

EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF USING A VLE FOR WEEKLY STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING

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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated faculty use of formative, weekly, online student evaluations of teaching. Results were based on interviews of six faculty members at a rural university college in the United Kingdom. While faculty were initially keen to use the feedback received from the students, reviewing the feedback each week soon became too onerous a task and tended to be superficially reviewed once every few weeks. Another issue was the lack of overall student participation in completing the evaluation forms, which gave rise to questions of how representative the answers were. Those faculty members who were more involved in this student evaluation used the feedback to improve their teaching and as an incentive to improve future classes. Variations were found in faculty use of evaluation feedback, as a result of difference in background and experience.

Introduction

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have been around for decades and are the most frequent form of assessment of faculty performance in higher education (Becker & Watts, 1999; Burden, 2008; Lill, 1979; Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, & Filler, 2007; Parayitam, Desai, & Phelps, 2007; Read, Rama, & Raghunandan, 2001; Remidios & Lieberman, 2008; Smith & Welicker-Pollak, 2008; Yao & Grady, 2005). While “such evaluations are. . . the most important, and sometimes the sole, measure of an instructor’s teaching ability” (Wilson, 1998, cited in Becker & Watts, 1999, p. A12,) and therefore useful for administrators, they can be of limited value to the faculty member (Becker & Watts, 1999; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Yao & Grady, 2005). Unfortunately, the positive effect of these evaluations cannot be experienced by those students who have completed the feedback at the end of a semester, as the faculty member cannot improve upon a module already completed (Becker & Watts, 1999). Studies have shown that “students generally considered the improvement of teaching to be the most attractive outcome of a teaching evaluation system” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998, p. 531), and support for student evaluations shows that faculty recognise the importance of the students’ involvement in shaping the module (Lill, 1979; Smith & Welicker-Pollak, 2008). However, the current system could decrease student motivation to correctly fill in evaluation forms, therefore possibly reducing their meaningful input, as students may not take it seriously (Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Smith & Welicker-Pollak, 2008).

Weekly Student Evaluations of Teaching

Contrary to the traditional summative evaluations of teaching, which have been criticised as “too complicated a task to leave to pen-and-paper summative, end-of-semester SET questionnaires” (Burden, 2008, p. 323), ongoing, weekly student evaluations could have a number of positive outcomes for the faculty member. These include improving teaching and learning (McKone, 1999), facilitating faculty personal development (Johnson, 2000), consequently improving student learning (Peat & Franklin, 2002), and possibly leading to changes in the course delivery and improved future student evaluations (Parayitam et al., 2007). Conversely, there has been research questioning whether student evaluations of teaching have any positive effect on the overall quality of teaching (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002) and in some cases has shown to have a negative impact on teaching, due to the increase in stress or pressure to perform (Brown, 2008; Mercer, 2006).

Criticisms of Student Evaluations of Teaching

There are some criticisms of using SETs, such as grading leniency bias (higher ratings when higher grades are expected); influence of module difficulty (dumbing down the module or reducing the amount of homework to keep students happy); influences of cosmetic factors (such as instructor gender, race, sense of humour, and/or physical appearance); whether the module is a required course or an elective; student effort; and student interest in the module (McPherson, 2006; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Parayitam et al., 2007; Scriven, 1995). Another criticism is that SETs are “a threat to academic freedom in the sense teachers may feel inhibited from discussing controversial ideas and presenting challenging questions to students because they fear that students may express disagreement through the SET” (Braskamp & Ory, 1994, cited in Parayitam et al., 2007, p. 92). While traditional SETs would be conducted as a form of summative evaluation, the purposes of this project is purely formative, as its goal is to allow participating faculty not to “assess the worth of success of the instruction [but to seek] information to improve it” (Tessmer, 1993, p. 23). This allows faculty to return to the original objective of student evaluation: “to provide feedback to the instructor to improve his/her teaching” (Lill, 1979, p. 243). Such formative objectives eliminate the need to consider the aforementioned criticisms of SETs in the paragraph above.

