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## **On-line Course Assessment: Problems and Prospects**

### *Introduction*

This is a summary paper that discusses the problems and prospects of using on-line tools to allow student assessment of faculty. In part one, some of the practical problems of on-line tools are considered. An effective on-line assessment system must be two-tiered to preserve the data integrity of the respondents, be simple to use, and provide flexibility to both the assessors and the assessed. The next part discusses future prospects and suggests how on-line tools can be used to bring new value to the learning process. Finally, some observations are made as to how student assessment of faculty fits with the formation of learning centered rather than teaching centered educational goals.

### *Part One: Requirements for an Effective System*

Currently, students undertake course assessments of faculty courses with paper and pencil tools. In effect, student assessment of faculty is a type of “survey” that is given to students. This survey is not standardized, however; it varies according to educational division or even by discipline. This survey is then sometimes used by department chairs and administrators to assess the effectiveness of the instruction of that faculty member. The primary issue, however, is that it should provide useful feedback to instructors who can use the survey to improve their instruction (more on these issues later).

Having worked in business as a marketing researcher, I would first like to point out a simple benefit of using paper survey research forms –namely that a paper, multiple choice form is easy to administrate. It places, or should place, limited demands upon the survey-taker in terms of time and effort. From the point of view of the survey taker, a glance at the form allows them to understand what is expected of them.

A lot of surveys are now being administered on-line. The benefit is that on-line surveys are highly efficient. Data that is collected electronically can be cheaply and expeditiously tabulated and analyzed. In fact, surveys research is all over the web. People are being asked to respond to many types of issues, both simple and complex, by electronic news sources and on-line magazines of various kinds.

The problem is that a lot of on-line surveys are not designed very well. On-line forms place new and different demands on the survey respondents to navigate through various buttons and scroll through various screens. One problem, for example, is that on-line surveys do not usually offer the responding survey-taker the option of reviewing the survey to be sure that responses are correct. Once data is entered, respondents cannot go back and check their response –the respondent is not offered the electronic equivalent of an eraser. In short, on-line surveys are often designed for the convenience of the survey maker, not the survey taker.

An additional problem, at least in the case of student evaluations, is the issue of identity. Student surveys of faculty need to follow strict protocols. For example, the identities of individual respondents need to remain anonymous to the faculty. There should be one form per student (the “uniqueness” criterion), and only students in the course taking the survey (or “exclusivity”). These issues require special care to achieve with on-line tools. The issue is not as simple as providing students with a survey form that could be emailed to the faculty –this would not preserve the anonymity of the respondent.

An effective system of assessment needs to be “two-tiered.” To preserve the integrity and the reliability of the data that is collected, respondents need to respond to a third party, not directly to the faculty. This kind of data integrity is not easy to capture with the existing software systems such as Frontpage or Blackboard.

In fact, preserving identity and uniqueness, as well as privacy, has grown quite complicated in the on-line world. It is important to note that choices can affect the results. For example, students understand that faculty can individually track student activities on Blackboard. Even though anonymous surveys may be possible, the perception that Blackboard can track responses may cloud the issue. While the goal of an anonymous survey may be achievable, Blackboard may not be a good vehicle to choose for this purpose.

#### *Part Two: New Prospects*

On a more positive note, software to create on-line surveys is getting increasingly user-friendly. Without a doubt, student assessment of course content will become increasingly easy to accomplish. And as ease of use grows, on-line assessment need not be a single, simple, end of the term procedure. In fact, assessment could be done at multiple times during the term, to better reflect course activities and modify course direction appropriately.

Certain procedures, grounded in good research practices, could improve the collection of assessment data. For example, if you authentically want to assess if faculty are providing students with informative syllabi, ask them just after the beginning of the term rather at the end when they can better respond to the question. Relying upon memory is a flaw of survey research, a threat to the validity of the findings. Yet this is one problem that can now be readily ameliorated by better practices.

The greater interactivity that on-line systems allow can bring new values to course design. Instructors can use on-line tools to get quicker feedback and promote collaboration and this in itself can affect course structure. Assessment of faculty can be reactive and transformative, it can occur during the course while there is time for both students and faculty to collaborate and make adjustments.

