Re-evaluating Course Evaluations: Clarity, Visibility, and Functionality

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Abstract

This article presents an innovative framework that provides a means to understand and re-evaluate student course evaluation systems. We present three major concepts vital to course evaluation systems and explain how they inform five evolutionary stages. Additionally, we show how the major stakeholders – students, faculty and administrators – are impacted in each evolutionary stage. This framework allows for development of student course evaluation systems from one where procedures are simply followed, to one where feedback is available and used in real time. The framework also provides a means to critically evaluate and re-evaluate current and future course evaluation systems.

Introduction

Despite the fact that students evaluate courses on a regular basis, as frequently as each time a class is taught, the present process is cumbersome as an actual tool for improving instruction. Students view the evaluation process as one that yields small returns for the effort spent (Edstrom, 2008); faculty question the reliability and validity of results (Johnson et al., 2013); rates of returns are inconsistent and student comments may be haphazard (Anderson, 2008; Donmeyer & Chapman, 2004; Ory, 2001). Yet, administrators dutifully collect and use student course evaluations as a measure of quality for program accreditation and faculty retention, promotion, and tenure (RPT) reviews (Edstrom, 2008; Beran & Violato, 2005; Johnson et al., 2013). The prevailing process of course evaluation is *post hoc (*Balam & Shannon, 2010) – that is, results are applied to courses and curricula after the students have moved on to other courses; students may use evaluations to retaliate and less often to review; and for faculty the consequences of a poor evaluation may be costly, as they provide little guidance for improving teaching and less recourse to counteract a negative review.

While each of the primary stakeholders - students, faculty, and administrators – can appreciate the difficulty in developing effective evaluation systems, each also sees the potential value that may emerge from effective course feedback, (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008, Reed et al., 2012). The purpose of this article is to present an innovative framework to revitalize processes and procedures for evaluating classes. This system will move student feedback from one in which procedures are simply followed, to one where feedback is available and used in real time, using a purposive approach. It is organized around a framework that offers guidance and instructions for directing the actions of all involved.

Background

The framework has been tested over a period of eleven years, during which the feedback system was shepherded from paper to electronic formats, results were sequestered in departments to

web-based data displays, and through several boisterous policy and procedure revisions. As a result, in this article, the framework that was conceptualized is described through its evolution. We also describe how the stakeholders in student feedback systems created the primary concepts involved and how the innovative feedback system developed.

A group of faculty, students, and administrators was committed to move a course feedback system from one that was characterized by cloistered results used for disparate purposes by groups who did not communicate to a system characterized by streamlined processes, and common-sense conversations about results held in open forums (cf. Reed et al., 2012). This framework enables exploring relationships between the perspectives and goals of the three major constituents in student course feedback systems in higher education, using three organizing concepts, *clarity*, *visibility*, and *functionality*. However, before moving to the framework, the explicit rights and responsibilities of the primary constituents regarding student feedback must be considered.

Student rights and responsibilities in student course feedback programs

From the student's perspective, effective student course feedback provides a means to communicate anonymously to faculty, for the purposes of instructional improvement as well as simply voicing discontent. Many students take their evaluative role seriously, believing they are fair and that they can identify effective from ineffective teaching (Beran & Violato, 2005; Campbell & Bozeman, 2008; Harris & Twiname, 2012). However, students seek reassurance that administrators receive student ratings, since many students believe their evaluations are inconsequential and ignored when it comes to faculty promotions and raises, and in the case of poor teaching, censure and dismissal (Campbell & Bozeman, 2008; Harris & Twiname, 2012).

Though the majority of enrolled students do not access results of evaluations, students express the desire to use results of previous students' evaluations to select the best courses and instructors for their own plan of study (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Commercial services such as Professor Recommendations (https://www.myedu.com/professor-recommendations/) and Rate My Professors (http://www.ratemyprofessors.com) are increasingly used (Zaragosa, 2007). These commercial services allow an alternative for student evaluations, yet also require additional evaluative effort by students, and may be less trustworthy than university-run processes, as anyone may rate a course without actually providing proof that they enrolled in, participated in, or completed a course. Students are interested in effective institutional feedback systems that offer ease of use and greater confidence in results.

Faculty viewpoint and responsibilities in student course feedback programs

From the faculty's view, effective student feedback provides a means of improving teaching while building evidence for retention, promotion and tenure. If they gain new insight from course evaluations, faculty will modify instruction positively if they have already mastered content and have learned several different teaching strategies (Balam & Shannon, 2010; Benton, 2011; Campbell & Bozeman, 2008). In institutions where student feedback is coupled with teacher development, improvement in student ratings may be seen over time (Barrie, Ginns, and Prosser, 2005; Murray, 1997; Reed et al., 2012). Unfortunately, in early career stages (e.g., pre-tenure probationary period), it is common for course feedback to be used to revise teaching

towards less desirable pedagogies in order to avoid low ratings and negative comments (Edstrom, 2008; Zhao & Gallant, 2012). Faculty also defend themselves against poor ratings and negative comments, to avoid difficulty during RPT reviews. Because of the energy expended on responding to poor feedback and the potential impact of ratings on teaching competencies and careers, faculty are interested in effective and fair institutional feedback systems.

