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Reading Students' Written Comments On Evaluations Of Teaching

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College teachers who make use of student surveys evaluating instruction frequently invite written comments, too. These remarks can clarify data gathered by use of a standard set of objective questions. Sometimes, however, the students' comments present a wide diversity of opinions. Statements in one class might range from "the material is interesting and very applicable" to a flat "the poorest teacher I have ever had." Instructors who venture to invite students to comment express frustration over seeming contradiction and consequently are tempted to dismiss the importance of written comments. Yet written comments can provide valuable insights leading to the improvement of teaching and learning in a course. As an instructional consultant, I was interested in helping instructors gain full value from students' written comments and therefore sought a means to give focus to this kind of data.

One means of organizing and interpreting the comments was already at hand. Consider, for example, the following statements made by students in an engineering course which was generally regarded as difficult:

1. More lecture would help. More explanation of how to do the problems not just examples. When exams come I can usually

do the problems assigned or worked in class but the new ones are completely foreign.

2. Would rate course higher if I were understanding material better.
3. Inability of the instructor to communicate with me during the lecture. He jumps from one thing to another. He is not consistent and he does not finish the job. (To help us understand the whole thing). In conclusion, his teaching technique is not right.
4. The only complaint I have is that the exam problems are always more complex than any of the homework problems and require too much time.
5. Makes me want to understand the material and making sure I know the concept and mathematical procedures.

The above five comments, drawn from a group of thirteen, were collected as part of a process of gathering information about the teaching and learning in the course. The instructor and I were investigating ways of improving the students' ability to solve engineering problems in his junior level course. We were making use of the Teaching Analysis process, a procedure based on the Teaching Improvement Process developed at the University Massachusetts-Amherst Clinic to improve University Teaching. The process, which consists of a sequence of activities conducted in one class during the semester, includes data-collection, analysis, practice, modification, and evaluation (for a detailed description of the Teaching Improvement Process, see Bergquist and Phillips 1977:69-133; also see Erickson and Erickson, 1979).

In the engineering class, students were asked to complete a version of the student questionnaire Teaching Analysis By Students (TABS).^{*} After responding to the standard set of questions concerning teaching skills and after rating the course as a whole, the students were asked the question "what made you rate the course as high as you did and/or what kept you from rating it any higher?" When the instructor and I began to analyze the feedback from the students, we first noted that on the TABS questionnaire the students had not given a clear indication of what instructional skills needed improving. In the class of 27,

the lowest rating occurred on the item regarding class participation, with 11 students (40 percent) indicating that improvement was needed.

The students rated the course overall as follows:

Excellent	- 2
Good	- 14
Satisfactory	- 5
Fair	- 4
Poor	- 2

A conclusion that might be drawn is that the students viewed the course as all right, but not particularly outstanding. The written comments certainly indicated that there were some areas of difficulty, but we needed additional information before we could proceed.

The written comments themselves appeared to give random and somewhat contradictory feedback. For example, one student (#3 above) says the instructor "jumps" around but another (#5 above) says the teacher makes "concept and mathematical procedures" clear. At this point the instructor could have concluded that "you can't please everyone" and dismissed the feedback. Instead, we used a technique which gave order to the responses; i.e., the comments were typed according to how the students rated the course as a whole.** The five comments quoted above then appear as follows:

Excellent (2) — No comments

Good (14):

The only complaint I have is that the exam problems are always more complex than any of the homework problems and require too much time.

Makes me want to understand the material and making sure I know the concept and mathematical procedures.

Satisfactory (5):

Would rate course higher if I were understanding material better.

Fair (4):

More lecture would help. More explanation of how to do the

problems not just examples. When exams come I can usually do the problems assigned or worked in class but the new ones are completely foreign.

Poor (2):

Inability of the instructor to communicate with me during the lecture. He jumps from one thing to another. He is not consistent and he does not finish the job. (To help us understand the whole thing). In conclusion, his teaching technique is not right.

(The number in parenthesis refers to the total number of students answering question in that category whether they made a written comment or not.)

Listing responses in this manner helped the instructor and the consultant attend more closely to what the students were saying. In our discussion we were able to zero in on questioning techniques. As a result of our data gathering and analysis, the instructor made a number of modifications. He decided to develop a "Lecture Notes" set of handouts to supplement the lecture and the text. He became more aware of when he was making assumptions about the students' knowledge and skills and leaving them in the dark. Every time he was tempted to say "Obviously"—which had been often—he stopped to check for understanding and to explain. Eventually he moved toward a problem-solving mode of presentation in which students brought problems to class to solve in a highly interactive process. After our intervention, his course ratings at the end of this and subsequent semesters showed and continued to show substantial improvement. One key to making this improvement was definitely our paying attention to students' comments.

Listing responses according to the students' evaluation of the course has several benefits. First, the instructor reads the more positive feedback first and thus is lead more gently to the lower ratings. The instructor can then see that students who are generally satisfied or generally dissatisfied may yet agree on what needs improving. In the engineering class, remarks made by one of the students who rated it "good" and one who rated it "fair" are very similar: both commented

on the difficulty of exam problems as compared to homework or sample problems.