Most student evaluations are conducted by the students in the classroom setting (Becker & Watts, 1999), and recommendations are that the teacher not be present in the room in order to reduce biases (Lill, 1979). Conducting SETs electronically is not a common practice, though with the increase in student numbers across many universities and constantly updated technologies, this practice is becoming less unheard of, especially in the sciences (Peat & Franklin, 2002) and online learning programmes (Ogunleye, 2010). Read et al. (2001) noted that other more intensive forms of evaluation, such as “peer visits, external and internal reviews of teaching portfolios, and qualitative feedback from students is more time consuming and places a greater demand on evaluators and institutions” (p. 190). This study addresses the time consumption demand by conducting the evaluations both online and weekly in order to gain on-going quantitative and qualitative feedback. As the use of a single source of feedback has been criticised (Timpson & Andrew, 1997), this study aims to add another evaluation instrument to the single summative evaluation form currently administered by the university’s quality

assurance department. For this study the student evaluation of teaching is conducted using the VLE Moodle as part of an on-going process to improve student learning and faculty teaching.

Aim of Research

The project came about serendipitously after conducting mid-module feedback forms with open ended questions. The responses of the students were positive and detailed, concurring with previous research on mid-module evaluations where students perceived they reflected positively on the instructors' commitment to teaching and performance (Brown, 2008). This experience led to the idea that it might be worth doing continuous formative evaluation throughout a module. Therefore, the aim of this project is to explore whether the introduction of weekly online evaluations of lectures are viable both from a student and faculty point of view. As the project is ongoing, this paper concentrates on the faculty perceptions of the success of the online student evaluation project.

The objective of this research is to understand whether faculty members find immediate formative student evaluation useful in improving current lecture materials whilst still fresh in their minds. Such feedback could provide faculty members with immediate feedback on:

- whether their lectures are pitched at the right level of background knowledge for students,
- whether the students are finding the balance between actual formal lecturing and other discussion based activities appropriate for material being presented,
- whether the material was presented in an interesting and challenging manner, and
- whether the particular class material is linked well to materials previously taught in earlier weeks (or previously taken modules).

Method

The evaluations were conducted with online questionnaires provided through the VLE Moodle. These online questionnaires were anonymous and the student was re-assured that the results would not affect the grading of the module, thus reducing student ratings bias, as mentioned previously.

SET Questionnaire Design

There has been research conducted on what evaluation items students can provide useful feedback to (Green, Calderon, & Reider, 1998). Therefore, it was important to research what types of questions were both measurable by the students, and also useful for

feedback to the faculty member. Calderon et al. (1996, cited in Green et al., 1998) noted students were unable to effectively assess items beyond their scope of knowledge, including:

- sufficiency of course content
- whether course materials are current
- instructors knowledge of the subject matter
- appropriateness of course objectives and content
- appropriateness of technology used in the course

Another issue for questionnaire design is the subject of open- or closed-ended questions. While closed-ended questions make the questionnaire quicker to fill out from the student perspective, open-ended questions provide the opportunity for students to provide explanatory feedback. Mostly close-ended questions were used, as this practice is most common (Becker & Watts, 1999; Lill, 1979; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007), usually with an arbitrary rating from 1-5 Likert scale, anchored by Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree on either end. There has been concern in previous research about reducing the “complex teaching process to series of numbers on a teaching form” (Mercer, 2006, p. 24), but it does allow for ease of interpretation and will be less time-consuming for the faculty member to assess the evaluation forms. One open-ended question was added at the end of the questionnaire to allow for any other feedback the student wished to make.

A list of possible questions was compiled using a variety of literature (Becker & Watts, 1999; Lill, 1979; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Parayitam et al., 2007) and faculty feedback before the final questionnaire was assembled. This questionnaire was pilot tested during the first few weeks of study by the students before being finalised for use throughout the year. This common questionnaire was administered to each faculty member to use as a guide, though they were encouraged to add questions that were more specific to their module.

