

Paper 34 – Full Paper

Student evaluations: do lecturers value them and use them to engage with student learning needs?

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Abstract

This paper draws on research that is currently in progress across three New Zealand higher education institutions. The research examines lecturers' perceptions of the formal student appraisal process and the influence of these views on lecturer thinking and behavior at all stages of the teaching and learning cycle. This paper examines the views of twenty lecturers at Waikato University, New Zealand, who were interviewed as part of the larger study and focuses on lecturers' perceptions about students' capacity to make judgments about the quality of their learning experience within the context of the formal appraisal system. The discussion also examines other factors that may influence lecturer's perception, the way they engage with student feedback and the extent to which they use it to modify their teaching practices. The findings from the Waikato University interviews indicate that lecturers were generally positive about students' capacity to evaluate teaching and the majority of interviewees made use of student feedback to varying degrees to modify practice. There were some links between conceptions of teaching and engagement with student feedback and lecturers' willingness to engage with student feedback was affected by the use of the same instrument for promotion purposes. The timing of student evaluations was also seen as a difficulty that restricted their usefulness for teaching, while the role of emotions was less significant than anticipated. The findings from the Waikato sample will need to be revisited and compared with the findings from the interviews at the other centres as well as the quantitative and qualitative survey data to present a more comprehensive picture.

1. Introduction

Formal student evaluation systems have been part of the higher education landscape for decades and have prompted extensive debate in the literature about their usefulness for teachers and learners (for example, Smock & Crooks, 1973; McKeachie, 1990; Beran, Violato & Kline, 2007; Beran & Rokosh, 2009). The topic of evaluations often prompts spirited discussion about their value (Alemoni, 1981; Edstrom, 2002, Nasser & Fresko; 2002, Arthur, 2009). Currently, governmental and institutional pressures for greater accountability across the tertiary sector are also intensifying the focus on formal evaluations for quality purposes. Furthermore, students are demanding greater transparency around the outcomes of evaluations and teachers' responses to them.

In this academic developers from three New Zealand tertiary institutions submitted a research proposal for funding to Ako Aotearoa, the New Zealand Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence. An initial canvas of the literature uncovered a many studies on student evaluations. However, there was only limited scholarship on how teachers perceive these instruments and how these perceptions determine the extent to which they make their teaching responsive to the information they receive in them about students' learning needs.

In December 2009, the project collaborators were informed that the proposed investigation, entitled "Unlocking the Impact of Tertiary Teachers' Perceptions of Student Evaluations of Teaching", would be funded by Ako Aotearoa. The collaborators

in this project are members of the professional development units at the University of Waikato and Otago University and the Evaluations Administrator at Otago Polytechnic.

2. Literature review

The literature demonstrates that the subject of student evaluations of teaching is one of the most widely investigated topics in higher education research. The concept of student evaluations of teaching and the debates about the merits of these processes can be traced back as early as the 1920s (McKeachie, 1990; D'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997). However, much early scholarship focussed on matters of validity and reliability, both of the instruments and of student evaluators (McKeachie, 1997; Beran, Violati & Kline, 2007). More recently, there is also a growing body of scholarship that examines the impact of evaluation data on the teaching and learning process.

2.1 Teachers' views on the validity and reliability of formal appraisals and implications for their perceptions of the feedback they receive from students

The literature on validity and reliability of student appraisals is relevant to the extent to which these may influence teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of student feedback. As noted by Costin, Greenough and Menges (1971) the "uses to which the student ratings are put depend heavily on faculty confidence in their meanings" (1971: 521). There is a wide range of views about the validity of student evaluations, from strong affirmation (McKeachie, 1990) to a view that student ratings are reasonably valid (Beran & Rokosh, 2009).

Other studies synthesise teachers' perceptions about the potential unreliability of student evaluation data, although much of it is based on reported opinion as opposed to empirical evidence. Aleamoni (1987) summarises common teachers' concerns that have been reported in the literature. These include the view that students are too immature to evaluate the quality of teaching, and that limited subject knowledge impairs their capacity to make judgments. A further reported concern is that students are not in a position to assess the effectiveness of the teaching and learning experience until a passage of time has elapsed. Other misgivings relate to the notion that irrelevant variables influence students' perceptions of the merits of a course and the teaching; these include factors such as the difficulty of a course, the grading propensities of the teacher and the more general idea of teacher popularity.

