

USING PRO-ACTIVE EVALUATION METHODS TO IMPROVE COURSE EVALUATION IN DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In most competitive institutions for higher education, course or module evaluation forms an important and integral part of the educational system. A key aspect of this evaluation exercise focuses on Student Evaluation of Faculty (SEF). Methods and tools for SEF include reflective evaluation, teacher journals, teaching portfolios, etc.

This paper explores the use of pro-active evaluation techniques to provide a more in-depth and accurate way of assessing specific design courses, complementary to the quantitative performance score exercise. Proactive evaluation techniques are based upon the story telling principle and introduce carriers, such as Instant Messaging, Blogging and SMS.

Keywords: Pro-Active Evaluation Techniques, Student Evaluation of Faculty, Story Telling, Design Education

1 INTRODUCTION

The role of universities has evolved over the last twenty years. From focusing mainly on teaching and research, universities have transformed their roles to being more concerned with "community service" [1], "regional development" [2], "regional engagement" [3], "regional innovation organisation" and "academic entrepreneurialism" [4]. This change is a response to a number of "push" and "pull" forces, such as government policy, community expectations, massification of higher education, technology and the emergence of a distributed knowledge production system.

This new type of knowledge production is characterised by the integration of supply and demand factors such that it is diffused throughout industry and society.

However, in conjunction with the new role of universities, classroom performance of faculty has and will continue to receive considerable attention within the professional literature. This attention is not surprising given the increasing importance of student evaluations in many institutions of higher education. Within a competitive university environment, student evaluations are used for formative reasons to improve the quality of instruction provided by the faculty and for summative reasons to provide evaluative data for tenure and promotion decisions as well as for merit-pay decisions.

2 THE VALUE AND NEED FOR SELF-EVALUATION

It takes a certain amount of time and effort to evaluate one's own teaching effectively. The following three reasons support the need for such an evaluation [5].

Regardless of how good or how poor teachers are, they all have the potential to get better over time (Fig. 1). Yet some teachers continually improve and approach their potential while others experience a modest improvement early in their career and then seem to level off in quality or sometimes even decline. Why? It is to be argued that the primary difference between those who do and those who do not improve is that only the former gather information about their teaching, and make an effort to improve some aspect of it, every time they teach.

Figure 1 The Effect of Evaluation on Our Teaching

Another reason to evaluate is to document the quality of one's teaching for others. All career professionals have other people who need to know about the quality of their teaching. It may be the person's current department or institution head, or it may be a potential employer. But once people teach, they have a track record, and others need and want to know how well they taught. The only way a teacher can provide them with that information is to gather it, and that means evaluation. Teaching portfolios are becoming a common way of communicating this information to others. As it turns out, putting a portfolio together also helps the teacher understand his or her own teaching better. Lastly, there is a very personal and human need to evaluate, which is for our own mental and psychological satisfaction.

3 STUDENT EVALUATION OF FACULTY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Arguments against tenure have typically been economic ones. As higher education enters the 21st century, arguments against tenure are changing. A paradigm shift is taking place in arguments against academic freedom and tenure. It is said that academic freedom tends to be viewed from the perspective of a bygone era when the university faculty and student population were relatively homogeneous. Accordingly, eliminating tenure or at least radically revamping it is increasingly being justified not on matters of principle but by political and other practical considerations.

It is currently suggested that eliminating or revamping tenure would be fairer to minorities, to the unemployed, and to part-time faculty members, presumably by opening up faculty positions for young professors and minorities [6,7].

