Student evaluating: An Exploratory Study of Students' Interpretation of College Course Evaluation Questions

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Abstract

Students in most universities in the USA evaluate their instructors at the completion of classes. Overall, the results of these evaluations inform various decisions by University administration such as promotions of instructors. Most studies that have focused on these evaluations have utilized the evaluation findings to explore issues that include the accuracy of these evaluations and the processes impacting students' perceptions about premium instruction. Other studies have attended to student perceptions about the whole process of evaluating instructors. This article shifts the scholarship focus to the items in the evaluation packets and explores students' interpretation of key phrases in the individual items in the evaluation packets. Such interpretation is most important in current times given that the new 2009 House Bill 2504 of Texas requires that all public institutions of higher learning in Texas allow the public access to instructors' evaluation scores. Exempt to these rules are the Dental and medical units. In a survey study with 103 undergraduate students in the Department of Agriculture at Texas State University, the study collected students' understanding of four key phrases from three questions that are part of the Student Perception of Instruction (SPI). The researchers used open-coding to analyze the data that exhibits the variability in students' understanding of these phrases, and which has implications for the reliability of the SPI as a measuring instrument. This article offers suggestions for improving the SPI measure instrument.

Key words: Faculty evaluations, HB2504, student perceptions, instruction

Introduction

Information about faculty evaluation is commonly utilized by the faculty and the institution's administration to make decisions such as improvement of instruction and promotion of faculty respectively. It is important to note that even though this information would shape decisions institutions make concerning faculty promotion, colleges administrations are open to and able to explore other factors that may bias the students' perceptions of instruction and the instructor. Some of these factors may include level of course (entry or higher level), status of course (required or elective), and nature of course (practical or theoretical) as well as students' interpretation of the individual items in the evaluation packet. However, Students Perception of Instruction (SPI) scores may be viewed differently by a general public who may lack the ability to explore some of the extraneous factors that could impact students' perceptions. They may take the scores at face value and therefore vilify the concerned instructors unfairly.

This study, therefore, underscores the importance of students correctly interpreting survey items in the evaluation packet. Correct interpretation of the survey items has a direct bearing on the quality of evaluation scores posted in these institutions' websites.

Reliable and valid evaluation scores will present faculty fairly before, the general public who since the inception of HB2504, have become a constituency of faculty assessors (Munisil, 2010). Indeed, faculty evaluations have always been considered a very useful source of information about students' perception of courses and their instructors. It is widely believed by scholars that SPI is a valuable means of assessment and improvement of instruction as it is the one important avenue through which students, the recipients of instruction, voice their opinions about the same. Chen and Hoshower, (2003), state that SPI in college is widely accepted as a means of accountability and of measuring instructor's teaching. Kember et al, (2002) Ramsden, (2003); Hounsell, (2003) all note the importance attached to these SPI for auditing and improving instruction delivery. In view of the high premium placed on data collected through SPI surveys, and being that there is no other data source of the same credence for the same purposes (Spencer and Schmelkin, (2002), it is imperative that inferences drawn from the data be as reliable and as valid as possible. The reliability and validity of this data is further necessary when it is considered that the SPI surveys results are used by institutions to make decisions that include the promotion of instructors (Yao, Weissinger and Grady, 2003). Consequently, it becomes important that students take the survey and correctly interpret the items in it. A casual look and the response rates to these evaluations at Texas State's Agriculture departments show variability in these rates from course to course and which spreads from a little over 50 to slightly over 90% (Texas State University, 2011)(2). It is important that university students have similar (or concurrent) understanding of the evaluation questions they are been asked to ensure consistent and reliable scores. The reliability of this information is more important now because amid the information now publically available on Texas public university websites are faculty course evaluations.

Recently, some aspects that studies about the SPI have focused on include interpreting the students' responses in the evaluation surveys (Chen and Chen, 2010) and collecting students' perception of the entire faculty class evaluation process (Heine and Maddox, 2009). Although this article also focuses on the student responses in SPI surveys, it primarily explores a different perspective on SPI research that has seldom been investigated: Students' understanding and interpretation of the course evaluation questions. The research hypothesis was that substantial differences in students' understanding of the evaluation question would lead to inaccurate interpretation of the results. Any decisions made from such scores could be faulty. In this paper an attempt is made to uncover common student interpretation of some items in the SPI rating scale. The objective of this article, therefore, is to provide faculty, teaching in the Texas public university system a better understanding of ways students evaluate them and their courses.

