

Better Use of Student Evaluations for Teaching Effectiveness

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Tailor Evaluation Forms to Class Needs

A problem results when the same teacher evaluation form is used in different classes. Many classes will have certain elements in common. Many will not. A class with 300 students in a large lecture hall will almost certainly be conducted in a lecture format. A graduate class with fifteen students will most likely be taught in a seminar format. A math class may use not only the lecture method but a question-and-answer technique. A senior wage-and-salary class may have students doing an outside project in a business organization. The point is that the same teacher evaluation cannot be used satisfactorily in all classes; it needs to be tailored to the requirements of the classes in question if it is to assist in improving teaching effectiveness.

The common elements in classes should be evaluated across the board. What is it that different classes have in common? For example, it is hard to imagine a class where students could not appropriately ask questions. So a statement with regard to whether or not the professor allows time for questions would be suitable on just about every evaluation form. But in a class where the lecture format is most appropriate such as the math class, and active participation such as discussions may not be, a question on student participation in discussions would not be suitable. In fact, it would most likely merely confuse the students.

Classroom elements not in common should not be evaluated across the board. What is it which sets one class apart from another? One department uses a common list of statements for every single class taught in that department, and faculty members make no allowances for differences in graduate and undergraduate classes. Some of the statements are not really appropriate to the graduate classes. For example, a pro-

In introducing material on performance appraisals in the junior/senior personnel management classes that I teach, I always ask this question. "How many of you [students] have ever formally evaluated someone's performance in writing?" Seldom do more than a half dozen hands go up from forty or more students. When asked whether or not they have ever filled out a teacher evaluation form, of course, all hands go up. It is an alarming thought that students complete teacher evaluations and do not associate this activity with appraising performance. It is even more alarming when one realizes that these students are juniors and seniors, and have been evaluating their professors' performances for at least the last two years.

As performance appraisals, teacher evaluations are used to make career decisions regarding faculty members. Teacher evaluations are considered in reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions. These teacher evaluations should be handled in a professional manner, or problems such as inconsistency or halo effect may result. Sometimes the scores are the results of variables beyond the control of the faculty member. Yet the scores count in determining whether a professor is outstanding, excellent, good, or average as an instructor.

I would offer some suggestions for modifying the use of student-teacher evaluations to improve teaching effectiveness. It is just possible that better use of teacher evaluations will enable the students to do a better job of performance appraisal and enable the professor to feel more comfortable with the process.

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essor may not use tests in a graduate class but assesses classroom performance in another manner. It makes no sense to ask for feedback concerning tests from these graduate students.

A feasible solution to this problem is to decide what areas are involved in teaching effectiveness. Department might decide that there are five or six areas on which faculty members should be evaluated. One area might be classroom presentation of material, another might be relationship with students, and so on. Then a list of behavioral statements for each of these areas could be developed with regard to different class formats and needs. For example, presentation of class material somehow exists in some fashion in every class. Different statements regarding this area could be developed; some would be appropriate to graduate classes and some to undergraduate classes. Each professor in that department would then be free to select the statements he or she thought most suitable as long as he or she picked something from each of these areas. This would certainly tailor the evaluation forms to class needs and yet insure that professors are being evaluated in some common areas.

Word Statements Carefully

The statements on teacher evaluations should be worded very carefully. Most teacher evaluations are designed for fast response time on the part of the students. Some evaluations use behavioral statements. For example, the student may be asked to decide whether the teacher was or was not available for consultation outside the class. Some evaluations give a list of traits such as attentive, interesting, and knowledgeable. What do these items mean? Not all students will interpret words in the same way. Many students read these statements or lists of words quickly. Whether or not they understand them is debatable.

Semantics and clear wording are important. A behaviorally oriented statement is better than a list of traits. Traits generally are open to misinterpretation on the part of the student evaluating the professor. What does "interesting" mean, for example? One student may think it applied to the professor's personality. Another student may think it means that the professor had a lively manner in presenting the class materials. Yet another student may think it means that the professor dressed well. A statement to the effect that the professor used cases, films, or guest speakers is much clearer in the student's mind.

The main objective is to make the items on the teacher evaluation relevant to the class, and to have clear wording so that the student does not have to guess at the meaning of the statement. It does not provide much feedback on teaching effectiveness if the students check the "undecided" choice with great frequency.

Train Students to Evaluate Performance

Students need to be trained to evaluate teacher performance just as any supervisor needs training to evaluate a subordinate's work behavior. People are not necessarily born with an innate knowledge of how to evaluate work performance. It is something which can be learned.

Freshmen and transfer students typically undergo some type of general orientation session. The subject of teacher evaluation should be introduced in these orientation sessions. This would include a general introduction to performance appraisal, with specific coverage as to what it is and how it is used in tenure and promotion decisions. If the university or college as a whole uses the same basic form, the students could be taught how to fill out the form. If individual colleges or departments use their own forms, these departments should also have a training session with their students for their own specific forms.

Students need to be taught not only how to fill out a form but also about appraisal errors and how to be objective. Students are just as guilty of committing these errors as supervisors in industry. One common error is halo effect which means that a professor's teaching behavior could be evaluated favorably or unfavorably on the basis of one trait or characteristic. For example, one professor may keep his class over the time limit most of the semester. This individual may be a very good instructor but have poor overall ratings, due to this time management problem. The student's entire rating of this professor could be colored by being kept late. Thus ratings would indicate, erroneously, low teaching effectiveness of this professor. Another problem is leniency which means that the student could simply be reluctant to give low ratings, figuring that the professor is at least average. A professor could receive satisfactory ratings when he really deserved a lower one. Still another common appraisal problem is that of using a current time period. If a student does not pay attention to the whole semester in rating, then the student may be rating the professor on less than the entire semester, such as the last few weeks. A professor may be viewed as satisfact

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