However, those in favour of tenure argue that, in a 21st century global society, academic freedom and tenure will become more important than it has been in the past. The reason is that with increasing diversity in both the general culture and the university campus, including not only diversity among the student body, but diversity among the faculty, comes increasing conflict of ideas, values, and perspectives. A non-tenure system could be detrimental to fairly managing these conflicts and promoting the existence of different perspectives, resulting in the restriction of freedom of speech and exchange of ideas. In addition to the above, opponents of a non-tenured system also

claim that administrators are strongly in favour of Student Evaluation of Faculty (SEF) being used for faculty salary, promotion and tenure decisions. Based on the present situation, where faculty teach in a litigious context, they advocate three reasons for supporting SEF. The first is a lack of practical alternatives to SEF, the second is administrative control, and the third is that student input facilitates student retention in numerous ways [8]. Changed from its benign historical origins, SEF provides a mechanism of control in a demographically diverse 21st century educational system, where paired evaluation, mutual observation, critical incident analysis or developmental action learning sets for faculty may have lost their motivating effectiveness.

In a governmentally non-sponsored education system, it is also a powerful tool in assuring classroom changes that lead to the retention of student tuition 'dollars' by assenting to student consumer demands and of parents who foot the tuition bill.

4 SEF AS A TOOL FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Despite a history of conflicting research on the reliability and validity of SEF, it has typically not been viewed as an infringement on academic freedom. When it is suggested that SEF may impinge on academic freedom, it is often considered an attack on either student rights, or on the process of evaluating faculty performance in general.

In line with the above views and in defence of SEF, negative connotations of SEF being viewed as a tool to determine salary, promotion and tenure decisions, should be approached neutrally. It is only half true that SEF infringes on instructional responsibilities of faculty by providing a control mechanism over curricular, course content, grading, and teaching methodology. Furthermore, SEF's significant role in current attacks on tenure is partly true.

The following examples illustrate how a clear and explicit evaluation system has harmed as well as benefitted the career development of selected teaching faculty.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), SEF has been deployed as a tool, alongside their research output assessment exercise, to reorganise the University in a drastic and unpleasant manner. Benchmarking among teaching performance of colleagues was focussed upon. However, it was done without fairly considering the teaching environment and conditions. Whether rightful or not, this resulted in a situation, where top management was able to execute more leverage in arguing for or against the teaching performance of an individual faculty member.

At the University of Salford, scholarship of teaching and learning was explicitly separated from expertise in the subject discipline. The remaining four activities were all external teaching activities that would generally be carried out by those already in senior posts but evidence of these clearly enhanced the promotional case. They included teaching-related professional service to other institutions, active membership of professional groups, including teaching-related ones, publications in teaching, and teaching grants and contracts secured. These activities also served to demonstrate that excellence in teaching-related activity, including scholarship and publication, can be recognised at the highest levels, both internally and externally. As a result of the changed criteria, this benefitted the career development of faculty, who otherwise may have been overlooked. A number of the teaching faculty were subsequently promoted to Senior Lecturer on the basis of a strong teaching portfolio and a successful administration/management profile [9].

As seems to be the case for several institutions of higher education, one of the key purposes of the education policy plan of the University of Antwerp (Belgium) is the gradual development of more evaluations of teachers and instructional quality, in which

the students, amongst others, play an important role. In order to achieve this goal successfully, they developed an evaluation questionnaire that should allow students to share their experiences and appreciation concerning the lessons they took from the professors and their assistants. The results of these evaluations were used for the improvement of teaching quality and tenure decisions at the University of Antwerp [10]. At the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, a quality assurance system (KVASS) has been introduced to continuously improve the teaching and learning of modules. KVASS approaches learning positively and holistically, emphasising collaboration between faculty and student to improve certain modules. Hereby, module feedback is aimed more at the module in general rather than focussed on the assessment of individual faculty. Besides this, if there is a need to evaluate faculty, it will be constructively done through consensus between the individual being evaluated and the student representative(s), who are conducting the evaluation. For faculty, who are concerned with continuously improving their modules, such a system will be encouraging.

5 A NEW PARADIGM FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN DESIGN EDUCATION

The link between teaching and learning could lead some academics to assume that once they have ‘taught’ something, students have automatically ‘learned’ it [11]. Even though the primary aim of teaching is simple, which is to make student learning possible, the means to achieve that aim generally requires a teacher to play multiple roles. They may have to become course/unit designers, facilitators of learning activities and assessors of learning outcomes.