2.2 Teacher attitudes to student evaluations

In spite of a popular conception that lecturers feel hostile to student evaluations, there is considerable literature that challenges this view. Schmelkin, Spencer and Gellman (1997) conclude that teachers' attitudes to the overall usefulness of student evaluations were positive, while Nasser and Fresko (2002) report that the teachers in their study were "mildly positive" about student evaluations. Braskamp and Ory (1994) also refute many of the common concerns associated with student evaluations, while the claim of a more positive view of evaluations is supported by the studies of Penny and Coe (2004) and Beran and Rokosh (2009).

However, while these studies challenge the reported academic hostility towards student evaluations, Beran and Rokosh (2009: 183) caution that acceptance of student evaluations does not correlate with perceptions of their usefulness for enhancing teaching or with actual usage of the instrument for teaching changes. These authors speculate that “since instructors find ratings to be of little practical value, their seemingly positive attitudes regarding student ratings actually reflect a neutral viewpoint or passive acceptance of the ratings in general”. Similarly, Smith (2008: 518) comments that “there is little published evidence that they [evaluations] are systematically used for developing and improving their teaching”.

2.3 Teaching and learning beliefs and responding to student evaluations

It is possible that teaching and learning beliefs may influence teachers’ receptivity to student evaluation feedback. Few studies have investigated this relationship, but it was the focus of a study by Hendry, Lyon and Henderson-Smart (2007); their study suggests a close alignment between teacher conceptions and the types of changes that teachers made to their courses as a result of student feedback. The study conducted by Hendry et al (2007) indicates those teachers with a student-focussed approach and who saw learning as involving strong conceptual change were more responsive to feedback and more positive about strategies for improving their teaching.

2.4 Teacher emotions and responsiveness to student evaluations

More recent literature on student evaluations has begun to explore the role of emotions in lecturers’ responses to student evaluations and the use of the information to underpin teaching changes. A study by Moore and Kuol (2005) focused on individual reaction to student feedback and suggests that there is a definite link between individual reaction to feedback and the nature of subsequent attempts to enhance performance. Another small scale study by Arthur (2009: 449) found that “all the interviewees expressed emotional responses to feedback”.

3. Research methods

A questionnaire was conducted at all three institutions that provided quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was sent electronically to all academics at the three institutions and the response rates were 47.19% (Otago University), 37% (University of Waikato) and 45.42% (Otago Polytechnic). On the basis of themes in the qualitative comments and questions generated by the literature review, a set of interview questions was developed.

Interviewees were selected from those who had volunteered to be interviewed when they completed the questionnaire. Respondents were chosen to provide a range of participants in relation to selected criteria. These included career stage, academic level, experience and academic discipline.

By December 2010, twenty interviews at the University of Waikato had been conducted and transcribed. This paper is based on these interviews. The appendix provides a demographic picture of the participants. For the purposes of this paper, qualitative data were analysed to ascertain the extent to which lecturers value the judgements about their learning that students provide in the formal course evaluations and the degree to which they engage with the feedback and respond to it in their practices. Other perceptions about the evaluations process that appear to intrude on the way academics engage with and respond to student feedback are also noted.

The research question for this paper is:

What do academics think about the usefulness of the information that is provided by the students in the formal evaluations process and how does student feedback influence their teaching and assessment practices?

Additionally, the researcher was interested to examine possible connections and patterns in interviewee responses. To this end interviewee answers were grouped under five headings. They were:

Generally, do you think that students have the capacity to make judgements on their learning? (Q.2.b)

How do you see yourself as an educator? (Q. 2a)

The other broad headings drew on responses to a number of interview questions. These headings were:

To what extent do academics engage with and respond to feedback received from student evaluations?

What other concerns influence academics' perceptions of the value of student feedback from the formal appraisals system?

To what extent do personal and emotional factors have a role in academics' response to student evaluations?

These three questions were drawn from ideas raised in the literature as well as feedback to the questionnaire.

4. Findings

Generally, do you think that students have the capacity to make judgements on their learning?

There was a considerable range in the responses to this question. Three broad categories emerged. There were a number of teachers who emphatically endorsed students' capacity

to make judgements, a middle group referred to as “yes, but” who responded positively, but indicated reservations, and a third group who answered negatively.

4.1 The yes group

Generally, do you think that students have the capacity to make judgements on their learning?

Seven of the twenty interviewees gave strong affirmative answers, usually adding some reinforcing words or comments. Statements include:

They can seriously make judgements (I)

Too damn right, they are eminently well placed to judge (J)

Yes, it’s insulting to think they can’t (G)

4.1.1 How do you see yourself as an educator? (Q. 2a)

In six out of seven instances, this group showed some degree of reflection about teaching and learning and were student-focussed in their conceptions.

