

# Suggestions to Increase Course Evaluation Response Rates in Online Courses

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*Different delivery formats of education have increased rapidly over the past decade. With increases in technology, many higher educational institutions have transitioned from traditional in-class evaluations delivered in the classroom to the online delivery of course evaluations. While results are mixed on the effectiveness of online evaluations, the online method of evaluating teaching effectiveness is here to stay. This paper provides an overview of the conversion to online evaluations and suggestions to increase response rates for online teacher evaluations.*

## INTRODUCTION

Student rating instruments have a variety of names including teaching evaluations, course evaluations, students' evaluations of teaching (SETs) and student ratings of instruction (SRIs) (Linse, 2017). Student evaluation of instruction is a key factor in determining instructor effectiveness (Kozub, 2010) and is often used to determine promotion and tenure decisions. In addition, these evaluations are useful in strategic planning and curriculum improvement (Liu, 2012) and have become an important indicator of university quality of educational services (Estelami, 2015). Past research indicates that student ratings can be valid indicators of teaching effectiveness and are congruent with evaluations gathered through other means such as peer evaluations (Marsh and Roche, 1997; Renaud and Murray, 2005).

With online learning formats, students have more choices available to complete an education. As with any new pedagogical method, terminology for online instruction is evolving. These terms include some of the following: distance learning, hybrid courses, accelerated courses, blended courses, web-enhanced, teleweb and multi-modal learning (Gilroy, 2008). In a 2008 report on online education (Allen and Seaman), the following definitions are used (p. 4):

- **Traditional course** – A course where no online technology is used.
- **Web facilitated** – A course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use a course management system or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments (1 to 29% of content delivered online).
- **Blended/hybrid** – A course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. A substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online

discussions and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face interactions (30 – 79% of content delivered online).

- **Online** – A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings (80+% of content delivered online).

As the use of technology increases, the traditional methods of taking advantage of a captive audience in a classroom setting to administer teaching evaluations has shifted to an online system where students can complete the evaluation on their own time. The main advantages to the change are faster feedback to the instructor and cost savings. Unfortunately, with the switch to online evaluations, response rates plummeted. In the online world students must make a special effort to complete evaluations (Benton, 2008) and often do not complete evaluations for all classes. Non-response bias is a concern (Adams and Umbach, 2012; Wolbring and Treischt, 2016). While results are mixed on the effectiveness of online evaluations; it is clear that the online method of instructor evaluation is here to stay. This paper provides an overview of the conversion to online evaluations and suggestions to increase response rates for online teacher evaluations.

## **FACULTY CONCERNS**

After implementation of an online system for instructor evaluations, many administrators discovered that their enthusiasm for online delivery was not shared by many faculty or students (Burton, Civitano and Steiner-Grossman, 2012). Faculty concerns are related to the quality of data to accurately evaluate teaching, low response rates, the ability of students who did not attend class to complete the online evaluations, the inability to determine if the intended student completed the evaluation and an overall mistrust of the system. Student enthusiasm is gauged by the completion of the evaluations online. The response rate has, in general, declined significantly with the transition to online evaluations.

At an East Coast university, professors expressed concern over the transition to online evaluations. The following comments summarize the concerns (edited for brevity):

“I have already lost the opportunity to have evaluations for one of the best classes I ever taught. The online evaluation was activated the week before the end of class with the deadline at midnight of the last class. Only one person completed the evaluation. The inflexibility in the implementation of our online system has deprived my promotion file of a great course.”

“Response rates are low for most of us on campus, around 30%. Even faculty teaching in computer labs report low response rates.”

“I was very busy and forgot to remind students to fill out the course evaluation. Only two out of 50 students completed the evaluation. Because only two completed the evaluation, they will not be used for my tenure and promotion file. I am placed in a position where I have to plead with students to fill out the online course evaluation.”