Effective on-line surveys need to be student-centered, designed with a view to the users. Universities are beginning to implement on-line assessment systems, yet little research has been developed to test their effectiveness or the differences with paper-based tools. As systems are implemented to create on-line assessment systems, they need to be designed for flexibility of educational purposes. And as education becomes increasingly learning centered rather than teaching centered, new issues are arising.

*Part Three: Can There Really be Learning-Centered Evaluations of Teaching?*

Faculty members often respond to student assessment of their teaching with skepticism and resistance. From an instructor perspective, the reasons for adopting this attitude are obvious. Students do not always respond to questions appropriately or with “perspective”.

An indication of the level student assessment practices was reported New York Times story by Marcia Biederman (May 8, 2003, “Volunteers Set the Grading Curve for Report Cards on Teachers”). The article reported on a website, RateMyTeachers.com, which relies on nearly 1,000 volunteers to screen ratings of teachers which it then places on the internet. The article notes that the website guidelines “prohibit vulgar, discriminatory, threatening or potentially libelous language, name calling, remarks about personal appearance, and comments unrelated to teaching.” While postings about things like “onion breath” sometimes get onto the site, many student remarks (purportedly up to 10 percent) are not posted.

This gives some indication that student assessment frequently can end up being very personal, rather than being an exercise in understanding the learning process. One wonders, can a standardized instrument or short-item questionnaire reveal very much about students’ learning processes? Will a relatively simple standardized ten or fifteen item form ever even begin to measure excellence in teaching?

At its basis, student assessment should provide useful feedback to instructors who can use the survey to improve their instruction. This implies that faculty should get involved in considering the feedback that they need. Questions about instructors and courses have to pay close attention as to how questions are asked and the context of the asking. If assessment forms are the only institutional means of feedback for students to respond to the frustrations of campus life and its problems, then learning issues can get lost. Assessment forms should not simply be measuring student satisfaction with college life.

Clearly, the use of standardized student assessment forms by administrators for promotion and tenure decisions raises the stakes for the faculty. Student assessment of faculty in an institutional context serves entirely different goals for administrators than it does for the faculty. In this context, assessment without consideration of course design may be dangerous.

The key question is whether the agree/disagree items that are commonly placed on assessment forms are rooted in any clear theory of what enhances the learning process. There is a huge literature on learning that can be tapped to answer this issue. And this literature has now become replete with examples of assessment that pays attention to new standards. “Authentic assessment” has been described by Jon Mueller as “A form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills.” Similarly, the assessment of faculty needs to pay attention to the real-world level of motivation and effort that is required by students to carry this out.

The problem with the project of student assessment of faculty is that it allows students, if only tacitly, to assign responsibility to their learning to the efforts of the faculty. It allows the student to say, “If I did not learn, it must be your fault.” From a learning-centered perspective, this promotes a perception that is exactly the reverse of what it should be.

Students who are the most successful put their learning at the center. They will learn for the sake of learning, for the intrinsic rewards that learning provides and due to the fact that they care about learning. The less successful learners are motivated by extrinsic rewards, such as grades or perhaps material rewards from parents.

The upshot of this may be a little disturbing for the highly involved and innovative instructor. There is evidence that the most gifted and successful students will learn almost regardless of the efforts of faculty. The means by which faculty efforts can stimulate learning motivations in students are, in reality, not well understood.

A learning-centered perspective certainly raises problems as to what student assessment of faculty needs to measure. Institutions should promote innovation in this area, rather than adopt policies that discourage it. There is a shift that is taking place in terms of the analyzing the mix of competencies that each discipline may require and finding ways for structuring processes that develop those competencies. Designing effective assessment measures should account for such competencies and their measurement.

#### *Conclusion: The Interactive Future*

Certainly, once the problems of implementation are overcome, on-line tools hold considerable promise to improve the assessment process. On-line tools need to be transparent, easy to use, and not confuse respondents. On-line assessment tools must be designed in such a way as to insure the accuracy and reliability of the data that is collected, assure the privacy and anonymity of respondents, and accurately reflects their complex views.

The use of on-line tools will provide new opportunities for better feedback to faculty. This feedback will enable greater interactivity in the process. As educational methods become increasingly learning-centered, the use of student assessment of faculty will need to change as well. New on-line assessment systems can contribute to renewed learning motivation.