Responses include:

Opening people’s minds (G)

Encouraging students to see the bigger picture (Q)

Working with their experience (K)

To facilitate the most profound learning that I can (J)

Only Lecturer I deviated from this pattern, and talks about his educative role only from a teacher perspective.

4.1.2 To what extent do academics engage with and respond to feedback received from student evaluations?

Six lecturers in this group said that they engaged with student feedback and used it to modify their teaching. Responses ranged from meticulous engagement to a cursory response. The more extensive descriptions were from those practitioners with developed and student-orientated reflections about their role as educators.

Statements include:

They are really important to me... I take these comments and use them as objectives for myself of things that I need to change or adjust (P)

The evaluations are incredibly useful to me. I go back to my reflective journal and I have a look at their thinking about their learning (J)

I use the formal evaluations as a form of checking to make sure that what I am doing is working. Individual questions for anything I’m not doing well and try to change (K)

4.1.3 What other concerns influence academics’ perceptions of the value of student feedback from the formal appraisals system?

Even in the strong yes group, some interviewees cited other factors that limited their engagement with and response to student feedback. These include the **timing** of the

formal appraisals at the end of the teaching semester (P, I, K, Q), questions about the **statistical unreliability** of the results (I) and the perception that students have to complete the forms in a rush (I).

4.1.4 To what extent do personal and emotional factors have a role in academics' response to student evaluations? In the emphatically yes group this element was not especially striking.

P uses the words “awed” and “humbled” which suggest a personal and respectful appreciation of her students, while L indicates some personal exasperation in the word “frustrating”. J and K acknowledge the potentially powerful emotional experience of reading student feedback, but their language suggests an ability to recognise and manage this dimension. J says he feels “somewhat threatened” but is committed to asking questions that may deliver “uncomfortable responses”, K says that “it’s about getting over the fear and hearing it with an open heart.”

4.2 The “yes, but” group

Generally, do you think that students have the capacity to make judgements on their learning?

Ten interviewees fall into this category. While they generally acquiesce that students are capable of making judgements, their comments are qualified. Their caveats vary from mild concerns to hints of animosity.

Responses include:

They should be able to; but it’s always partial (B)

Yes... You can be a good teacher, but if they haven’t understood it - that can be frustrating (D)

Yes...most students are not interested in doing them, it’s just another tick thing. Some topics are harder to get good ratings for, simply because of the difficulty of the material (F)

Absolutely..... I believe there is a cultural bias. If I were a student, I should not want to embarrass the person who has been teaching me [From a Maaori and Pacific student perspective] (R)

4.2.1 How do you see yourself as an educator?

For this group there are no consistent patterns in the relationship between teaching beliefs and views on students’ capacity to evaluate. However, overall this group does not demonstrate the same level of reflective thinking about the nature of teaching and learning as was noticeable in the yes group. Five out of ten of the “yes, but” interviewees talk about their role as educators in a teacher-centred way or in terms that suggest that they have not pondered the topic much.

Examples include:

Teach knowledge, principles, the curriculum (A)

Enthusiastic about teaching. Entertainment and teaching. (F)

I always thought of myself principally as a researcher, rather than as an educator (S)

The other five emphasised the students more strongly in their conceptions. Examples include:

Encourage students to ask questions and become suspicious researchers (O)

I learn as much from students as I think I teach them – the Maaori term Ako meaning both teaching and learning (R)

A collaborative endeavour and not pouring stuff into them (T)

4.2.2 To what extent do academics engage with and respond to feedback received from student evaluations?

Most of this group engage to some degree with student feedback.

Examples include:

Don't give me the whole picture, but they certainly give me feedback. I don't take them as everything. I just use the feedback to make my teaching better (A)

The grading system is really useful because they tell me things are on track, whereas comments give me directions about what could be improved. I do look at the comments and try to adjust in response to the comments (M)

I rip open the packet or download it straight away.. I'm more concerned with getting their written responses.. I like to see if there is anything I can do differently (O)

If it's negative then I change my course. If there's something that shows there is a hint of trouble, then I'll follow it up in various ways (R)

Only one lecturer (F) more or less ignores student evaluations, saying he is "very mildly interested in evaluation results and does nothing in response".

4.2.3 What other concerns influence academics' perceptions of the value of student feedback from the formal appraisals system?

There is no single theme in relation to the other factors that emerge as influences on the way the teachers do or do not engage with student feedback. Three respondents raise concerns about the questions themselves:

Questions can be manipulated by teachers (F)

Don't like some of the questions (T),

Want more flexibility in compulsory questions (D)

One respondent questions the validity and reliability of the instrument as a whole (F).

