Teaching evaluation and student response rate

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to share the author’s viewpoint on how to increase student response rate in course evaluation surveys.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach is to highlight measures which increased student response rate in online surveys of the author’s teaching evaluation at The University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

Findings – This viewpoint suggests that student response rate to course evaluation can be improved by the lecturer’s effective communication. The examples of effective communication are given in this paper.

Originality/value – This work will encourage the lecturers to initiate more student engagement to improve response rate of their teaching evaluation.

Keywords Online survey, Course evaluation, Paper survey, Response rate, Teaching evaluation

Paper type Viewpoint

Importance of student evaluation of teaching
Student evaluation of teaching is important for a number of reasons. These evaluations ensure quality in university teaching, provide an independent method of gauging teacher’s effectiveness, guide in making decisions for major curriculum changes and professional development for faculty and help in establishing a framework to better quantify and reward good teaching outcomes.

Shift in student evaluation of teaching from paper-based to online surveys
Paper-based assessment has been the most common form of student evaluation of teaching worldwide. However, over the past decade, there has been a shift away from paper-based to online assessment. As internet is becoming more available and affordable, traditional paper-based data collection methods, seem expensive, time consuming and less efficient.

Positives of this shift to online evaluation
One of the most important positives is efficiency gains, in terms of turnaround time from students and significant cost savings. In addition, online evaluations allow students the time, ease and ability to refine, expand and reflect on responses without the constraint of an “in class” time bound environment to complete paper-based surveys. This increases student
response to open-ended questions which provide qualitative data which is instrumental in improving teaching practices.

A review of the major literature works over the period 2000-2013 (as depicted in Table I) summarizes the main advantages of online method of evaluation.

Challenges of this shift to online evaluation
One of the biggest challenges is the low response and return rate of students to online evaluations when compared to paper-based evaluation responses (Benton et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2015; Guder and Malliaris, 2010; Nowell et al., 2010).

A sample of the findings of response rates drawn from different research studies at various higher education institutions (as seen in Table II) over the years 1999-2013 indicates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors (Year)</th>
<th>Main advantages</th>
<th>Research focus areas</th>
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<td>Hmieslesi and</td>
<td>More written feedback</td>
<td>Student course evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Champagne (2000)</td>
<td>Reflect, reflect, expand on responses</td>
<td>Student course evaluations</td>
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<td>Kasiar et al. (2002)</td>
<td>More written feedback</td>
<td>Comparison of traditional and Web-based evaluation processes</td>
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<td>Johnson (2002)</td>
<td>Richer and higher data collection</td>
<td>Online student ratings</td>
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<td>Hardy (2003)</td>
<td>More written feedback</td>
<td>Online student ratings</td>
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<td>Ballantyne (2003)</td>
<td>Richer and higher data collection</td>
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<td>Ballantyne (2004)</td>
<td>Richer and higher data collection</td>
<td>Online student survey and comments</td>
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<td>Anderson et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Provide more feedback</td>
<td>Student course evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Donovan et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Richer and higher data collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laubsch (2006)</td>
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<td>Comparison of online and in person evaluations</td>
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<td>Donovan et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Richer and higher data collection</td>
<td>Constructive student feedback on online and traditional evaluations</td>
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<td>Emery et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Efficiency, cost savings, richer responses</td>
<td>Open source online evaluation experiences</td>
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<td>Miller (2010)</td>
<td>Time and cost savings, richer responses</td>
<td>Online evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samuels (2013)</td>
<td>Richer responses, efficiency, quicker and cost savings</td>
<td>Academic departments use of online course evaluations</td>
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Table I. Main advantages of using online course evaluation surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors (Year)</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Response rates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Layne et al. (1999)</td>
<td>Southeastern University</td>
<td>47% – online vs 60% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sax et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Several US institutions</td>
<td>17% – online vs 24% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dommeoyer et al. (2004)</td>
<td>California State University</td>
<td>43% – online vs 75% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson et al. (2005)</td>
<td>University of Kentucky</td>
<td>83% – online vs 80% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Cornell University</td>
<td>47% – online vs 69% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laubsch (2006)</td>
<td>Fairleigh Dickinson University</td>
<td>61% – online vs 82% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nair et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Monash University</td>
<td>31% – online vs 56% – paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perrett (2013)</td>
<td>Large university in South US</td>
<td>71% – online vs 68% – paper</td>
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Table II. Comparison of response rates (online versus paper-based evaluation)
general lower return rates for online evaluations compared to paper-based evaluations in all except two cases (ranging as low as 17 per cent to a high of 83 per cent).