Background to the study

That a good college education is a foundation for successful life experiences cannot be understated. Indeed, most of today's job opportunities require a college education (Carnevale & Fry, 2000; George, Neale, Horne, & Malcolm, 2001; Heller, 2001; Ntiri, 2001; Brand, 2009). The world over, prospective students often carefully research and choose institutions of higher learning they believe will offer them the best education for their investment and prepare them for the job market. Institutions, as players in the highly competitive field of education, try their best to attract prospective students by advertising their academic programs both on their institution's websites and through various media outlets. To ensure that the information provided to the public is transparent and consistent across all public institutions of higher education in Texas, the 81st Texas legislature passed the Bill 2504 concerning public access to course information.

In October 2009, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) adopted the House Bill 2504 passed earlier that year. The Bill requires that course syllabi, instructor CVs and salaries, student evaluation report on instructors, and department budgets among other information be posted on the institution's websites and be accessible to the general public "by use of not more than three links." Additionally, the site in which this information is placed should not be password protected, require identification or registration from users and should be updated as efficiently as possible. The medical and Dental units in these academic institutions were exempted from the requirements of the Bill. The Bill required these institutions to comply with its mandates by the Fall of 2010 (HB2504, 2008). This Bill made extensive demands and rigidly specified how these demands would be met by participating academic institutions on one hand and on the other, promised to lay open, to the general public, hitherto largely inaccessible information such as instructor evaluations and salaries. The debate that arose in the wake of the adoption of this bill by Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board was quite intense.

This debate pitted stakeholders in public institutions of higher learning in Texas against the Bill's proponents. There was widespread outcry from faculty in academic institutions across Texas impacted by the Bill and who read a sinister motive behind the drafting and eventual adoption of the Bill (Munsil, 2010 and Crisp, 2009). The Texas Conference of the American Association of University Professors requested a repeal of the law in its June newsletter. "As far as any of us can tell, this is an attempt by cultural conservatives to identify course content they might view as undesirable, and is thus clearly an attack upon academic freedom," they had said in a previous newsletter (Munsil, 2010). Amidst this entire furor raised by stakeholders in affected academic institutions in Texas, the authors of the Bill maintain that transparency was and is the main motivation for crafting and adopting HB2504. They argue that the Bill will enable the Texas tax payers, who financially support public institutions of higher learning, get more information about specific processes such as course content and students perception of instructors in such institutions. Prospective students and their parents will also benefit from such information when making choices of academic institutions in which to invest their time and resources, respectively. Representative Lois Kolkhorst, a supporter of the Bill explains the motivations behind the bill as follow: "Some fear that this is a 'gotcha' system, and it's really not at all...I think that this will be a great tool to help the consumer…The motivation behind the bill was to really empower the students and the parents to choose classes that really fit their goals…As college tuition has gone up sharply ... dollars are very tight and students are leaving universities with thousands of dollars in debt, I think it's very important that we have transparency,"(Munsil, 2010).

On the other spectrum of the debate, faculty is complaining about the redundancy of the Bill and university administrators are citing its cost. Dr. Murray Leaf, speaker of the Faculty Senate at the University of Dallas at Texas, points out that there are aspects of HB2504 that are academically unnecessary yet expensive for institutions to comply with; and states: "The schools within the University of Texas System were well prepared, having posted syllabi and CV's online for years. Students benefit from the availability of course content. The main challenge for schools comes from the need for technology to meet the unfunded mandate to post the additional, and academically unnecessary, information at the same time" (EducationNews, 2010). Texas State University, for example, already had a sophisticated and expanded system installed. Although, this system accommodates syllabi, CVs and student evaluations of faculty, the university still spent 400,000 dollars to provide the administrative work and technical training, and other resources necessary to comply with HB2504 and further estimating her ongoing costs at about 255,000 dollars (Texas State University). Similarly, the University of North Texas had already spent 100,000 dollars to expand their system and only needed to update adjunct and teaching fellows' information (EducationNews, 2010). Though a lot has been said about the need for transparency and cost of implementation, little has been said about the interpretation of the new wealth of information now available to the public at large. This study sets out to explore ways in which students interpret these survey items.