The timing of the appraisals is raised as an issue by four respondents, while three respondents express concerns that the evaluations are used for promotions. R believes that students will not necessarily respond accurately both because of cultural views on the relationship between teachers and learners and because students do not take time when filling out the forms. Similarly, T indicates he has reservations about the quality of students' feedback when he says that "students need education around answering."

4.2.4 To what extent do personal and emotional factors have a role in academics' response to student evaluations? These interviewees make limited explicit reference to the emotional or personal dimensions of receiving student evaluations. D indicates

some emotional intensity when he says that it can be “frustrating” when students do not understand what he has taught them, while O acknowledges being “nervous” especially because evaluations are used in promotion, “rips open the packet” and believes evaluations can be “manipulated”. S is “pretty disappointed” when his scores are not high, but says that he is more upset by reviewers’ feedback on research than by student evaluations. T betrays a significant degree of emotion when he says “I can’t trust them” and recalls a personal experience when a mistake was made by students.

4.3 No group

Generally, do you think that students have the capacity to make judgements on their learning?

Three of the twenty interviewees were resoundingly negative about students’ capacity to make judgements about their learning experience:

I used to believe in students’ ability to make judgements, but I no longer believe this because students are purchasing a degree and this affects their judgement. (E)

No, I don’t think the mark connects with reality (H)

Students can make judgements; whether they are best placed to make judgements is something I’m a bit uncomfortable with. It can be quite hard for students to be accurate measurers of the quality of teaching. Some of my colleagues are fantastic teachers but they are unpopular because their papers are difficult, and the students think they’re being taught badly. It appears to be a popularity contest. I have reservations about students passing judgement on a lecturer for that reason (C).

4.3.1 *How do you see yourself as an educator?*

There were limited responses from all of these teachers, whose views were all fairly teacher-centric and showed little evidence of in-depth pedagogic reflection.

Examples include:

Teacher just part of the equation-many variables (E)

Practical application. Using examples (H)

From a background in which lecturers impart information, is slowly changing as here students question (C)

4.3.2 *To what extent do academics engage with and respond to feedback received from student evaluations?*

The responses ranged from a flat no from C who does not make use of comments or discuss them with students, to E who “just gives them a quick glance and moves on to the next job” to H who looks at the three things that should be kept and three things to change section, but then says “but when I look at it overall, there’s not a lot that I think I need to change.”

4.3.3 What other concerns influence academics' perceptions of the value of student feedback from the formal appraisals system?

For all these lecturers there were other factors that appeared to impinge on their responsiveness to student evaluations. E believed a consumer mentality influenced students' judgments, the use of evaluations for promotion created a wrong ethos and that timing meant that by the time she received her evaluation results, she was "over it". Her negativity seems to be influenced by the perception that "the institution doesn't value teaching" and by job pressures.

4.3.4 To what extent do personal and emotional factors have a role in academics' response to student evaluations?

The emotional language was most evident in this group. Responses include:

"I read them, then I think now what did I do to you again?" (H) "I take it a lot more personally than I should" and that some responses are "personally cruel." (H) "Terrifying as it is used in promotions (C)

5. Discussion

With regard to the overall research question, the findings of these interviews suggest that seven out of twenty interviewees emphatically affirmed the students' ability to make judgments about their learning, while another ten agreed with some reservations. Only three of this group stated that they had little faith in students' judgement. These findings are close to the conclusions of Schmelkin, Spencer and Gellman (1997) who report that teachers' attitudes to the overall usefulness of student evaluations were positive. A more positive view of student evaluations is also supported by the studies of Penny and Coe (2004) and Beran and Rokosh (2009). The large group of teachers in our study in the "yes, but" category echoes the findings of Nasser and Fresko (2002) who found that the teachers in their study were "mildly positive" about student evaluations.

Beran and Rokosh (2009) and Smith (2008) query whether these relatively positive attitudes towards student evaluation are translated into actual use of the student evaluations to inform teaching. The findings from this set of interviewees were more positive in this respect than the literature suggests. The majority of the yes group (six) and the majority of the "yes but" group (nine) engage in varying degrees with student feedback. This responsiveness to student feedback and use to inform teaching changes is more evident in these findings than the literature suggests. However, these findings may have been influenced by bias in the sampling. The interviewees were selected from volunteers who responded to the preliminary questionnaire. Thus, they chose both to answer the questionnaire and volunteered for the interview, suggesting they were interested in teaching and in the topic of evaluations.

