

ONLINE EVALUATIONS OF ONLINE COURSES: ANOTHER OBSTACLE TO INVOLVING FULL TIME FACULTY IN DISTANCE LEARNING?

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Abstract

While there are many criticisms of online courses, their growth is beyond doubt. Nearly a third of all college students in the United States are taking at least one course online, and that percentage is increasing. As the many controversial facets of comparing online with traditional courses increase-- only 30% of full-time professors approve of them-- there is one issue that is almost ignored. Many studies have indicated a significant difference in outcomes between Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) submitted for online courses and the traditional in class paper and pencil manner. On the positive side, online comments tend to be considerably more detailed, and probably more valuable and qualitatively superior. And, of course they are far more efficient and less costly. But many studies over the past decade have indicated that online SET grades often lower, that is, more critical of the instructor. And to add to the problem, online evaluation response rates are consistently lower than the paper and pencil results. Does this present a disadvantage that further discourages full time faculty from teaching at distance?

This paper examines the possible effect of this phenomenon from three perspectives: first, the evidence that online SET scores are frequently lower and response rates always lower than face-to-face SET procedures; second, the dilemma of faculty, especially full-time faculty, in facing the decision to teach online, when uncertain evaluation results could possibly harm their careers; and third, various remedial actions that have been proposed to remedy the problem

INTRODUCTION

Embedded in the complicated controversy concerning distance-learning versus traditional approaches in postsecondary education is a relatively unreported problem associated with the assessment of all learning experiences. The Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) in earlier years was accomplished through pencil and paper evaluations submitted at the end of the course and summarized through a laborious, time-consuming process into summary evaluations across various teaching dimensions: course relevance, interest of the instructor in students concerns, individual attention shown to the learner, etc. But in recent years most universities are migrating away from the slow and expensive paper and pencil evaluations, using online evaluations instead. This migration to online evaluations has several inherent problems. Among them are lowered and highly varying response rate, lower faculty evaluations, scaling difficulties associated with moving from manual to online techniques, and many others. But the problem that until recently has gone almost completely unnoticed has been that online evaluations may be a potential threat to the careers of on line instructors. Therefore, even though the general subject of paper and pencil versus automated methodologies of evaluating courses may seem like a somewhat low priority strategically in postsecondary education, in actuality it is of major consequence.

Why would online evaluation of online courses be a strategic issue in postsecondary education? The answer lies in several trends that have been more and more visible in recent years. First of all, online education has become a major part of university offerings. The most recent study indicated that over 6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, more than 30% of all college attendees, and 11% were taking all of their courses online. [1] Further, even though online percentages are rising, overall university attendance has decreased every year for the past six years. [2] One final statistic that is significant. For 15 years the annual Babson reports have reported that the number of faculty

who approve of distance learning hovers around 30%. [3] This faculty dissatisfaction statistic is also reflected in many other reports. [4, 5, 6] Therefore, the SET problem can certainly exacerbate a situation where good online teachers are even more in demand than ever before. With so many other hurdles facing the online educator – lower esteem by colleagues, reduced support from administrators, etc. – this challenge should not be taken lightly. It represents a challenge to the offering of high quality online courses since it can discourage otherwise qualified faculty from choosing to participate.

1 EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH ON STUDENT EVALUATION OF TEACHING (SET) RESPONSE RATE AND EVALUATIONS

A recent study of a large university which switched from traditional paper and pencil methods of course evaluation over 10 years ago found that initially there was a drastic decline of overall response rates from 73% paper and pencil evaluation to 43%. This in turn led to great concerns about the SET scaling and other attributes of the evaluation process. [7] The problem of reduced response rates for online evaluation is not unique to this institution. There have been many other reports of similar results. For example, highly varied response rates, from 0 to 95% were found in one study of e-learning delivery [8] and also noted that the depth of research on this problem has been scanty. The report also commented on similar types of findings, mostly in studies aimed at specific settings or approaches. [9,10] Another study, this time aimed at examining differing evaluation metrics between online and traditional courses, found significant differences in outcome indicators across the board, with statistically lower course evaluations and response rates between the two modalities, in addition to lowered final grades and DFW rates. [11]

A large scale study focused on the detrimental effects of lower SET scores for faculty teaching online courses and took note of the fact that even though there have been over 2000 studies concerning SET over the past 70 years, there has been very little research on problems associated with lower scores for online courses. In the particular experiment involved 250 online classes in a single semester at a large Midwestern university. To quote the study's findings:

"The results indicate that average SET ratings in online classes are significantly lower than the average ratings in on-campus classes across all five dependent measures." [12]

A unique study in the context of web versus traditional SET evaluations, student data from 181 different courses across seven academic terms were obtained based on both online and in class evaluation of each course. In this study, as in so many others, the reported results were:

"Significantly lower evaluation scores for both the instructor and the course are produced when a web-based modality is used. In general, these results did not vary for courses at different levels of matriculation or at different levels of student participation" [13]