Method

This survey was administered to 103 students' majors took the survey in a classroom setting. Of the 103, 100 effectively answered the questions although a few did not respond to all the items in the survey. These students constituted a conveniently available but relevant sample (Patton, 2002). The surveys were conducted in five different classes and at the beginning of class. Prior to administrating it, the researchers explained to the students the reasons for the survey. It was also explained that the survey sought their interpretations of three of the new five question course evaluation survey they had started taking the previous semester in addition to the traditional course evaluation they have been taking before then. It was also clearly explained to students that their answers should not refer to, or be related to the class they are currently sitting in while completing the survery, but express their general understanding of the questions in the standard evaluation packet.

In Texas State, in addition to a traditional SPI evaluation survey, students have been, lately, required to answer five new questions which were developed by a committee set up to ensure the University complied with HB2504. The questions are: 1. The instructor communicated effectively; 2. The course was organized effectively; 3. The course goals were made clear; 4. The instructor conducted class as scheduled; and 5. The instructor provided opportunity to learn. To ensure a higher rate of response and minimize the class time taken by the survey, the researchers selected three of the five questions, which were expected to be subject to multiple interpretations, randomly. The students were asked to write their interpretation of key phrases in three evaluation items. The survey questions are: 1. What do you understand by the phrase "the instructor communicated effectively"? 2. What do you understand by, "the instructor conducted class as scheduled"?

3. What do you understand by," the instructor provided an opportunity to learn"? The students were given ten minutes to complete the survey. The survey also collected information about the students' academic status. They were asked to give as detailed an answer as they saw necessary. Additionally, students did not complete the evaluation in the classroom setting as they normally did for the traditional course evaluation. The data was analyzed qualitatively through an open coding method of data analysis, to map out the distribution of emergent themes among the student responses.

Results

The researchers determined the various themes under which the students' responses could be categorized using the open coding technique of data analysis. Straus and Corbin (2008) describe open coding as the identification of themes apparent in the data in a gradually emerging manner in which formed categories are edited or even deleted altogether. Since qualitative data analysis tends to be inductive rather than deductive, the researchers tentatively identified and named the categories in which the concepts emerging from the data were to be grouped. The themes were mapped on a spreadsheet. This process unfolded through labeling, defining, and developing categories based on their boundaries and what they contain and utilizing words or phrases to represent such categories.

Using the open coding data analysis technique, a variety of themes emerged for each item in the survey. It is important to note here that some of the students' responses straddled more than one theme in a question. Further some responses showed that the student misunderstood the question and posted responses meant for one question for another. For each of the questions, the researchers came up with the category "other" with which they scored responses that gave extraneous and remotely related information to the question asked. Such responses ranged from a simple "not sure" for the student's interpretation for the phrase, "the instructor provided an opportunity to learn" to parts of a response that conveyed among other things that the instructor had "…knowledge in the subject."

The first question sought the students' interpretation of the phrase "the instructor communicated effectively." The key word in this sentence is "communicated." The Webster's New World College Dictionary (4th ed.) defines communicate variously as, to transmit, make known, give information, signals, or messages in any way such as talk, gestures and writing. Analyzing the students' responses with this definition in mind, four main themes emerged for the students' responses to the first question of the survey. The total number of themes was five when the category "other" was added. These themes are; the instructor: 1. could explain the material well, 2. Spoke clearly, 3. defined course goals and learning objectives and made assignments and instruction clear, 4. gave enduring written and online information, and 5. other.

The first major idea that came from the responses showed the students interpretation of this question to mean that the instructor could explain the material well. 67% of the students thought this way. Among the responses that displayed this understanding include:

"…The instructor explained his information well to the class and explained his instructions well."

