USING STUDENT DATA TO IMPROVE TEACHING

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In 2006 the average student evaluation result for my subjects was 4.6 out of 5 for overall quality of learning (I was teaching at the University of Melbourne where 5 was best). On the basis of student comments, formal and informal, as well as their assessment results, I hypothesised that students were unclear about the requirements of their final assessment – they just did not get what I was asking them to do. I then devised and implemented a plan for helping my students to better understand the assessment task. In one teaching session I explained the assessment criteria, we identified what would be written in an assignment that met these criteria, and the students assessed a draft of their own work using these criteria. At the end of the semester I found that my students had produced much higher quality work in their assessment (corroborated by a moderator), and I received a higher evaluation score of 4.8. Each year I consulted my student evaluations and refined my explanation of what I wanted my students to do, until I left Melbourne in 2010 with an average evaluation score of 5 out of 5.

We are encouraged to evaluate our courses, subjects and teaching so we can confirm our jobs, get promoted, and assure the quality of teaching and learning in the university, yet we have little guidance about how we can use the evaluation results to improve our teaching. Here is how I do it, using student survey data.

I start by thinking about how I will approach the evaluation data I already have. My attitude towards this data, particularly student surveys, allows me to use it to improve my teaching.

1. View the data as formative information

I see student survey data as a tool to help me improve, rather than as a mark or grade for me, my teaching or my course. If I do not make this shift in perception, if I view the data solely as a final judgment – a pass or fail on my teaching – then I cannot use it for development or improvement. I renounce “What’s wrong with my teaching?” and embrace “How can I develop my teaching?” It is also important that I treat the data as something that can be improved, no matter how good or bad my evaluation results.

If I wanted to judge the overall quality of my teaching, perhaps for promotion purposes, then I would acknowledge mitigating factors. For example, if I was teaching a large, compulsory course, I might argue that my student survey results do not directly reflect the quality of my teaching or my course. But these mitigating factors are a distraction when I want to develop my teaching, and they can easily become an excuse for why I cannot improve. So when my aim is to develop my teaching, I simply ask myself: “Given this data, what can I do to improve the learning for my students?”

2. An approximation about student learning

I treat the student survey data as a window on student learning, an indication of the extent to which students benefited from the course I taught. So, if students said that they found a lecture boring and irrelevant, I would not take this to be a judgment about myself, my teaching, or even my students. But I would take it as indication that there is a barrier to their learning, and I ask: “How can I change my teaching and my course so that they no longer find it boring?”

3. Approach the evaluation data as an inquiry

My evaluation results provide me with a source for hypotheses about what might be improvable, and an approximate means to test these hypotheses.
Clinton deliberately made time for students to clarify and discuss the rubrics intended for assessment purposes. He even illustrated how the assessment criteria were applied when he gave us feedback on our mini assignments, and arranged for peer review of the assignment drafts. This was most helpful when we eventually embarked on our final, large assignment because we were by then very confident and clear of what he would be looking for in the assessment. We were thus encouraged and motivated to work towards excellence in our major assignment! We wanted to do well, not just for ourselves but also for him!

- Student comment 2009

I hypothesise why I received my particular student survey results, and therefore what might be improved. I use triangulated data from various sources – formal student evaluations, my own classroom observations, assessment results, informal feedback from students, peer observations – as well as my understanding of teaching and learning. From my hypothesis, I infer various changes in teaching that are likely to improve my evaluation scores, which I then implement. Then I gather more evaluation data to see if my teaching has improved. I generally use the student evaluations of the overall quality of learning as a proxy measure – more specific evaluation data can help to identify the areas that could be developed, but I tend to judge improvement by the overall student survey score. If that score increases after my change in teaching, and nothing else is lowered, then this suggests that my teaching has improved. If I continue to receive higher evaluation results year after year, then this gives me reason to think my hypothesis has been confirmed and my teaching or my course has improved (though I have to be careful to distinguish merely making students happier, and genuinely making the course better and improving their learning).

4. Read between the lines

When I use student survey evaluation data to improve my teaching I am conscious that what students say is the issue may not be the issue. When they say a session is boring, then something is a problem for them, but that problem may not be a boring lecture. Perhaps the real problem is that when I gave my students feedback about an assessment task, I had not explained how this would enable them to understand the course and do better in the final exam, so they thought I was wasting their time, which they expressed as “That was boring!” If so, this suggest that I might improve my course by clarifying the importance of the feedback.

5. Take a broad view of teaching

I also approach the evaluative data with an expanded view of teaching. Teaching is everything I do to support student learning, including writing course documents and assessment tasks, selecting readings and text books, offering online support, office hours and email contacts, scheduling lectures and arranging the desks in tutorials. This broad view of teaching better enables me to hypothesise about what I might do to improve my teaching and my courses.