Administrators' rights and responsibilities in student course feedback programs

Administrators consider effective student course feedback to be vital to institutional integrity. Because assessment of courses and instructors is required for accreditation, student feedback serves a critical audit function (Johnson et al., 2013; Zhao & Gallant, 2012). In many institutions, student course evaluations are mandated to occur at regular intervals, and the outcome of evaluations must be made available to students and be included in faculty files. Student course assessments are viewed as ratings of teaching abilities (Benton, 2011), though only extremely low ratings will trigger a formal investigation of teaching competence (Edstrom, 2008). Primarily due to the audit function that feedback systems serve, yet also to maintain the school's reputation, administrators at institutions of higher education are invested in maintaining effective and efficient student course feedback systems.

In summary, the present system is one of competing agendas, distrust, and miscommunication. The three stakeholders in student course assessment regard student feedback as normative for different and disconnected reasons (Benton, 2011). While individually each stakeholder may work to use feedback for their own purposes, together they shy away from a shared responsibility for using course and instructor feedback to improve teaching and learning and resistance to changing feedback practices can be anticipated (Edstrom, 2008). Application of the conceptual framework described in this article offers an opportunity to make shared decisions about course feedback policy and procedures, ultimately aligning the goals and protecting the rights and responsibilities of all interested parties.

Shared concepts in student feedback systems

Three key concepts – *clarity*, *visibility*, and *functionality* – form the basis of student course feedback programs in higher education. These concepts remove much of the competing agendas, distrust, and miscommunication within systems in use while at the same time, push the evaluative system towards providing meaningful data that will encourage teaching excellence.

Clarity. *Clarity* addresses reliability and validity of the data set, and of measurement procedures, so that results are believable and dependable. Formalization and publication of policy and procedures regarding administration of feedback systems is included in the concept of *clarity* (Benton & Cashin, 2014). Further, *clarity* includes resolving variation in interpretation and meaning of results for all stakeholders, as well as providing benchmarking, and ensuring the readability of results as they are presented to users (cf. Balam & Shannon, 2010; Benton & Cashin, 2014). For example, a consensus regarding the publication, interpretation, and use of results in courses with enrollments of less than 30 students can and should be achieved, at first for the institution as a whole and later for departments and programs.

Visibility.   *Visibility* is providing results to the right people at the right time and in the best place; consequently, *visibility* means different things to students, who would like results "yesterday" (Balam & Shannon, 2010), faculty, who may seriously resist making comments public (Balam & Shannon, 2010), and administrators, who are cognizant of the costs involved in running robust systems (Benton, 2011).   Formalization and publication of policy and procedure regarding display and use of feedback results are included in the concept of *visibility*.   *Visibility* also includes publication and promulgation of the use of feedback by interested parties, as well as level and speed of access to results (Balam & Shannon, 2010).   Access to results has been revolutionized with the move from paper-and-pencil systems (when results were often received after a delay of six months in large departments) to electronic, web-based systems where faculty can request and receive mid-course assessments in time to adjust the present course, to the delight of currently enrolled students.

Functionality.   All stakeholders have motives for feedback use; consequently, *functionality* becomes a third critical concept in student feedback programs.   Functionality also includes regulations and requirements that direct processes around student course feedback data collection and display, and benchmarking.   A critical piece of *functionality* is the development of policies and procedures that govern the use of results in RPT decisions (cf., Benton, 2011).   A less inflammatory issue relative to *functionality* is the use of results in faculty development plans (Benton, 2011).   Faculty and student governance structures are central to oversight of *functionality* when policy and procedures are written and implemented, while information technology support services are critical to the execution of online systems (Kinash et al., 2011).

Implementing and revitalizing the course evaluation system

Revitalizing the student course feedback system may occur slowly and in phases or stages as described here (Major & Major, 2011; Reed et al., 2012).   As with all stage theory in complex systems, the level of revitalization reached in using these concepts is unpredictable and uneven and may, in fact, regress on occasion (Reed et al., 2012).   For example, a course feedback system may be unusually sophisticated in its visual display of information, or *visibility*, and lag in the *clarity* of policies regarding the use of feedback, and in stakeholder understanding of the intended use of results, or *functionality*.   Yet, these three concepts, *clarity* of processes, *visibility* of results, and *functionality* of feedback, present themselves along a continuum that can be roughly divided into five phases: from the initial, or Proto phase, through the Procedural, Motivational, and Relational phases, to culminate in the Social phase.