This low number of response rates, in online surveys, makes the data invalid. To mitigate this challenge, Nulty’s (2008) research provides a set of guidelines for required response rates to be considered valid and useful measure of accuracy for online evaluation. Since the larger is the class size, the lower response rate is required, Nulty recommends an ideal required response rate of 58 (size <20) and 35 per cent (>50) for accuracy of online survey results and to achieve validity.

**Major reasons for the differences in response rates**

The reasons for the differences in response rates range from gender and age factors (Hatfield and Coyle, 2013); privacy and anonymity (Khorsandi et al., 2012; Nevo et al., 2010); social pressure; distraction and location issues (Mau and Opengart, 2012); lack of engagement; incentives; communication; perceived inaction with feedback or general “survey fatigue” (Bennett and Nair, 2010); and demographic and economic variables peculiar to the institution of country (Morrison, 2011).

**Solving the issue of low response rate**

Bennett and Nair (2010) in their study at an Australian University were able to register an overall 83 per cent online response rate, but this was in response to the deliberate strategies and measures implemented to increase student involvement. Using effective engagement, communication and teacher–student participation techniques led to greater and more sustained response rates.

**Measures to increase student online response rates**

A vast amount of literature has been written about the problems and the strategies which can be used to encourage and increase the response rates of student online evaluation (Crews and Curtis, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Stowell et al., 2012).

The most comprehensive work done by Berk (2012) outlines a review of the problems and articulates an in-depth set of techniques and best practices which can be applied to increase online response rates. It should be noted however that he does not advocate a “one size fit all” solution but emphasizes that success in raising response rates will most likely be met by a combination of strategies and incentives over the long term.

In my opinion, the most important and fundamental ingredients for raising online response rates depends to large extent on the commitment, engagement and buy in of both students and teaching administrators to the process. For example, studies indicate that the biggest determinant for student participation in online evaluation is the level of engagement they obtain from teachers (Gaillard et al., 2011).

Those institutions which take the time to communicate and explain the process, how their responses will be used or incorporated to improve course delivery and outcomes experience increase in response rates (Wode and Keiser, 2011). On the other hand, students who do not feel a part of the process or think their feedback will not be taken seriously or valued or teachers who do not effect changes consequent on feedback experience lower response rates (Beran and Rokosh, 2009).

**What can lecturers do to increase response rate?**

The response rates are important as these evaluations are frequently used for consideration in tenure and promotion, hiring and pay increase decisions (Hammonds et al., 2017).
My viewpoint is that response rate can be increased if lecturers are informed about the timing of when the surveys are sent out, so they can also make a personal appeal (both in class and by email) to the students to complete their course evaluation surveys.

In this communication, lecturers should explain to the students how their comments would be taken seriously, and how it will be used to improve teaching (Heinert and Roberts, 2016).

The key is to inform students about the purpose of evaluations:

- Let students know that you will use their feedback to make changes in the course.
- Give students some examples of useful feedback you have received in the past, and how the course/pedagogy has benefited in response.

This best practice will show you improved results, and if you also want to score better in these evaluations, start giving chocolate cookies to your students (ESA, 2018).

References


Samuels, B. (2013), *Increasing Number of Academic Departments Use Online Course Evaluations*, CampusWest, 30 April.


**About the author**

Tashfeen Ahmad expanded his understanding of Psychology at Harvard University and joined The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, with 10 years of general management experience. He has taught courses in International Business, Production Management, Operations Management, Quality Management and Change Management. His research work focuses on the future of higher education and learning technologies. Tashfeen Ahmad can be contacted at: mrtashfeen@hotmail.com

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