Student Motivation

Initially, it was proposed that students would have to fill in the questionnaire as a condition of downloading their class notes off the VLE Moodle. However, the British Educational Research Association deemed this unacceptable practise: “researchers must not use coercion or duress of any form to persuade participants” to provide feedback (BERA, 2004, p. 7). Therefore the question of student motivation to fill in the questionnaire comes into play: “Since students’ input is the root and source of student evaluation data, meaningful and active participation of students is essential” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998, p. 532). This suggests that students who are not motivated may not provide meaningful information. In order to encourage students to complete the evaluation, it was recommended faculty place the evaluation in the VLE so that it would appear just prior to students downloading key materials each week. Another consideration, particularly with this study, where students are filling out the same evaluation every week, “is the potential for students to become uninterested in the evaluation process simply because of overfamiliarity with the instrument and the way they fill it out” (Divoky, 1995, p. 318). However, expectancy theory also reasons that students will “continuously evaluate the outcomes of [their] behaviour and subjectively

assesses the likelihood that each of his or her possible actions will lead to various outcomes” (Chen & Hoshower, 1998, p. 534) suggesting that students will be continuously motivated by seeing their suggestions incorporated into the material.

A training session was run for faculty who were interested in participating in the programme, so that they were familiar with how to implement the evaluation tool within the VLE.

Interviews

The criterion for the selection of faculty and modules was that the participants should come from diverse backgrounds so a broad range of data could be collected (Yao & Grady, 2005). Faculty from different departments, seniority, gender, and experience were asked to volunteer for the study. As the study was exploratory, representativeness was not a major criterion for the selection of participants. The total number of participants was limited to six so the amount of qualitative feedback from the interviews would not be overwhelming.

The aide memoire included the following discussion questions:

- What has been your experience with student evaluation of teaching?
- What inspired you to get involved with this project and what were you hoping to achieve?
- What do you actually do with the online weekly student evaluation feedback?
- What barriers have you encountered in your use of student evaluation feedback to improve your teaching? What suggestions do you have that may enable you to make more effective use of student evaluation feedback?
- After this project is over, would you continue to use online weekly student evaluations?

Results and Discussion

The faculty members represented a number of departments within the overall university college: Business, IT, Veterinary Nurses, and Environmental Studies. Most of the respondents had only been teaching for a year or two, and two of the respondents had over ten years experience. Two of the respondents were male, and four were female, and the ages varied from earlier teaching career 20s to later teaching career 50s.

All of the respondents had experience with the typical end of year evaluations conducted university wide by the university’s quality assurance department. These evaluations

tended to rate the overall module on a score of 1–5, and that information was fed back to the faculty leader of the module. One of the more experienced faculty observed that such evaluations were common everywhere he had taught. The overall impression was that while the end of year forms were a handy tool, they often did not provide enough information to be of greater value:

- I look at them, take in the information that's there. . .because the form in my opinion doesn't provide a lot of detail.
- The quantitative information. . .just know you got a score.

Some students also can provide qualitative information to further expand on why they gave the score they did, and this information tended to be more useful to all respondents, rather than the quantitative score:

Some of it first year I got comments back that I wasn't very approachable, and that was my nerves I think, I usually set them a task in the tutorial and sit back and let them do it. This year I'm going around and working with them. . .so I'm much more sort of involved with the class... that seems to be more appreciated than just sitting down at the desk.

However, the overall impression of the end of year forms was that they were conducted too late in the module to be of any use to those students who gave the scores:

For one thing, the timing of them — at the end of the year! It's too bloody late to do anything about it! It's difficult to go back and say 'how might I have needed to do that differently?'

They also tended to not be specific enough in reference to any particular changes that could be made by any faculty member or how the faculty member could improve any particular sessions.

The participants were inspired to begin this research project with a variety of different views. One of the less experienced faculty saw it as a way to ensure she was doing a good job:

. . .it's was more that I think personally I want the students to think I'm doing a good job, and I want that feedback from them to find out if I am or not, or find out some ways to improve my approach.