Another benefit gained from listing comments according to course ratings is that it gives insight into how students regard themselves. One kind of comment occurring frequently in mid-term evaluations along with lower rankings is the "I should be doing better" variety. For example, in this same class, a student who rated the course "satisfactory," wrote, "Not getting as much out of the course as I should—need to work on problem formulation." This comment which apparently refers to the student's own behavior is typical of a number of responses found on evaluations. These do not rate the course or the instructor's skills but instead rate the student's own performance. Thus the teacher needs to investigate ways of encouraging, challenging, or meeting the needs of students who for whatever reason are not performing up to potential.

Considering student comments in the order of class ratings also leads to a discussion of the diversity of student learning styles. For instance, some students rate a course high because they like discussion, while others rate it low because they prefer a structured lecture. Comments which reflect similar learning styles often cluster around the same rankings. In consultation, we can examine these clusters and move away from negative feelings and contradictory evidence to a discussion of learning styles, and to suggestions of what might be done to vary the instructional strategies to provide for different ways of learning.

Once students' comments are classified according to their ratings of the course, a second technique also becomes useful in interpreting the data. This technique makes use of the components of effective teaching. Although consultants usually want to avoid simplistic answers, instructors often ask what makes for good teaching. I make use of the research of Hildebrand, Wilson, and Dienst (1971) to answer questions about effective teaching and to categorize students' comments. This research surveyed students and faculty to identify "worst" and "best" teachers in order to determine the characteristics that make for effective teaching (Hildebrand 1973). These characteristics cluster around five components:

1. *Analytic/Synthetic Approach* (subject matter): the manner in

which the teacher lays out the matter of the discipline—not dull, pedantic, disjointed, but reflecting conceptual understanding, drawing students in, giving a sense of adventure and discovery.

2. *Organization/Clarity*: clarity in presentation, making material lucid, cohesive, orderly, related.
3. *Instructor-Group Interaction*: establishing rapport with the class, asking and answering questions in a positive way, reading body language and responding, eliciting exchanges among students.
4. *Instructor-Student Interaction*: getting along with students one-to-one in class or out; making an effort to know the individual; treating students with respect.
5. *Dynamism/Enthusiasm*: arousing interest, challenging students; expressing excitement about the subject and about teaching (Hildebrand 1973: 46-47).

The power of using categories of effective teaching to analyze students' comments is found in how the students' observations about the teaching in a particular class can be related to what researchers say. The technique not only calls attention to areas which may need improving but it also identifies those which are effective. Both kinds of comments can be seen in the following statements made by students in a writing class:

Excellent:

I rated this course the way I did because (1) it is very helpful to me in my writing, (2) it helps my communication process, (3) the instructor is very helpful with everything at almost anytime.

Good:

I have gained a great deal of knowledge from this course. What will help me and other students understand ... better would be to slow down and explain.

Fair:

The assignments are very abstract. They should be more practical, i.e. too much analysis; need more emphasis on the mechanics of writing. The instructor moves too quickly from one subject to another.

In analyzing the above comments, we marked the first statement with an "SM" for the comment on the way the subject matter is laid out and "ISI" for a comment on the interaction between the individual student and the instructor. Since both of these comments are positive, support is gained for a particular skill or practice. The comment under "Good" also might be marked with an "SM" for a positive view of the subject matter, but I would also call attention to Organization/Clarity (OC) in the matter of "emphasis" and "moving too quickly" or pacing. The comments under "fair" also involve "OC" as well as a question regarding subject matter: what can be done to make the "abstract" part of the assignments more concrete, perhaps more "real world"?

It is also enlightening to share with teachers another observation of Hildebrand and his colleagues. Different components were valued according to students' values, they found. For example, organization and clarity were valued by students who placed upward mobility first as their college goal, while these same students favored the interactions between instructor and students the least of the components (Hildebrand 1973: 47-48). Thus the instructor is led to examine student characteristics and to determine what can be done to diversify instruction as well as to help students adjust to the particular methods employed by the instructor.

Looking for themes, key words, repeated phrases, and degrees of intensity are other techniques one might use in analyzing students' written comments in order to give guidance to improving instruction. The two techniques I have described above allow instructors to attend to the students' perceptions, give focus in the process of pinpointing teaching skills or instructional materials to modify or improve, and encourage consideration of the students' characteristics and learning styles. Students' written comments are just one kind of evidence which might be gathered in analyzing the teaching in a course. For faculty

members, peer consultants, and others reading these comments, following a systematic method for interpreting the statements should make them a more significant source of information about teaching and learning.

Notes

*I am indebted to Glenn Erickson, Director, Instructional Development Program, University of Rhode Island, for sharing with me a shorter version of TABS or TABS B. (Also see Erickson and Erickson, 1979). I began to use TABS B with 24 items after a number of instructors hesitated over using the regular 50-item TABS because administering it took too much classtime. On TABS B, the request for written comments, which is stated as item #25, coupled with the objective items, usually produces a large volume of remarks, with an average of two-thirds or more of the students making written statements—which are frequently length and detailed.

**Glenn Erickson suggested a similar technique to me in a discussion at the POD Annual conference at Berkely, CA, October 1981.

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