area of need, and what further steps do you plan to take?

Criteria

Student learning	The findings clearly demonstrate that the majority of this individual's students are making significant learning gains across the course.
Quality of methodology*	The instructor's methodology for keeping track of student learning is sound. The data/findings are persuasive/trustworthy and appear to validly and reliably reflect the quality of student learning
Quality of faculty development over time	The instructor is able to accurately diagnose his or her teaching strengths and weaknesses with supporting evidence, especially as these apply to the quality of student learning. The instructor engages in quality faculty development opportunities regularly, applies that learning, and keeps track of the results. Development is powerful and ongoing with a plan for the future.
Quality of course and lesson design, resources, and materials	The syllabi and other course materials make it clear how the course focuses on developing the attributes we desire in our graduates. Lesson design and strategies are research-based. Overall design meets the criteria set forth through criteria proposed by Quality Matters or similar organizations.
Level of student satisfaction	Data suggest reasonable levels of student satisfaction
Level of innovation	Evidence suggests that the instructor innovates and is willing to take reasonable, research-based risks when needed while managing those risks when possible

*What makes a higher quality methodology?

- Collecting data from more courses/students per semester
- Collecting data over time to look for trends
- Triangulation of methods
- Assessing student learning as far after the initial learning as possible

Possible Sources of Evidence

- Mid-term Course Assessment
- Demonstration teaching (instructor teaches a lesson to peers incorporating innovative elements and getting feedback)
- Peer review (conducted)
- Quality Matters certification for predominately on-line courses
- Transformative Course Design certification for predominately F2F courses
- List of development attended and how he or she implemented ideas from that faculty development and measured the results
- A pattern of above average scores on student opinion surveys
- Development of innovative curriculum
- Student work over time
- Scholarship of teaching and learning that results in improved student learning
- Pre/post assessments – evidence of learning gains
- Implementation of strategies learned through professional development
- Japanese lesson study (Jugyo kenkyu - <http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/a-different-approach-to-teacher-learning-lesson-study/>)
- Documentation of alumni or student successes
- Student reflection on which learning gains (perhaps gathered via salgsite.org)
- Iterations of syllabi that show growth and development
- Exceptional advising and/or supervision – assisting students in crisis, unusual accommodations, use of resources, allowing students to extend placements