Some were interested in getting feedback from the students in regards to changing the classes for the next year's cohort, some liked the idea of getting regular feedback from students, and one of the more experienced faculty was interested in meeting like-minded people who were more reflective about what they do. Those respondents who had been teaching for a longer period of time seemed to be more concerned with making small adjustments to their teaching, and reflecting about what elements made the students more

interested in their module. The more inexperienced respondents seemed to be more concerned with making sure their lectures were okay, and making sure their teaching approach was appropriate for the students they were teaching:

I think because I'm so new at this I find myself constantly second guessing 'am I doing things right, are they getting anything out of it . . .do they understand what I'm saying.'

The participants were also asked what they did with the online feedback. One interesting find was that respondents used different techniques for eliciting feedback from the students using the online tool. Half of the faculty members did not provide printed out notes in class and the students were responsible for downloading them from Moodle. In these cases, the evaluation tool was linked to the notes, and the students were faced with a 'barrier' of the evaluation tool each week prior to getting their notes (though they could by-pass the evaluation tool and not answer the questions):

I get the impression that they will fill the evaluation form in just because it's there and it's a barrier. They'll complete it yes everything's brilliant, then click on the link to get access to their notes.

Another respondent linked the evaluation tool to extended notes on Moodle, but provided a short form of notes during class:

It's generally been people who've missed a session. . .I came away with the impression they went through the evaluation form just to get to the lecture notes, so it's all very positive stuff with no additional written comments.

Another faculty member linked them to activities, which the students will re-visit once the lectures are all completed:

I'll be taking them back to some of the supplementary materials. I'm going to revisit these evaluations. Because I think it puts them in a situation of being. . .they will now have the value of hindsight. They haven't appreciated a reason to go and look at that material. . .I'm sure I'll get a higher response rate. . .I'm very keen to re-evaluate how they found the sessions. . .their feeling about that.

One respondent didn't link the evaluation tool to any Moodle items, and simply reminded the students to fill it in each week.

There were mixed responses to what each faculty member did with the feedback tool, but this didn't seem to vary with what style they used to get the information via links on Moodle. Overall, the answers were not as specific as they would have liked. However, some respondents did find value in the feedback tool:

Having seen that. . .I probably went completely overboard (laughs). I'm conscious that I didn't walk around a lot. . .I tried to do the eye contact thing. . .

and I did find myself asking (you fall into that trap where you tend to ask the people who you know will respond), it did encourage me briefly. . .to be more inclusive.

An interesting find was that regardless of the method used for eliciting feedback from the students, all faculty struggled with a lack of response rate from students. All participants were disheartened by this factor.

I would only have 10 students going on to Moodle to access the lecture notes. . .and then say half of those students would do it. . .that ends up being a 25% response rate for the overall class. . .makes you wonder if that was representativeness enough to be able to do anything with the feedback. . .those students that respond, is there a reason they're responding?

The discussion on expectancy theory leading students to be motivated by seeing their input into the lecture being taken seriously may have led some students to keep using the evaluation tool, but didn't inspire new students to sign up. This supports the points made by Chen and Hoshower (1998).

Some questioned the students' ability to be critical when evaluating a lecture, as most of the feedback was very positive:

I've gone into class and actually shown them the results from the previous week, and made the comment that everything seems to be fine again. . .try to encourage them that way. . .I'm not sure how you get students to make more comments.

However, one new faculty member commented that even if there were not many comments made or many students participating, you still had an overall view of how the lectures were going, consistent with research finding that students are "discerning evaluators who are sensitive to different qualities of courses" (Remidios & Lieberman, 2008, p. 112).

When asked about the barriers to using the evaluation tool, the respondents tended to agree that one barrier was the lack of student response. While they were positive about the evaluation tool itself, they questioned its usefulness in light of a small number of students actually utilising the tool. Another comment made by a number of the respondents was the lack of critical evaluation of each lecture:

I think the problem is the students are apathetic, I just don't think they care enough to make comments that are useful. . .their view on the way teaching works is, maybe they don't see it as a two way communication.