"…The instructor was able to transmit the information to students effectively so that it could be understood and processed."

In the second theme, students interpreted the key word to refer to how the instructor spoke. This idea included instructor's voice level and pronunciation of words. Of the 29% of respondents who interpreted the item this way, statements such as these are illustrative of their thoughts:

"…The instructor spoke clearly and properly."

"… The instructor spoke clearly and assigned material with clear instruction."

The third main theme that emerged from the students' understanding for the phrase "the instructor communicated effectively" was that he/she defined course goals and learning objectives and made assignments and instruction clear. 20% of the students' responses show this interpretation of the survey item. Some statements that exemplify this idea include:

"…whether or not the instructor made directions clear. Whether or not the teacher is easy to understand."

"…all objectives, coursework, and lab instructions were fully articulated, questions answered, and students able to perform with minimal assistance."

The fourth theme that emerged from the responses was that the instructor gave enduring written and online information. The students favored this type of communication because they could refer to it at their own time. 4% of the students taking the survey interpreted the item in this way. Some statements that illustrate this idea include:

"…"…the instructor should be able to communicate the subject matter in a multiple of ways-more important for concepts such as math or science based. Use of several outlets of communication helpful-email for updates."

Lastly 23% of the responses fell on the category "other." In this category the researchers placed all the responses that gave extraneous information to the question asked. Some of these responses addressed aspects of the survey that were asked in another question and some even had nothing to do with the survey question at all. Some of these responses include:

"…he was available during office hours, he was very enthusiastic about teaching, and he taught the material very well. He was sure everyone understood animal science."

Three main ideas emerged from the students responses to the second question about what they understood by "the instructor conducted class as scheduled." The key word in this phrase is "schedule." The Webster's New World College Dictionary (4th ed.) in its definition that closely approximates class schedules describes the word to mean "a timed plan for a procedure or project." Many students (72%) rightly understood this phrase to be asking after how far the instructor adhered to class time and avoided canceling classes. Statements that illustrate this idea include:

"…class started on time and ended on time."
"…was punctual and held an organized class process. Instructor planned and used all class time."

It was interesting to note that the sizeable percentage of 45% of the students thought this question asked if the material covered on any class session was the material planned for that session in the syllabus. These students excluded aspects such as keeping class time and any other aspects class scheduling. Some statements that illustrate this idea include:

"…the instructor covered in class what was expected according to the syllabus."
"…went by what was in the syllabus."

6% of the students interpreted this question to be asking after how prepared to teach the class the instructor was during the class time. These students thought this question asked after the level of preparation to conduct the class that the students could perceive in the instructors actions in class. A few statements that illustrate this perception include:

"…he was on time, prepared, and went by the syllabus."
"…he always let us know what we were going to talk about and always had the power points on time."

A further 6% of the students gave interpreted this question in ways that were relegated to the "other" category. Such responses were not directly related to the dictionary meaning of the word "schedule." A response that illustrates this thought includes:

"…they provide a syllabus."

The key word in the third item on survey "the instructor provided the opportunity to learn." was "opportunity." The Webster's New World College Dictionary (4th ed.) in its definition that closely approximates the word "opportunity" `in a teaching and learning context defines it as "a combination of circumstances favorable for the purpose; fit time." Three main ideas emerged from the students responses to this third item although a large percentage (56%) of the responses fell on the "other" category. This indicates that this is an item which meaning the students are most unsure about. This uncertainty on the part of the students has implications for the reliability of the responses gathered in response to the survey item. Responses gathered using this item is very misleading because more than half the respondents did not understand the question. A variety of responses was relegated to this category. In the first response the student is referring to the end result of the instruction process whereas the question solicits his/her perception of the instruction itself. The second response shows the consequence of the student's achievement level in the class and has nothing to do with the teaching/learning environment as created by the instructor:

"…the learning was put to use."

"…if I feel that I have learned something over the semester then I will put a high mark for the professor."

However, 49% of the student thought this question asked whether the instructor creative in designing the teaching and learning activities. This interpretation of the item positively relates to the dictionary meaning of the word "opportunity" in relation to learning. Some responses that illustrate this perception are:

"…he gives us the opportunity to ask questions, he motivates us to learn/study and he provides us with loads of information that has helped tremendously."