The Proto Phase: Something Is In Place.   The Proto phase is the least formed and least desirable of all the phases, but at least some form of course assessment is in place in most, but perhaps not all, departments.   In the Proto phase, *clarity* within the system is characterized by decentralized interpretations of student course feedback results; for example, each department has its own rating scale so that Law professors may excel with a high of 7 while Science professors may only ever achieve a maximum score of 5.   Quantitative and qualitative results are used for summative evaluative purposes, improving the course after the course is over – sometimes called the "autopsy" approach (Hmieleski & Champagne, 2000).   Since procedures for data collection, interpretation, and use vary across instructional unit, multiple internal and external threats to reliability are present (e.g., Benton & Cashin, 2014).   During the Proto phase, forms are paper-and-pencil and the person giving the surveys is occasionally the course

instructor. The instructor may feel free to alter responses, or simply not turn them in for processing. *Visibility* in the Proto phase is limited to instructors and administrators; long periods of delay occur while data are processed. Numerical results are available to a select group of students at the time of RPT reviews. *Functionality* in the Proto phase is almost completely disorganized and is focused on the use of feedback as a tool for rating instructor teaching effectiveness, as opposed the effectiveness of the course in meeting educational objectives. The use of feedback for RPT actions is not governed by university-level policy.

Procedural Phase: Mechanical and Backstage. Matters will have improved in the Procedural phase. The Procedural phase of student course feedback programs addresses standardization of processes involved in administration of data collection forms, questions, and display of data (cf., Major & Major, 2011). Conversion to an online student feedback system solves the majority of data collection, standardization, and analysis problems, e.g., Law and Science instructor ranges and means are now available for comparison. Policies and procedures govern data access privileges and frequency of data collection, and dictate use by faculty and administrators. For many universities, the Procedural phase is the *status quo* for student feedback programs.

Commonly, in the Procedural phase, policy and procedures remain static while survey questions are revised at a departmental or program level; university-level questions are seldom modified so that benchmarking functionality at a university level is preserved (e.g., when dispensing university-level teaching awards, it is helpful when comparing Law to Science that student feedback questions and metrics are similar across departments within the institution). Data may be mined for accreditation purposes, e.g., evidence that general education and specialty programs are meeting stated outcomes.

Clarity in the Procedural phase is characterized by the presentation of results without interpretation. While feedback remains a summative (end-of-term and cross-sectional) operation, threats to reliability have been greatly decreased through online administration, common start and end dates for data collection, and common data reporting processes. *Visibility* in the Procedural phase becomes mandated while still limited, with results available after some processing delay. Not all stakeholders will receive the same report; some will receive frequencies and means and institution-wide metrics while others receive results as percentages of responses at the level of program only. Select students may receive comments at the time of instructor formal reviews. *Functionality* in the Procedural phase focuses on regulatory purposes, with time spent on formulating and revising institution-level policies and procedures, and the use of feedback in RPT actions. The intended use of results by all stakeholders is assumed and seldom examined.

Motivational Phase: Galvanizing and Public. In the Motivation phase, student course feedback has gone public and early adopters of change processes have become galvanizing agents to improve the feedback system. Results may be displayed in more prominent and useful locations. Feedback displays are accompanied by information designed to improve meaning and interpretations. Policies and procedures are revised in open forums, including all stakeholders' input. Expected developments in this Motivational phase include lively faculty discussions, and remarkable student interest in results, e.g., in our experience, moving a link to numerical results to the university class schedule resulted in a feedback page hit increase of 1000% in one term at

our institution. Administrators may use benchmarking data to set annual goals to meet or exceed department, college, or university averages.

Clarity of feedback processes is characterized by the presentation of results with interpretations and benchmarks, though results remain largely used for summative purposes. Information about data meaning, readability, and interpretation is added to reports for students, instructors, and administrators. Students may appreciate a visual display of results to accompany numerical reports, as long as instructions for interpretation are included. For example, when assessing the efficacy of bar charts that accompanied numerical displays, we found that students in focus groups searched for courses with results displaying, "all tall bars." Adding an explanation of how to read a bar chart solved the problem.

Visibility in the Motivational phase is noticeably heightened, with policies and procedures written, rewritten, and publicly certified following vigorous – and sometimes tense – discussion in committees and plenary sessions. A communication plan regarding changes in the location of links to data and the data display will help, as long as it includes multiple outreach and vetting sessions to regulatory committees and governance bodies.

Interestingly, *functionality* evolves from being regulatory, that is, regulating how feedback data are collected and analyzed, to being egoistic, with each stakeholder focusing on using feedback for their own unique purposes. Specifically, students value giving and receiving information, faculty value the benchmarking and development aspect of the data yet remain fearful of the weight of results in RPT decisions, and administrators value the developmental, benchmarking, and accreditation uses of feedback. The egoistic nature of *functionality* can be seen in the different reports that stakeholders may receive, and in the nature of the conversations that take place around intended use of results.

