

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Making Sense (and use) of Written Student Comments

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"These comments don't make any sense. Some of the students say things are going fine and others say this is the worst class they've ever had. I can't please everyone, so why try?"

Have you shared the feelings expressed above as you go through your own student evaluations? Many instructors have. And, because of this, they may be tempted to dismiss the important things these comments can say about their teaching and their students' learning. On the other hand, many instructors also say that they get more information from student written comments than they do from the scaled items so typical of student evaluations. Which is correct? Should we dismiss these student comments or embrace them?

The problem arises from the fact that written comments don't have a built-in structure like scaled items. They don't come to the instructor compiled into a nice, neat summary. Instead they are usually read straight through from the top of the stack to the bottom, so that they seem to be just a series of random, unconnected statements about the teaching and the teacher. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the human mind to make sense of any type of information. There is a need to impose structure and organization on information in order to make it comprehensible. The purpose of this article is to suggest some ways to impose some structure on these student comments so that they will make more sense and possibly give some better insights into teaching which might be obscured by a more random presentation.

Sorting by respondent Consider the following statements from an engineering course which students generally regard as difficult:

1. More lecture would help. More explanation of how to do the problems, not just examples. When exams come, I can usually do the problems assigned or worked in class but the new ones are completely foreign. 2. Would rate the course higher if I were understanding material better. 3. Inability of the instructor to communicate with me during the lecture. He jumps from one thing to another. He is not consistent and he does not finish the job. (To help us understand the whole thing.) In conclusion, his teaching technique is not right. 4. The only complaint I have is that the exam problems are always more complex than the homework problems and require too much time. 5. Makes me want to understand the material and making sure I know the concept and mathematical procedures.

Questionable grammar and construction aside, if one looks at the scaled course ratings, one finds the students distributing their overall rating of the course as follows:

Excellent = 2
Above Average = 14
Average = 5
Below Average = 4
Poor = 2

From these ratings one might conclude that the students generally feel the course is all right, but there are a few things which might be changed to make it better. The written comments, on the other hand, certainly indicate that there are some areas of difficulty. How can the instructor sort out this information to make it more helpful and to reconcile the two results?

The first thing which can be done is to group the comments according to the overall course rating given by each student evaluator. This provides a context for the comments, which now read in this order (refer to full comment):

Excellent (2)--- no comments Above Average (14) --- The only

complaint I have.. --- Makes me want to understand Average (5) ---
 Would rate course higher if Below Average (4) --- More lecture
 would help.... Poor (2) --- Inability of the instructor...

RATING	SUBJECT MATTER	ORGANIZATION CLARITY	INTERACTION	DYNAMISM ENTHUSIASM
4				
3	Exams more complex than homework	Exams too long	makes sure students understand	makes me want to learn materials
2	Would rate higher if I were understanding better			
1	needs more lecture exam. prob. harder	needs more explanation of how to do problems		
0	Inability to communicate material to students	jumps from one thing to another inconsistent		

Listing student responses in this way has a number of benefits. To begin with, the more positive feedback will be read first, which is not only easier to take, but it will help determine whether students are generally satisfied or dissatisfied. It may also show that some students who are satisfied have the same concerns as some who are less satisfied. In the comments listed above, one student who rated the course "Above Average" and one who rated it "Below Average" both said that the exam problems were more difficult than those in the homework.

Adding a second dimension Though just classifying the student comments according to their overall course ratings can give the instructor a more realistic view of his or her teaching, adding another dimension can show where changes might be made. The dimension

shown below is based on five components often cited as characteristics of effective teaching, but an individual instructor can create any set of components which seem to fit the particular course or teaching goals.

1. Analytic/synthetic approach to the subject matter
2. Organization/clarity
3. Instructor-group interaction
4. Instructor-individual interaction
5. Dynamism/enthusiasm

Using the matrix shown in the figure, the instructor can place student comments from the engineering class according to the rating the student gave to the course and the characteristics of effective teaching. After filling in the matrix, one can see that those students who rated the course higher indicated that the main problems they encountered concerned the exams. They also had a positive feeling about the instructor. On the other hand, students who rated the course lower seemed to need more assistance in structuring the content and determining what was and was not important. This increased specificity could aid the instructor in determining what instructional adjustments might benefit which students.

Improving the comments If the instructor wanted to take this process one step further, he or she could provide the students with the categories shown on the horizontal dimension of the matrix at the time they are filling out the evaluation and encourage them to comment on whichever of the topic areas they felt had some meaning for them. Many instructors already take this step by appending some specific course related questions to the standard forms. This practice helps the students structure their written comments more succinctly and yet more completely since it triggers their thinking about what is of interest to the instructor. Of course, one would always make one category an open-ended item in which any other comments could be made.

The happy ending The combination of these techniques for analyzing and improving student written comments can help the instructor gain insights into how different students learn best in a given course so that instructional efforts can be more tailored to their

needs. It has the added advantage of keeping the instructor from over-reacting to a single negative comment, a constant of human behavior in reaction to evaluation. Finally, it can help the instructor avoid the frustration of dealing with seemingly contradictory comments, which might be giving student evaluations the undeserved reputation for unreliability. In the end the instructor will find that bringing a little order to the chaos of written responses will reveal the treasure of information they can provide.

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