"…always encouraged us to do our best, didn't just read the power points, he took time and explained them, had a study session class for us and always welcomed us to visit his office for help."

17% of the students thought this item asked simply whether the instructor was available to them outside class times. Such students thought that this instructor availability was important as it showed his/her dedication to the teaching assignment and to the students' success in the course. Some responses that illustrate this perception include:

"…professor made themselves available to questions, office hours, and created an environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions or making comments."

"…she would help you if you went to her office, she would always help."

12% of the students thought the question asked whether the instructor enabled and encouraged various learning styles in the students. Some responses that illustrate this opinion are:

"…open discussion, answered questions, explained well, hands on, utilized all people's types of learning, not just testability or kinetics...."

"…the instructor found a way for each student to learn."

Leading from the responses the researchers collected in this study, it is important that college instructor be aware that the students evaluating them may not always correctly interpret course evaluation items. With the mandate that Public Universities and Colleges in Texas comply with HB2504, the implication of such scoring of evaluations becomes heavier. The general public and other stakeholders in the field of education will have access to these evaluations but without the added information that these scores may not be a true reflection of the teaching abilities of the particular instructor. Even if they suspected the score as not a realistic representative of the teaching abilities of the instructors, they are far removed from campuses that they are unable to access the individual students' interpretations of the evaluation items. Only instructors can access such information from students but have no way of communication the same in forums such as University website for general access by the public. The researchers suggest that more reliable student assessment of instructors may be collected through open ended survey items that allow students more freedom to elucidate what they thought of the class and instructor's skills.

Discussion

This article focused on the evaluations students make of their instructors at the end of semesters. One of our main reasons for the study was the dearth of empirical scholarship that interrogates the value of the score instructors get from the students. In this case this value is tied to the interpretation students made of the main phrases that form the individual evaluation items in SPI packets. So, as a shift from a number of studies that utilized the evaluation data itself to interrogate issues that impact the students' perceptions when conducting the evaluations and which, consequently, impinge on the reliability and validity of the resultant scores, (Chen and Chen, 2010; Heine and Maddox, 2009; Abd-Elrahman, Andreu, and Abbot, 2010), this paper explored matters of semantics among student evaluators. It evaluated the possibility that the value of the SPI scores may be compromised by the varied interpretations that students have of key questions included in the in the evaluation.

Results showed that the students had various interpretations for the key phrases in each of the items in the SPI evaluation packet. Although some of the students' interpretations were closely related in meaning some went so wide afield as to acquire a totally different and unintended meaning for the SPI evaluation item. An example is item "the instructor conducted class as scheduled." The response, "…they provide a syllabus" suggests that the student thought this question asked about the course content, while the response, "…went by the syllabus and did not make changes throughout the semester" suggests that the respondent interpreted the question to be asking about instructors' adherence to the syllabus in exclusion of his/her time keeping habits. From such varied responses, it is possible that the value of the SPI scores may not reflect what students actually think about a course.

Recommendations

It would be recommend that SPI evaluation items be revised in such a way that they can be useful in gathering valuable and useful scores for university administration, faculty, and students. One way this could be done is to ask questions that give the students freedom to explain and describe what they thought about the course and the instructor. This kind of data will require more time to analyze when compared to the easily analyzed and interpreted data collected using a Likert scale, but it will be more authentic of the students' thoughts and feelings. Another but more tedious and cumbersome way the SPI items could be presented is for faculty to take time and explain the meanings of the key phrases in the item before the students respond to them. Needless to note this latter method is prone to many weaknesses which may include misinterpretation of the phrases by the faculty member, miscommunication between the faculty member and the student evaluators among other weaknesses. It may not matter much what course of action is taken to better these SPI evaluation instruments, what is most important is that the data gathered by these instruments be valuable and useful to all who need to utilize them. The responses on any one item represented the different interpretations the students made of the key phrases in the evaluation item. This meant that data collected from these surveys do not reflect what it should and which is in answer to the general question: Was the instructor a good teacher?

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