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

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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

Authors (Year)	Main advantages	Research focus areas
Hmieleski and Champagne (2000)	More written feedback Refine, reflect, expand on responses	Student course evaluations
Kasiar *et al.* (2002)	More written feedback Refine, reflect, expand on responses	Comparison of traditional and Web-based evaluation processes
Johnson (2002)	Richer and higher data collection	Online student ratings
Hardy (2003)	More written feedback Refine, reflect, expand on responses	Online student ratings
Ballantyne (2003)	Richer and higher data collection	Online evaluations of teaching
Ballantyne (2004)	Richer and higher data collection	Online student survey and comments
Anderson *et al.* (2006)	Provide more feedback Richer and higher data collection	Student course evaluations
Donovan *et al.* (2006)	Provide more comments about Lecturer	Student feedback on online vs traditional course evaluations
Laubsch (2006)	More written feedback Refine, reflect, expand on responses	Comparison of online and in person evaluations
Donovan *et al.* (2006)	Richer and higher data collection	Constructive student feedback on online and traditional evaluations
Emery *et al.* (2008)	Efficiency, cost savings, richer responses	Open source online evaluation experiences
Miller (2010)	Time and cost savings, richer responses	Online evaluations
Samuels (2013)	Richer responses, efficiency, quicker and cost savings	Academic departments use of online course evaluations

Table I.
Main advantages of using online course evaluation surveys

Authors (Year)	Institution	Response rates
Layne *et al.* (1999)	Southeastern University	47% – online vs 60% – paper
Sax *et al.* (2003)	Several US institutions	17% – online vs 24% – paper
Dommeyer *et al.* (2004)	California State University	43% – online vs 75% – paper
Anderson *et al.* (2005)	University of Kentucky	83% – online vs 80% – paper
Avery *et al.* (2006)	Cornell University	47% – online vs 69% – paper
Laubsch (2006)	Fairleigh Dickinson University	61% – online vs 82% – paper
Nair *et al.* (2008)	Monash University	31% – online vs 56% – paper
Perrett (2013)	Large university in South US	71% – online vs 68% – paper

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).

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