2 EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH ON QUALITY OF SET COMMENTS

With respect to the qualitative advantages of online evaluations, a study aimed at students taking a course on WebCT found that this group was much more likely to leave supplemental, qualitative comments about the course, and also left more detailed comments than the typical paper and pencil participants did. [14] Another study comparing qualitative aspects of the web-based evaluations versus traditional paper and pencil methods was even more specific. In a course with enrollment of 169 students both evaluation methods were randomly employed, with these results:

"The number of comments was significantly higher in the web-based group compared to the traditional group. Students, faculty and staff all rated the web process as more convenient and less time-consuming than the traditional method. A web-based evaluation system using subsets of students to complete each evaluation can be employed to obtain representative feedback. The web-based process yields quantitatively and qualitatively superior student

comments, enhanced student satisfaction, and more efficient use of faculty and staff time.” [15]

This result is inherently credible, since the atmosphere for a paper and pencil evaluation is constrained and, particularly in the digital age, somewhat unfamiliar. Sitting in a classroom where an instructor passes Scantron-like forms probably seems like something from another era to many students. The online responses can be done at a time of the students' choosing, using a modality that is completely comfortable. As another study noted,

"There was no significant difference in quantitative student responses based on administration method, but students who completed evaluations over the Internet were more likely to give qualitative feedback compared to students who completed their evaluations in the classroom. Moreover, students in the Web-based condition provided longer qualitative comments than students in the paper-and-pencil group." [16]

In a larger study a randomized control group taken from seven colleges, 25 departments and 41 instructors' response rates were lower for the online courses, but not seriously so since scale score differences did not exceed effect sizes. [17]

3 LOWER SET RATINGS AND LOWER RESPONSE RATES—THE DILEMMA

In summary, there is a wide body of evidence, spanning several decades, indicating that when a university shifts from paper and pencil SET approaches to online evaluations there are several predictable results. First of all, in general, the instructor evaluations are considerably below those for the online SET, meaning that on average, faculty can expect generally lower grades from students across most evaluation dimensions. Second, the range of these differences is broad, meaning that some institutions may experience a lower incidence of SET evaluation reduction than others. Third, and equally troubling for online faculty, is the consistent finding that the response rate for online course evaluations is significantly lower. Therefore, on average, an online instructor can expect not only lower evaluations ab initio, but also to be subject to the problems of lower response rate, possibly skewing the results seriously. There is convincing evidence that online evaluations are qualitatively superior, meaning they are more carefully considered and written, and also more detailed and, therefore more valuable as a guide for improvement.

This, then, is the dilemma of online evaluation – faculty members who choose to work online can expect lower SET scores and also lower response rates, some of the latter drastically lower depending on the situation. On the other hand, though, online evaluations tend to be far more considered and thoughtful. In this environment, it would seem that full-time faculty especially would be more reluctant to participate in the online environment, even though it is rising in popularity among students.

4 ADDITIONAL FACULTY CONCERNS ABOUT ON LINE LEARNING—BEYOND SET SCORES AND RESPONSE RATES

In 2004 a classic article appeared in the *Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery (CACM)*, titled "Universities marginalize online courses: why should faculty members develop online courses if the effort may be detrimental to their promotion or tenure?" [18] In it, the author presented a list of problems faced by tenured and tenure-track faculty associated with the decision to present courses online, like willingness of a senior administrative official to confer equal status to online courses, compared to traditionally taught courses. Directly related to this concern is the problem of the effect of online teaching on the decision for promotions and especially tenure. As mentioned earlier, the number of courses taught online has skyrocketed, yet the problems described in the 2004 article are still very much a part of the challenges faced by college faculty today.

The most consistent indicator of faculty opinions about online learning has been the Babson reports, which since 2003 annually assessed the opinions of administrators and instructors concerning a wide variety of topics associated with distance learning. In the 2012 Babson report, the tenth in the series, an invariant statistic about faculty was repeated: only about 30% of college faculty approve of distance learning. [3]. Surveys by the Gallup organization and Inside Higher Education in 2016 and

2017 also found considerable dissatisfaction and uneasiness among a large portion of faculty with respect to the role of distance learning [5,6]. The satisfaction is felt even more strongly in community colleges where faculty reported more negative sentiments toward online teaching over the past five years than those of other postsecondary institutions. [19]. Most of the concerns had to do with relatively mundane issues like training, institutional support, etc.