Much of the concern from faculty is due to the perception that there is a difference between traditional and online ratings of teaching effectiveness. Research has shown minimal or no differences between the two modes (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Heath et al., 2007; Smither et al., 2004; Thorpe, 2002). Some research has shown more favorable ratings in the online mode when compared to the traditional paper-and-pencil method (Burton et al., 2012; Carini et al., 2003; Tomsic et al., 2000). Linse (2016) states that student ratings are student perception data. These ratings are only one factor in faculty evaluations and are not measures of student learning. Despite calls for administrators not to place such heavy weight on students' evaluations of teaching, the use of these instruments often determines, to a great extent, whether or not faculty are granted promotion, recognition and/or tenure.

## **ACCEPTABLE RESPONSE RATES**

There is not a definite answer to what is an acceptable minimum response rate for students' evaluations of teaching. According to research by Leamon and Fields (2005), reliability of students'

evaluations of teaching increased with the number of students completing the survey. Gerbase, Germond, Cerutti, Vu, and Baroffio (2015) compared paper and online evaluation of teaching to determine the minimum response rate needed to maintain precision in the online format. They concluded that a 50% response rate is needed. Their study indicated a larger variance in student responses in the online method, which raises instability and may affect the precision of the measure.

According to Nulty (2008), much depends on what is being done with the data. If the responses are used to increase teaching effectiveness then any number of responses will suffice. If, however, the evaluations are used for promotion and tenure decisions then a high response rate is preferred (over 70%) to improve reliability and validity of online evaluations.

## **ADMINISTERING STUDENT EVALUATIONS**

Sell (1988) suggests the following guidelines for administering student evaluation questionnaires to improve reliability and validity of results. Although these guidelines were written before the online mode of delivery became accepted, many are still valid:

- Format should be clear and consistent
- Students should remain anonymous
- Students should be given adequate time to complete the questionnaire
- Students should not be allowed to discuss their ratings while they are being administered
- Questionnaires should be administered during the last 4 weeks of a semester (but not the last day and not during or after an exam)
- Someone other than the one being evaluated should administer the questionnaire, or at the very least, the one being evaluated should leave the room
- A student should collect the questionnaires and deliver them to an independent office for scoring
- 80% minimum attendance of the student population in a course is necessary on the day an evaluation is administered
- Do not use a numeric questionnaire in courses with fewer than 10 students (use open-ended, written response items instead.)

Online course evaluations violate several of these guidelines. Students may discuss the questionnaire while they are taking it because a fellow student may be seated next to the student on a different computer. In addition, after a student has completed an evaluation, he/she may speak to other students to influence how they fill out the evaluation. While the faculty member does not administer the questionnaire in an online environment, the faculty member is responsible for increasing the response rate. The response rate is not dependent on how many students are present on a given day in an online class. This has both positive and negative repercussions. The positive aspect is that students have a longer period to complete the evaluations, thus potentially increasing the response rate. The negative aspect is that unless students complete the evaluation immediately after being prompted they will often forget. This situation places the instructor in the position of having to send out several reminders throughout the period the evaluation is active.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The reality is many universities have invested money in an online evaluation system to assess teaching effectiveness and will not revert back to paper methods. The focus should be on ensuring validity and reliability while increasing response rates. If there is no difference between paper based and online evaluations of effectiveness, faculty need to be convinced of this. A series of studies carried out at Brigham Young University during a three-year period from 1997 to 2000, showed an increase in response rates for students' online evaluations of teaching, from an initial rate of 40% to 62% in 2000. The factors below may result in an increase in response rates for student online teaching evaluations (Johnson, 2003):

- Student access to computers
- Amount and quality of communication to teachers and students regarding the online rating system
- Communication to students regarding how student ratings are used
- Faculty and student support of the online rating system

Despite the decrease in response rates across the board, some faculty members are still able to achieve impressive response rates in the online world. The following are ideas from faculty with a 70% or greater response rate and at least 30 students in their classes (Faculty Strategies, 2012).

- Mention improvements made to the course in response to past evaluations
- Guide students about how to write helpful feedback
- Build rapport with students throughout the semester
- Create a culture of feedback in the course
- Reserve a room and a block of time when students can complete the course evaluations
- Provide reminders when the evaluations are active
- Make clear that you value student feedback

According to Nulty, instructors can increase the response rate in online evaluations if they follow the guidelines below. Those who use more of the approaches will achieve higher response rates (Nulty, 2008 p. 305).

