Give Context for Your Course Evaluations

End of semester course evaluations are generally used in two broad ways, either by instructors looking to improve their teaching, or institutionally for evidence to support career advancement. However, it is unclear how accurate student evaluations actually measure effective teaching. While some students appreciate the process of evaluating their instructors and take it seriously, others don't. Some students fail to complete the task thinking it doesn't make any difference; others take the opportunity to be humorous or unleash frustrations (Sullivan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, predictable factors can contribute to lower evaluation scores such as:

- Time of day
- Course difficulty, either in terms of content rigor or challenging topics (Mazur, 2018)
- First time teaching a course or new modality
- New teaching practice, especially when less familiar to students
- Challenging class dynamics (for example, a large group cheating case)

Other factors, such as instructor gender, race, and age, can also affect evaluations. Additionally, instructor likeability can also influence feedback. In a study about student perceptions of faculty, Clayson (2021) found that regardless of objective factors, such as what happened in the classroom or how the instructor taught, students' perception of an instructor's likeability strongly influenced their responses.

Since these contextual elements are not apparent in course evaluations and individual instructors have little control over these elements, faculty should consider briefly writing the context for course evaluations, an explanation that has been called a **contextual narrative.** Such narratives are especially important if course evaluations are used to determine whether a teaching contract gets renewed or one gets tenure and promotion.

Review Evaluations for Themes and Patterns

Start with the student evaluations themselves, questions asked and overall results. Each department may have different course evaluations, rating systems, and methods for instructor review, so ensure you know what students are or aren't asked and what the scores mean.

Writing a narrative begins with a quick surface read to identify connections to to the following themes and patterns:

- Materials
- Workload
- Grading
- Communication
- Organization
- Engagement
- Pacing/timing

Noting the following themes lets you know what your students perceive as your strengths in certain areas and what concerns they have about content, instruction, and schedule.

Since anonymous evaluations enable students to be candid about your teaching, you can expect some negative feedback; you should take both the negatives and positives with a grain of salt, "shrugging off" unproductive comments (Gayeski et al., 2022). Adapting the right mindset to benefit from student feedback entails looking at the comments and ratings for ways to jump in, explore, reflect, and improve. Making this a habit of using a contextual narrative process can lead to opportunities to consider growth over your career.

Respond and Reflect

List your initial responses, such as whether responses are affirming, demeaning, or not aligned with the class experience itself. Your response might also give you ideas for reframing things that didn't work or land well with students. Identify key feedback that may get lost in scores, such as students feeling supported through challenges or thinking differently.

Write a Brief Narrative

Once you have a list of your responses and ideas, write them into a narrative, which can be as short as a paragraph or two. Generally such a narrative includes

1. Description of the course (list basic course information: name, section number, and anything else like modality and class size)
2. General themes and patterns from surveys

3. Explanation for survey results and contexts about the course
4. Future action

Conclude with what you will do going forward but also factors that are out of your control.

Here is one example:

> *Most students worked hard to meet the course requirements and did so with a positive attitude. About a third of students indicated they struggled in the course and needed more content to succeed. Several students indicated they struggled to keep up with the pace and disliked the required real-time meetings. Even though I received a lot of positive feedback about my course design, I had more negative feedback than usual for this course. Many students may have come to the class underprepared or lacking clarity about my expectations. I think the best change I can make is to add short review sessions at the start of each unit to improve student performance.*

Make It a Habit

Ideally, review surveys and write a short summary and explanation after each semester, especially if you are early in your career or experience contract renewals. Limit the time spent on each course write-up, step away when they're overwhelming, and reach out to colleagues who can help like CETL or those in your department. Continually reviewing feedback can also help you see whether student feedback changes over time.

Conclusion: Pre-empt Issues with Next Class

As individual instructors cannot control the format and content of course evaluations at the end of each semester, these actions allow them to shape the narrative while still listening to the student voice. If these student surveys express challenges that are largely out of your control or ones that are misunderstood, explain the issue with students in future semesters and how you intentionally teach to best support them in that issue, and the role they can take in having a beneficial learning experience.

References and Resources

- Engaging the fear: How to utilize student evaluations, accept feedback, and further teaching practice
- Get the most out of your end-of-term surveys
- The student evaluation of teaching and likeability: What the evaluations actually measure
- Student motivations, perceptions and opinions of participating in student evaluation of teaching surveys: A scoping review

- Teachers, students, and ideological bias in the college classroom

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