The study of Hendry et al (2007) suggests a close alignment between teacher conceptions and the types of changes that teachers made to their courses as a result of student feedback. While our findings did not demonstrate such consistent alignment, there was clear evidence of a link between teacher beliefs and responsiveness to student

evaluations. In the case of the yes group, all but one of the interviewees expressed a student-focussed approach and demonstrated a high degree of reflection about pedagogy. The two most in depth discussions of practice were matched with a very strong interest in student evaluations and a thoughtful, systematic use of the feedback. For this group there is a very clear connection between a developed approach to pedagogy and attitudes to and use of student evaluations.

Overall the “yes but” group does not demonstrate the same level of reflective thinking about the nature of teaching and learning as the yes group. Five out of ten of the “yes, but” interviewees talk about their role as educators in a teacher-centred way or in terms that suggest that they have not pondered the topic much. The other five emphasised the students more strongly in their conceptions. As with the emphatic yes group, in the no group there was a clear correlation between teacher beliefs and attitudes to student appraisals. All three of these interviewees showed little evidence of pedagogic reflection and expressed teacher-centric attitudes.

In terms of other factors that influence lecturers’ engagement, there were some recurrent themes. One was a concern about the institutional use of appraisals for promotion decisions, another was the timing of the appraisals at the end of the semester which people suggested limited their usefulness, and another theme was a view that the university did not value teaching. The literature also reports a strong concern about the use of evaluations by management (McKeachie, 1997; Penny & Coe, 2004; Beran and Rokosh, 2009).

The large volume of feedback to the questionnaire indicated a noticeable emotional dimension. However, by and large, interview respondents did not explicitly identify the emotional quality of the feedback experience. Interestingly, two of the most developed comments on the emotional dimensions of receiving feedback came from highly reflective practitioners in the yes group. Similarly, there was a very direct acknowledgement of “taking things too personally” from an interviewee in the no group. Other indicators of emotion were apparent in the language used by some of the interviewees. However, on the evidence of our findings, there was not a strong link between emotions and the way lecturers viewed and used feedback from evaluations as suggested by Moore and Kuol (2005) and Arthur (2009). It will be interesting to reassess this finding when the interviews from the three centres are combined, as it does not match the tenor of many questionnaire responses or informal conversations with many academics. It is also possible that our question “when you receive the results of evaluations from students, how do you feel?” was confusing and unclear for respondents.

6. Conclusion

Our findings were broadly supportive of the literature. The surprises were the high percentage of people who made changes to their teaching in response to feedback from evaluations and the limited explicit references to emotion. These results will be reassessed when the findings from all three institutions are combined.

In terms of potential modifications to the appraisal process to encourage teachers to engage more enthusiastically with student feedback on their learning and use it for teaching development, the most important areas to re-examine are the use of the same instrument for promotion purposes, and the timing of student evaluations at the end of the semester. More generally, the sophisticated use of student evaluations by teachers with a well-developed pedagogy, is a reminder that revision of appraisals processes need to be integrated into wider debates about academic development.

7. References

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5. Appendices

Respondent Letter	Service	Position	Applied for promotion between 05 and 09	Received promotion between 05 and 09	Faculty	Nature of position
A	16-20	Prof	Yes	Yes	FSEN	Cont
B	16-20	Prof	Yes	Yes	FOE	Cont
C	6-10	Lect	Yes	No	Law	Cont
D	21+	Lect	Yes	Yes	FOM	Cont
E	11-15	Snr Lect	Yes	Yes	FOM	Cont
F	21+	Prof	No	No	FSEN	Cont
G	21+	Ass Prof	No	No	FASS	Cont
H	16-20	Snr Tutor	Yes	No	FOM	Cont
I	11-15	Snr Lect	No	Yes	FSEN	Cont
J	21+	Snr Lect	Yes	Yes	FOE	Cont
K	16-20	Ass Prof	Yes	Yes	FOE	Cont
L	6-10	Lect	Yes	Yes	FSEN	F Term
M	0-5	Ass Prof	Yes	Yes	FSEN	Cont
N	0-5	Snr Tutor	No	No	FCMS	Cont
O	6-10	Ass Prof	Yes	Yes	FASS	Cont
P*	6-10	Other	No	No	FOE (WPC)	Cont
Q	0-5	Snr Lect	No	No	FOE	Cont
R	11-15	Snr Lect	No	Yes	SMPD	F Term
S	0-5	Snr Lect	Yes	Yes	FOM	Cont
T	11-15	Lect	No	No	FASS	Cont

*Note confidentiality needed

Table 1: Table showing respondent pseudonyms against demographic data