A significant portion of the online teaching cadre is adjunct instructors, many of whom simultaneously teach for several institutions. A recent study found that 48% of adjunct faculty teach for at least two universities, and of these 40% teach completely online. 15% reported having a full-time position at one institution while teaching adjunct for another. [20]. There are no indications that this component of online teachers is any more satisfied with online learning options than tenured or tenure-track instructors. Further, according to the American Association of University professors (AAUP), more than half of all faculty teaching in the United States are contingent, meaning, that they are either part-time or full-time non-tenure-track faculty. (21) This issue is frequently mentioned in the popular press. (22)

To summarize, full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty in the United States are definitely conflicted about online learning and its potential effect on their careers in the academy. As a recent report put it,

"Faculty have a love-hate relationship with online teaching and learning: They don't want to do it but think they would be better instructors if they did." [23]

5 POSSIBLE SOLUTION TRAJECTORY: RETHINKING THE SET PARADIGM TO REFLECT THE UNIQUENESS OF THE ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Nearly all of the current methodologies for evaluating online teaching are simply extrapolations taken from traditional teaching methodologies and postsecondary education. This is in spite of the nearly complete penetration of online learning in the college environment-- close to 90% of colleges offer distance learning programs – and there is extensive reporting that the current methodology for online evaluation is inappropriate, or at least insufficient. [24,25, 26] An example of a separate approach for evaluation is the Online Instructor Evaluation System (OIES) developed by Park University. The system has received high marks from online teachers as being more in touch with their unique teaching/learning environment. [27] There is also considerable interest in the topic of an "ideal evaluation system". One study asked a large number of online teaching specialists and a single institution with their own favorite type of evaluation modality might be. Instead of preferring to be evaluated by those who were also teaching online this group strongly felt that it was better to be mentored and evaluated by those who had subject matter specialties, somewhat relegating the online status to a lesser importance to them. As the researcher concluded:

"Based on the findings from this study, stakeholders may consider qualitative, holistic feedback provided by subject matter experts, specifically peers, rather than supervisor evaluations emphasizing explicitly quantifiable measures" [28]

There are countless other studies, many of them quite recent, that are reflective of the differential results that can be expected between traditionally SET instruments and those which capitalize on advantageously deployed distance-learning insights. In a study which use the edTPA metric found that learning outcomes for the online teacher preparation course and its traditionally taught face-to-face counterpart were surprisingly different:

"The results suggest programmatic course offerings are not equal for both types of students and that results in differences favoring face to face course preparation; however, online candidates, even with unequal course access, outperformed face to face candidates as being more teacher ready on 80% of the rubrics within edTPA. Findings lead us to wonder: Do teacher preparation program structures represent inherent biases projected by faculty who prefer face to face over online programs without evidence of differences in learning effectiveness?" [29]

Although some of these findings are complicated, the search for predictor variables sometimes is intuitively obvious. A study at Clemson University which was seeking correlations for improvement in SET evaluations from semester to semester determined that the most significant predictor was the instructor's longevity. The longer he or she was associated with the same course the better the SET results [30]

6 POSSIBLE SOLUTION TRAJECTORY: INSTRUMENTAL APPROACHES

There is a very large array of what could be called instrumental interventions in SET, an combination of tools that can be brought to bear on the problem of low response rate and low evaluations. A recent study reported from North Carolina State University, analyzed the decision made a decade ago to move from paper and pencil to web-based evaluation which resulted in response rates plunging from 73% to 43% in one year. Gradually rates improved, but in this study faculty members were asked to describe a variety of interventions aimed at improving response rate. Some of the approaches were: personal notes to students asking that they complete the SET process; Mentioning the importance of online evaluations during class sessions; creating establishing a climate in the class that reflects more mutual respect between faculty and students; administering the SET instrument during a face-to-face class; setting aside a specific time in class when students can perform the SET process on their individual laptops or cell phones; reminding students that the online evaluation is very helpful to improving subsequent classes; forwarding message from an authority figure like department head or dean about the importance of evaluations; offering the incentive of snacks to be delivered at the final exam then you if the response rate achieved a certain level; adding a specified point bonus to existing class grades or eliminating one low test mark grade if a certain response rate is achieved; promising to eliminate one low graded assignment if a certain level of response rate was achieved [31]. North Carolina State University also has several frequently asked questions (FAQ) list to encourage faculty to be aware of various procedures possible for improving SET response rates (31, 32). Most of the recommended procedures in the instrumental category seem to favor the use of inducements over any other procedure. (33, 34) While some of these inducements are legitimate, many, like changing existing grades, are probably questionable ethically.

7 CONCLUSIONS

One researcher found an apt analogy between the online SET challenges and the work of the late author Marshall McLuhan, famous for his dictum that "the medium is the message". The online evaluation medium probably leads to a different outcome (the message) than the traditional paper and pencil approach. [9 7, p 191] The evidence is definitely compelling that the certain results of switching from paper and pencil to online SET are a reduction in the response rate, sometimes drastic and nearly always slow to recover, and a lowering of the evaluation score. This disadvantage needs to be balanced with several positive aspects. First of all, in a digital age it seems almost ludicrous that some institutions are still using expensive, intrusive and technologically backward paper and pencil evaluations. When other aspects of life are moving at the speed of light it seems inappropriate to continue processing SET as they were done almost a century ago. Second, nearly all of the studies have indicated that the quality of the responses in the online SET approach is significantly higher, since respondents nearly always give more detailed and useful replies online. Third, there is a significant literature on various instrumental approaches many institutions are using to raise the response rate through action of faculty and administrators. These efforts have varying results but certainly indicate that some of the disadvantages of switching from paper and pencil techniques can gradually be erased through administrative actions.

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