- Provide a demonstration of how to submit an online response in order to reduce any computer-related questions.
- Push the survey. Make it easy for students to access the survey by providing the survey URL in an email sent to them.
- Remind students of the deadline date of the evaluation and the importance of results after each class. Professors can also have the survey web site programmed to automatically email reminder notices to survey non-respondents on a regular basis.
- Extend the duration of a survey's availability since there is a higher chance that students will respond.
- Explain in the course syllabus the importance of student input for course improvement and that their evaluations are taken seriously and do effect change.
- Provide in-class time for students to fill out the online form using their laptops.
- Reinforce the message that instructors will not have access to individual student. Evaluations, but would be given summary reports only after the course grades are submitted.
- Persuade students that their response will be used. Students should believe that a professor will take their feedback seriously and specific actions will be taken to solve the issues raised.
- Help students understand how to give constructive criticism, which will help convince them that their comments will be heard.
- Create surveys that seek constructive criticism, so students feel engaged with the questions.
- Involve students in the choice of optional questions to make the survey more interesting for students and support the efforts of persuading students that their responses will be used.
- Keep questionnaires brief to increase the likelihood that students will complete a survey.
- Direct students to a computer laboratory where they could submit their evaluations.

## **STRATEGIES TO AVOID**

In most cases, incentives provided by faculty are discouraged because it may be interpreted as bribery or another form of pressure. Therefore, making participation a course requirement, offering extra credit for participation or mentioning importance in faculty salary, promotion, or tenure decisions are discouraged. In the online course evaluation world, it appears faculty must become involved in emailing, encouraging, begging, reserving a computer room, etc. Many faculty offer extra credit points or other

forms of frowned-upon incentives to increase response rates. While faculty won't publicly admit to offering incentives, the pressure to provide data for tenure and promotion is strong, and on many campuses, there are not policing systems in place to monitor these practices.

Faculty members wishing to increase the evaluation response rates are creative. For example, a faculty member offers an extra credit assignment if the class reaches a pre-determined percentage target of evaluation completeness. Once the class reaches the desired response rate, then an extra credit quiz or assignment will be offered to everyone. This practice protects student anonymity and doesn't directly give extra credit for completing the evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

Despite research indicating there are no differences in ratings between traditional and online modes of evaluation, faculty still have significant concerns about lower response rates and the perception of the impact of lower response rates on overall faculty teaching effectiveness ratings. Faculty are also concerned about the validity and reliability of online evaluations, both with respect to non-response bias and whether responses genuinely reflect the views of students who are in good standing. In the paper-based delivery of course evaluations, faculty participation and stress was minimal (bring the evaluations to class and have a student administer it). There was a captive audience so faculty did not have to worry about low response rates. Since students who stopped attending classes, were, in most cases, not present when the paper versions were administered, there was not the potential for those students to fill out the evaluations as there is in the online format.

Even if most students not attending class do not fill out the online evaluation, the perception that these students are rating the professor low in all categories exists. For students, instead of the evaluation process being part of the regular class time, the student now must be proactive to fill out the online evaluation for numerous classes. In the paper format, participation from one student in evaluations for numerous classes was only dependent on the student being present in class on the day of administration. Now a student can choose which classes to complete an evaluation; A student taking numerous classes may not fill them out for all classes. Students can discuss their evaluations with other students prior to filling out the evaluation and may expect and ask for an incentive to complete the survey.

Regardless of these concerns, instructor evaluations in an online format have become an accepted administrative practice. It is recommended that university-wide incentives be developed to take the onus away from faculty. Decisions that impact promotion and tenure must be multi-faceted and based on more than faculty ratings (Benton and Cashin, 2011). It is also recognized that faculty need to be involved in increasing response rates because it may impact their careers. Those faculty members who are more proactive receive higher response rates compared to those that do nothing to encourage student participation in online evaluations of teaching effectiveness.

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