There are many suggestions for providing good learning opportunities, based on theories and research findings. Good learning opportunities include learning through experience or action, learning that uses methods to encourage independence, and resource-based learning [12]. However, provision of good learning opportunities does not guarantee good learning outcomes. The reasons for the discrepancy between the faculty’s expectation of student learning and the actual learning that takes place are many. One obvious factor is student motivation. This lack of motivation may be compensated for by project-based joint-learning between faculty and student, whereby the former acts as a mentor to the latter. Such a model has often been implemented in design studies, where teacher-centred has shifted to learner-centred learning.

In design education, approaches such as project-based enquiry continue to serve as a distinct and valued feature of the discipline. Established upon the tradition of an Atelier model of learning, design education aspires to values and pedagogies which emphasise the need for low student staff ratios, one-to-one tutorials, small group critiques, and significant quantities of individual formative feedback and guidance [13, 14].

However, such a luxury of intimate teaching-learning relationships will be scarcer in the future, which may force design educators to reflect on the teaching methods and approaches currently in use. An example of this is work that explores the application of web-based technologies as a means to compensate for increased student numbers within a design studio setting [15]. Central to this line of enquiry is the investigation of alternative pedagogies with which to deliver individual feedback and guidance.

Factors that comprise good learning experiences, which have been drawn from the students’ writing can be grouped into hands-on and practice-relevant education, seeing things with your own eyes, teacher enthusiasm and experience (experiential learning),

team-working, and tactile and emotional experiences [16]. When related to design education, these factors are highly influenced by mentor-based education.

6 PRO-ACTIVE EVALUATION METHODS

Within the context of design education, a more accurate course evaluation method is to be investigated to improve reflective design teaching and learning, which is less dependent on quantitative performance scores of faculty. The basis for developing and communicating an extensive qualitative evaluation lies within methods already used in design research itself, such as ‘storytelling’, as well as new media, such as blogging, SMS, Instant Messaging etc.,

6.1 Using storytelling and blogging for more accurate student feedback

In our everyday lives we hear many stories. Some reflect humor, others poignancy. Some have no specific purpose; others make a specific point in a highly effective manner. In addition to being entertaining or conveying information, stories are a method by which important values and traditions are conveyed to others, including the next generation. When transferred to the context of research and education, storytelling will facilitate reflective learning. This means that storytelling provides opportunities to examine and learn from complex professional situations through reflective dialogue.

Unlike other forms of communication, stories are a safe way to convey messages that engage the affective domain rather than only the cognitive. This affective approach will have an inevitable personal bearing on the one being evaluated, as well as the evaluator. The coverage of personal matters in the student evaluation of a course module or respective faculty should be seen as an initiative to elevate the accuracy that lies behind quantitative scores. However, attempts to involve stories in learning and evaluation processes can be complex in connection to ethical issues.

Besides using storytelling for evaluative purposes, it forms another way for educators to think about and to behave toward students different from themselves; and sharing stories that can result in collaborative critique leading to improved teaching [17].

6.2 SMS and Instant Messaging (IM)

Contrary to planned module feedback sessions, SMS and Instant Messaging provide a unique platform to spontaneously voice concerns about the teaching of modules, teachers, teaching environment, etc. continuously throughout the course of a module. In some cases, such spontaneous concerns are a true reflection of how the teaching is being performed. However, because of human nature, the only disadvantage of SMS or IM feedback is that more often negative rather than positive issues concerning a module are communicated explicitly.

7 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Pro-active evaluation methods, as discussed in chapter 6 should be further investigated, on how these can be used as a complementary instrument to facilitate and improve honest student evaluation, while taking into consideration favourable and unfavourable variables attached to the course. These variables are Lectures or Sectional Teaching, Student Expected Grades, Age of the Teaching Faculty and Class-size [18]. Not only will a more thorough personal commentary on feedback scores form a better platform for the University administration to make more accurate judgements and decisions, but it will also provide the respective teaching faculty with “that extra” information and insight.

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