

Student Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness in Higher Education

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Abstract: Receiving feedback from students has become the most common source in higher education in evaluation of teaching. There appears to be a widespread consensus that students' evaluations of teaching have raised awareness of teachers about their critical role of effective teaching. The involvement of students in assessing teacher or course effectiveness inspires teachers to tailor their teaching to meet students' preferences. On the average, there is little controversy over the use of student feedback as a data source for instructional improvement. The study aims to reveal the impact of students' evaluations on improving the quality of teaching at a university.

Key Words: Quality Assurance, Student Feedback, Effective Teaching, Improvement

Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness are used to improve teaching performance at most higher education institutions (Abrami, 1989; Hellman, 1998; Hobson & Talbot, 2001). Many universities have established systems to rate the effectiveness of teaching. Although the influence of student evaluations on teaching and course quality remain a debate because of its reliability and validity to measure teaching effectiveness, it is important to note that student feedback can be used to assess teaching quality. Cashin (1988) argues that students evaluations are more reliable and valid than any other data to improve faculty teaching. Universities have placed a great deal of emphasis on student evaluations because:

- ✓ Students' feedback has been considered as a significant teacher evaluation tool as it allows teachers to refine their teaching.
- ✓ Universities use them as a source of data for personnel decisions
- ✓ Students use them as a source of data to make decisions on the selection of lecturers and courses
- ✓ Student feedback is given considerable weight in quality assurance system of universities as they are considered good indicators of teaching effectiveness.
- ✓ Surveys provide useful information to measure student satisfaction with lecturers and their teaching.

Student ratings are effective means of evaluating teaching effectiveness and can provide: 1) formative feedback to improve quality of university teaching; 2) evaluation of teaching effectiveness for promotion decisions and 3) information to students about course and teacher selection (Marsh & Roche, 1993). Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness have gained widespread use in many universities and have been adopted as part of their quality assurance

system. This meaningful input from student ratings is used by the universities to evaluate lecturers and observe their teaching styles.

Student evaluations serve two basic purposes (Chen & Hoshower, 2015): 1) their formative use gives an idea to lecturers to enhance their teaching performance and course delivery and 2) their summative use gives an idea to the administration to make decisions about lecturers or courses. There is a well-developed literature addressing the usefulness of student surveys in improving teaching performance (Theall & Franklin, 1991; Wilson, 1986). By means of surveys students provide quality input to lecturers for course improvement. Universities need quality input to make decisions about their lecturers' promotion, salary and contracts. Much research has examined the contributions of student ratings for teaching effectiveness (Marsh, 1984; Cohen, 1981). It is important to stress that properly designed student surveys can be used as a measure of lecturers' teaching performance. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that students cannot make judgments about university performance from all aspects. For instance, students cannot make accurate judgments if they are asked about lecturers' subject matter knowledge because their experience may not be sufficient to provide valuable information in such an instance. The present study aims to investigate the role of student evaluations in improving the teaching quality at a higher institution.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The study was conducted at a university in Iraq which consists of 3000 undergraduate students and 300 lecturers. End-of-semester student surveys are mandatory at the university and they are collected using an online data collection program. Student surveys at the university are conducted twice in a year at the end of semesters. Students have to answer 13 questions in which they evaluate their lecturers. It is important to emphasize that students are not asked about subject-matter knowledge of lecturers. Rather, the questions reflect students' views about teaching styles of lecturers and course objectives. The questions in the survey were rated on a 5-point-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. After each survey all lecturers are provided a report concerning their teaching performance. They endeavor to improve their teaching skills to meet the needs of the students. The survey results of the last three academic years in all departments at the university were compared to reveal the contributions of student evaluations on the development of lecturers' teaching practice.

Table 1: Student survey results in the last 3 years

Departments	2014- 2015 Fall	2014- 2015 Spring	2015- 2016 Fall	2015- 2016 Spring	2016- 2017 Fall	2016- 2017 Spring
Civil Engineering	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.5
Business and Management	3.6	3.6	3.8	4.3	3.8	3.6
Information Technology	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.7	3.7	3.7
Architecture	3.7	3.4	3.7	4.5	3.8	3.8
Computer Engineering	3.4	3	3.3	3.3	3.5	3.4
Interior Design	3.4	3.9	3.7	3.3	3.6	3.8
Dentistry	3.6	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.6	3.7
Accounting	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.4	3.3	3.7
Law	3.8	4	4	3.7	3.8	3.8
English Language Teaching	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.7
Banking and Finance	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.6	4.3	4.5
Biology Education	3.4	3.7	3.2	3.5	3.9	3.6
International Relations and Diplomacy	3.3	4.1	3.6	3.2	3.7	3.9
Physics Education	3.5	3.8	3.2	3.7	3.5	3.6
Mathematics Education	3.8	3.9	4	3.9	3.9	4
Semester Average	3.54	3.65	3.59	3.67	3.71	3.75

Results

This study explored whether student evaluations of teaching effectiveness play a major role in the enhancement of lecturers' teaching performance. The survey results of the last three academic years were compared to reveal the students' views about their role to improve teaching quality. The survey results in Table 1 suggest that student evaluations were useful and had an effect on lecturers' teaching quality. It is important to point out that the semester average of the survey results continued to increase in the spring semester in all academic years. In 2014-2015 academic year the semester average in the fall semester was 3.54 and it rose to 3.65 in the spring semester in the same year. Except for Computer Engineering, Dentistry, Accounting and English language Teaching, the students expressed more positive responses and the department averages were higher compared with the fall semester. In 2015-2016 academic year the semester average in the fall semester was 3.59 and it rose to 3.67 in the spring semester in the same year. Except for Civil Engineering Interior Design, Law, International Relations and Diplomacy and Mathematics Education, the students held more positive views about the teaching quality in the spring semester. Finally, in 2016-2017 academic year the semester average in the fall semester was 3.71 and it rose to 3.75 in the spring semester in the same year. Except for Civil Engineering, Business and Management, Computer Engineering, Biology Education, and Mathematics Education, the results in the spring semester were higher. Apart from 2015-2016 fall semester, a steady growth in the semester averages were observed in all years.

Student ratings of instruction indicated that lecturers used the survey results as an important data to monitor their teaching process and improve their ability. In some departments the

students' ratings are lower in the spring semester although they were high in the fall semester possibly because of a number of factors such as change in grading policy and course content, and new lecturer in the second semester might have affected students' rating. This study showed that students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness not only provided useful information for lecturers to enhance instructional skills and but also led to improved university teaching.

Conclusion

Students' rating cannot be the sole measure of effective teaching but obtaining student feedback can be used to improve teaching quality by lecturers. Student evaluations cannot only be used as a feedback to modify teaching practices but also course content and structure. This study demonstrated that students' views about teaching quality make a substantial difference in effective teaching; in other words, students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness provide diagnostic feedback for lecturers to improve their teaching. Student participation in a teaching evaluation is essential in higher education institutions; therefore, I recommend that universities motivate their students in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness by means of conducting surveys very often. Most importantly, lecturers should use this input to improve their teaching practice.

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