

Teaching Tip 13: Student Course Ratings

S. Benson Eii-Consulting, LLC

This tip focuses on the use of student course/teacher evaluation (SETs) as a form of formative evaluative feedback. There is a significant body of literature regarding student evaluation of teaching (SET). For example [Uttl, et. al. 2016¹](#) suggest that there is little or no correlation between student ratings and teaching effectiveness. However, other reports suggest there are correlations. What is clear is that student ratings of instructors and courses can be bias with respect to instructor gender, ethnicity, physical appearance, in addition ratings are effected by discipline type, perceived course difficulty, grade expectations, pedagogy, class size and even the timing of the survey and when students complete the survey. This does not mean student ratings have no validity or use, rather these reports caution about how the information is use and the necessity to have more than a single measure for the course and the instructor's teaching. Generally, campus wide SETs include questions that rate various course or teacher aspects on a Likert type scale plus open-ended student constructed responses. To a large degree SETs, whether paper and pencil or electronic measure student perceptions of affectivity.



Too often faculty and administrators focus on the mean score rather than the distribution of the student responses which give a clearer representation. Unfortunately, both individual faculty and administrators tend to overweight negative comments and underweight positive student comments. While written student comments can often provide formative insights, they need to be analyzed in fair and impartial ways, for example classifying each response as positive, negative or neutral will give a better information overview then simply reading the comments verbatim. Fortunately, there are now text-analysis or text mining programs that automate analysis of students' qualitative course feedback. These are continuing to evolve, for current information one can easily search "text analysis tools for student course feedback" to identify tools and papers that address the used of text analysis of student course feedback.

To help ensure that student SET surveys are valid useful it is important to explain their purposes, uses and why they are important. For SET information to be useful it needs to be representative and not a bias sample from a few conscientious students. There are several approaches to helping ensure an adequate student response rate; one is to administer the survey in class, this can be easily done if the survey is pencil and paper or web-based and accessible on mobile devices (it is important that the instructor leave the rooms to reduce possible bias), alternatively there can be various incentives, including requiring students to complete > 75% of their class surveys to allow registration for the following semester, or providing a small amount of participation points for completing the survey (there are various

approaches that allow this, while maintaining the anonymous nature of the student responses), etc.

The purpose of SET instruments is to collect formative information on the course and the instructor so as to identify strengths and weakness to help improve teaching and learning. The information also allows comparisons across instructors, departments, faculties and the institution. This provides benchmarking that can be used to identify possible problems and exemplars and to give an indication of how well one's doing relative to peer groups. One free web-based SET tool is SALG [Student Assessment of their Learning Gains] which is flexible, customizable and focuses on student learning. For more information see <https://salgsite.net/>

A university's SET instrument does not have to be (should not be) the only formative feedback on the course and your teaching. It is wise to always incorporate your own an end of the semester survey to let you know what worked, what didn't work, which assignments were good, what students liked and what could be improved. Of equal importance is the mid-semester feedback survey, since this allows time to make minor changes in the class before the end of the semester.

¹B. Uttl, et al., Meta-analysis of faculty's teaching effectiveness: Student evaluation of teaching ratings and student learning are not related, *Studies in Educational Evaluation* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2016.08.007>



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Prof. Spencer A. Benson | sbenson@eii-consulting.com, sbenson51@gmail.com