This is consistent with the research by Chen (1998) on the essential components of "meaningful and active participation" (p. 532) when looking at the link between motivation and outcome. In this case, that type of participation did not seem to be elicited

by the overall student responses to the evaluation. One respondent agreed with this, and even taught some non-updated lectures to see if the students would respond

. . .almost like a test to see if they were doing it right, and found that the feedback didn't actually change as much as I would have thought that it should.

This is consistent with research by Divoky (1995) in that students generally became more uninterested with the evaluation tool because it was too familiar.

Another respondent admitted one barrier was their motivation to continually use the tool and input the feedback into Moodle, though their reasoning tended to be that it was more of a psychological barrier (just one more thing to do on top of the already hectic workload) rather than the tool was difficult to set up. Another respondent commented how quick and easy it was to set up and that not knowing how to do it couldn't be used as an excuse:

The fact that you've done the questionnaire makes it much easier. . .if you'd asked me to set up my own questions I'm absolutely certain I'd have never got round to doing it.

The interview was closed with one more question: After this project is over, would you continue to use online weekly student evaluations? Surprisingly, even though most comments on the outcomes of the feedback were not as positive as they would have liked, most respondents would still want to continue using an online evaluation tool. There were a few comments about how frequently they would use the tool, and most agreed that weekly was possibly too often, and a more flexible approach would be worthwhile.

I'm keen to actually evaluate. . .this focuses very much on what went on in the session. . .there are some other things I'm keen to experiment with. . .I thought our students would be more digitally natured than they are.

A few mentioned that perhaps the inclusion of more qualitative comments around each question would allow for more detailed feedback, but they questioned the student's likelihood of responding to more detailed questionnaires.

There were some serendipitous findings to the study. One faculty member, when questioned on what they did with the feedback noted:

To be fair I think it's not so much what have I been doing with the feedback tool, for me it was the fact that I knew that feedback was coming, I consciously changed my lecture before. . .I had been evaluated on it. . .knowing those were the questions they were going to be answering I actually changed the lectures that I ran from last year so that they would be able to answer those questions positively.

Thus the evaluation tool provided a sense of motivation, and the questions themselves provided scope for what elements should be changed. Another faculty member noted that

One of the questions in particular asked if they were inspired to go and learn more, perhaps wasn't something that I'd identified as a key thing that I should be doing. . . which is of course in a final year group is something hopefully very important. I think I was quite interested to find out whether I had done enough of a push to get them to go out and look for themselves at the end of a lecture.

Conclusion

Overall, faculty members found immediate formative student evaluation more useful for confirming their lectures were hitting the right notes with the students, rather than improving current lecture materials whilst still fresh in their minds. Lack of critical evaluation and small response rate by the students tended to frustrate many faculty members involved in the project, and as a result not many changes to teaching materials were implemented as a result of the student evaluations. Therefore, the exploratory study was not as successful at reaching its aims as prior research may have suggested it would be. However, a serendipitous finding was that knowing an evaluation was to be done of their materials motivated a faculty member to make changes to her teaching materials even before the tool was implemented, and some of the questions on the evaluation tool motivated some to reflect on their own teaching practices.

In conclusion, the weekly online use of student evaluations is one more form of evaluation, which if conducted less frequently, could provide a timely and comprehensive view of another dimension of teaching.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of the study was that it only used faculty interviews conducted by other faculty members; therefore, some of the participants may be hesitant to express all their opinions because of the potential for sensitivity to the subject matter. The results were based on an exploratory study of faculty at a rural university-college, and although the participants were selected from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, most participants had limited experience with teaching, so their experiences or perceptions may not be generalised to faculty from other disciplines or institutions.

As the project is only part way through, future research will include interviews with students to investigate their overall views of the evaluation tool. Other possible research could compare the summative assessments done by the university's quality assurance department with the weekly evaluation scores to see if continuous student feedback has an effect on those scores (for example, do those faculty members who conduct weekly feedback and therefore change their lectures get higher scores from the students on the

module?). Further research could also be conducted on how to improve the student response rate, and therefore receive a more representative amount of feedback from each class.

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