Student feedback: Embracing the student voice to transform the educational landscape

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Professor Emeritus and Inaugural Pegasus Professor Charles D. Dziuban discusses the importance of integrating student feedback in teaching and learning in higher education

"Chuck is a very smart man; he may even be as smart as he thinks he is."

(end of course comment)

"This guy is so boring my pillow needs a pillow."

(comment on ratemyprofessor.com)

Listening to student feedback

A persistent issue in higher education, industry, and other learning settings concerns incorporating the student voice into teaching and learning. There is a consensus that incorporating meaningful student feedback will foster an educational environment where instructors become aware of how students view their effectiveness. Accomplished effectively, incorporation can increase engagement and motivation, improve teaching strategies, enhance critical thinking skills, increase a sense of learning purpose, and improve curriculum and assessment, all of which create an environment where students and instructors form an active and supportive learning community. As a result, the walls of 'class' come down, with class no longer being a place but a process where learning becomes an autocatalytic feedback cycle. At the street level, every teacher wants to know how their audience views the 'performance.'

The voices

Mechanisms such as interviews, focus groups, anonymous platforms, mid-semester feedback, online forums, and others capture the student voice. However, the predominant method is the formalized, end-of-course Likert scale rating protocol with supplemental comments, forming a short-term transactional psychological contract. Customarily, the questions on these instruments address areas such as course rhythm, expectations and rules, benchmarking progress, engagement, and instructor responsiveness. Students engage in morphological connectionism, where they build observer-dependent instructor prototypes based on positive, negative, or ambivalent perspectives. This approach is both formative and summative, giving students a facilitative and diagnostic voice. Also, the information provides departments and colleges with a mechanism for evaluating faculty members, creating a high-stakes environment for compensation, recognition, awards, and even tenure.

The internet and social media spawned an alternative student evaluation culture that is informal, uncontrolled, complex, sometimes chaotic, and exclusively virtual. This happens on ratemyprofessor.com, YouTube, X, Bluesky, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, as well as in chats, text messages, and other places where students gather virtually. They fabricate instructor reputations that spread like memes across the virtual world. This happens outside the purview of the institutions, shadows the formal evaluation system, and has evolved into a formidable student voice. Therefore, there are two primary approaches at the moment: the formal rating-scale metric and the virtual student narratives. No doubt there are other mechanisms, and in the future, we will have to incorporate them into the new educational paradigm.

Issues and challenges

Issues have surfaced with a metric rating approach. Focus groups show that students feel like 'robots' when they are required to evaluate every course, seeing no effect from their responses because instructors receive the results long after the course is over. One study demonstrated that students have moved from ambivalence to rejection of the process by simply straight-lining their responses (assigning the same value for every item), bypassing the intent and invalidating the results. Those who do consider individual items create a long-tail power curve containing little usable information. Another issue with metrics is that they fall prey to the Goodhart principle, where although initially they were considered indicators, they morph into targets that are gamed and thus no longer reflect their original intent.

On the other hand, in social media-based student comments, students can say anything about instructors at any time and have no filters, boundaries, or consequences. It is the Wild West of student evaluation. Instructors are unable to monitor or respond to these narratives. Often, student voices reflect the increasing and conflicting demands of contemporary society, where they are ambivalent about the value of education given its time and monetary needs. This process can spin out of control, where confirmation bias dominates the conversation and has little to do with education. However, this critique may seem overly negative, but as professionals, we know that in the future, student feedback will be one of the most important aspects of education. Our biggest challenge is accelerating change. Consider what we face with Artificial Intelligence that uncouples educational principles: learning and critical thinking, teacher presence and student motivation, curriculum and context, assessment and holistic learning, knowledge, and curiosity. These should be addressed if we are to capture and incorporate the new student voice in a positive and productive way. Complexity theory offers hope where faculty members and students find common, emergent ground in an idealized psychological contract. The narratives and metrics are manifestations of the same thing.

Questions to guide the way

1. How can we create a more responsive feedback system that encourages honest and meaningful student input?

2. How do institutions accommodate the misalignment of how they use the student voice versus their stated intentions? Often, they expect one outcome but reinforce something entirely different: the sorcerer's apprentice phenomenon.
3. How can we encourage students to take ownership of their learning experience and view their evaluations as vital to the educational culture?
4. What assessment models can accommodate the student voice in the era of Artificial Intelligence and digital learning?
5. What policies should be developed to ensure that student evaluations, both formal and informal, are used responsibly to enhance teaching and learning?
6. How do we deal with the possibility that the student evaluation of their courses is uniquely observer-dependent rather than emanating from a common set of learning experiences?

"Absolutely loved this course. So engaging and informative"

(end of course comment)

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