

Empowering Learners and Instructors through Online Class Evaluations

【論文】 学生がオンライン・クラス評価を行うことで講師の能力を向上させる

This research paper examines issues related to online evaluations of classroom performance of instructors by students. It begins with a review of the current literature on student evaluations of faculty; identifying the benefits and drawbacks of such evaluations according to prior research. From there, it explores the advantages of having students complete frequent online evaluations of educators' performance as recognized by the researchers in a tertiary institution in Tokyo. After outlining the advantages of the system utilized at the university, the researchers look at the disadvantages of such a system; once again, discussing the issue from their experience at a particular institution in Tokyo. The paper concludes with points for consideration for other educators dealing with online evaluations of faculty at institutions of higher education.

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大学在学中にアジアを中心とした国際研究を専攻。その後アメリカの日本人教授の薦めのもと、一年間日本に滞在。大学卒業後、アメリカから東京へ移住し国際高等学校で教師として活躍。その間、日本テンプル大学の修士課程プログラムで TOEFL と TOEIC の製造元である ETS で問題作成を担当。この経験を通じて研究テーマとして取り入れる。学位取得後、デジタルハリウッド大学で教職をとる。英語プログラムアシスタントディレクター。2011 年から明治大学兼任講師。

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明治大学商学部卒業後、ペンシルバニア大学にて TESOL (英語教授法) 修士課程を修了。デジタルハリウッド大学では、開学準備段階から開学後の5年間に渡り、全学の英語プログラム主任を務める。2010年4月からは明治大学政治経済学部にて特任准教授。専門は第二言語習得・外国語教育。

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. 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.

Review of the literature

Regarding the issue of who evaluates instructors, 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 handles this responsibility (Oliva, Mathers & Laine, 2009). The authors of this paper have firsthand experience with the difficulties concerning administrative-initiated evaluations. 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 in which the administrator will examine the given instructor, the evaluations end up lacking the essential constructive feedback the instructor needs. 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, thereby affecting the evaluation process. The authors of this paper have witnessed this 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 implemented 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.

In addition to the concern about who does the evaluating, the criteria used are also a major 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 Ardan 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' and students' feedback, 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. This may seem hard to grasp at first; however, if one considers the numerous responsibilities administrators have and the time constraints under which they work, 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.

A case study: a newly established university in Tokyo

The authors of this paper have worked as administrators and instructors in the English department of a university in Tokyo. Since its establishment, the university has employed online student evaluation on their registered courses. The following introduces the history of its development.

When establishing the university, the founders felt the need to employ new concepts that other schools had not attempted within Japan in order to thrive in its highly

competitive higher education market. They employed a range of unique ideas in order to differentiate themselves from other institutions. For example, they hold overseas events for the first year students with the main 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.

The developers of the system set up a series of questions for students to answer about the classes they attend. The questionnaire was then uploaded onto the university's website. Every week, students fill in the survey immediately after a class for each of their classes. As for the portion of the survey that contains multiple choice answers, the results become available as charts for easy access 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 initial survey 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 support, 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 concluded that some of the original questions and the organization of the survey needed changing. Accordingly, the faculty development committee of the university devised a modified version, and a second version was used from the start of the 2008 academic year. The second version provided additional questions asking the students to reflect on their participation and effort in the class.

Advantages of utilizing an online class 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 adjust 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. 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 who frequently view student 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 listening to the lecture. Having an online evaluation tool that provides easy-to-analyze, constructive feedback in a timely manner allows teachers to obtain a broad sense of the progression of the course.

Online student evaluations also allow reticent 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 express 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. 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 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 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. 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, as they may feel their supervisors do not know what actually 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 can be seen, the university being reported on in this paper has gained tremendously from online student evaluations of classes. By having the students abundantly evaluate their classes, the university's instructors are better able to provide effective, pertinent lessons to their students. However, all the pluses described above have also come with some negatives, which we will now discuss.

Disadvantages of utilizing an online class evaluation

Some instructors at the institution are resistant to 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) or negative student evaluations stemming from the skin color of an instructor (Smith, 2007), 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" (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Davidovitch & Soen, 2006; Moore & Kuol, 2005), which is one major reason why this evaluation system was designed in such a way that both teachers and students can see it as a tool to improve their classes cooperatively. Although the university's online evaluation system has operated since its establishment in 2005, no critical monitoring was made on instructors' use of the system until the second year of operation, and once the authors began monitoring their use of the system within the English department, the faculty's aversion to the feedback quickly became clear.

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?"). Thus, 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, the authors 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.

Another issue the university's instructors have had with the feedback originates from how sparingly students give feedback, an issue that many tertiary institutions face (Norris & Conn, 2005). 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. 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.

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; Johnson, 2003). The authors 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 the instructor will reciprocate during their assessment of the students.

Still another aspect of student evaluations that the institution's English 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. We educators want to assist all learners within our courses with grasping the content we teach and further the students' knowledge of the material; however, when receiving frequent negative feedback from a particular student or group of students we 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.

Conclusion

There are nagging issues that must be addressed in order for the feedback provided by students to effectively assist instructors in improving their teaching quality and further enhancing students' ability to perform. One such issue might be anonymity of the evaluations. Currently, the university's system identifies which students provide comments for instructors. This allows instructors to address the concerns of the specific students. However, by identifying the student who is leaving the feedback, students may be hesitant to leave more critical comments that instructors need to read when educational issues arise in a class. By making the comments section anonymous, students may leave critical feedback.

To address the issue related to student comments, the students may need an orientation 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. 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.

Many tertiary institutions understand the advantages of having online student evaluations. For example, 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. 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 for student assessments of their classes. As this form of assessment and teacher development continues to evolve, it will become more and more prevalent throughout education.

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