Relational Phase: Connective and Reflective. The Relational phase is characterized by student feedback programs that are connective and reflective in processes and policies. Student feedback focuses on placing results in the contexts of time, instructor and student characteristics, disciplinary norms and expectations, and course requirements. Course and instructor results are linked and whenever possible, results are displayed and analyzed longitudinally. Feedback results are combined with other assessments to present a robust collection of information about teaching processes and student progression.

In this phase, faculty, students, and administrators regularly converse about the uses and limitations of student feedback, both as an outcome measure for learning, and as an indicator of teaching effectiveness. Students access results to inform course choice as well as to begin learning course material. Faculty use results to make improvements in their instructional design and methods. Policy and procedures guide administrators' use of feedback in personnel decisions.

Clarity in the Relational phase is illustrated by processes that are reviewed annually for minor changes, resulting in institution-wide confidence in the stability and meaning of results. Feedback is solicited (and offered) at midterm as well as at end of term. Consequently, results are used for pseudo-formative purposes. The meaning of results is derived longitudinally and in contextual formats, i.e., tracking results over time becomes normative. Results are combined

with other indicators of teaching effectiveness, including student satisfaction, and learning engagement for a holistic assessment of courses, students, instructors, programs, etc. *Visibility* is encouraged in the Relational phase; results are linked between a course, students, and faculty. For the first time, student comments are made public in some form. The intended and actual use of results to inform course choice by students, instructional improvement by teachers, and decisions by administrators is openly exchanged. In the Relational phase, *functionality* is constructive. All stakeholders adhere to policy and procedures regarding the use of results. Stakeholders engage in regular, between-term conversations about the uses and limits of feedback as an outcome measure. For the first time, all stakeholders receive the same numerical report.

Social Phase: Conversational and Interactive. The final phase is Social, characterized by conversations and interactions regarding how to work together to improve the educational experience, with course feedback as one tool. Feedback is solicited, offered and used to make improvements in real time, using an open and recursive process. The continual use of feedback to improve teaching becomes normative for the campus climate. Changes in instruction become fluid and collaborative, as students respond to changes and offer more feedback. When engaging in a range of interactive and collaborative forums about teaching, all stakeholders are present and results are included.

Clarity in the Social phase is characterized by feedback processes that, similar to the Relational phase, are reviewed often enough so that institutional confidence in results is high and feedback is solicited continuously; consequently results are used for true formative assessment. The meaning of these data changes dynamically, as they are used in real time; changes in instruction become fluid and formative. Stakeholders routinely include results in a range of interactive and collaborative forums dedicated to teaching. *Visibility* in the Social phase becomes ubiquitous. Stakeholders routinely publish, access, and evaluate numerical and qualitative results as part of a culture of instructional assessment, planning and improvement. *Functionality* in the Social phase is developmental. Stakeholders engage in regular conversations during the academic year about the use of feedback in shaping higher education.

Conclusions

The characteristics of each of these five phases are summarized in Table 1. The three concepts, *clarity*, *visibility*, and *functionality* are shown, and how these may develop as institutions change their systems through procedural, motivational, and relational phases with the ultimate goal of moving the course evaluation system to the social phase (see Table 1).

The advantages of moving at least into the Relational phase in student course feedback systems counteract all the difficulties enumerated in the article's introduction. Students welcome the increased access to results that guide them in course choice, and the sense that their feedback is meaningfully used. Faculty employ results from current students to improve the current course, and use feedback as one of many means to build their teaching abilities, reducing student feedback as a source of fear during RPT reviews. Administrators can use feedback metrics to guide high-level decisions with confidence in results, focusing more on instructional programs and other university initiatives than on individual faculty. In short, attending *clarity*, *visibility*,

and *functionality* in the feedback system has the potential to revitalize the educational mission in significant ways for the three groups who care deeply about teaching and learning.

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Table 1
Relationship between concept and phase in student course feedback system implementation

Conceptual Component	Program Component	Phases with identifying hallmarks				
		Proto	Procedural	Motivational	Relational	Social
Clarity	Policy and procedures	Locally stated	Commonly stated	Commonly interpreted	Contextually placed	Dynamically changing
	Assessment, administration	Summative	Summative	Summative	Pseudo-formative	Formative
Visibility	Availability of results	Limited	Mandated	Heightened	Integrated	Ubiquitous
	Distribution of results	Delayed	Delayed	Immediate	Immediate	Real time
	Type of results available	Numbers	Numbers	Numbers	Numbers, some comments	Numbers and comments
Functionality	Use of technology	Paper and pencil	Online	Online with diagnostics	Online with diagnostics	Online with diagnostics
	Intended use of results	Student-centric	Regulatory	Egoistic	Constructive	Developmental