Chapter 16
Using Student Feedback to Help Improve Teaching in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

"Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new" (Einstein, n.d.). This quote by Albert Einstein expresses the importance of continually evolving the college classroom. There are a wide range of attitudes toward student evaluations of teaching or SETs, from complete rejection to acceptance and use. SETs results are widely used not only for administrative decision-making, but also for improving learning and building student-teacher rapport. For this reason, it is important to investigate faculty motives and reasoning for using or not using SETs. There is also a need for more information about which aspects of the SETs process faculty members view as useful and which parts are viewed negatively. More information about faculty perceptions of certain aspects could warrant important modifications to the SET process. The purpose of this chapter is to gain insight into how faculty view SETs and how they utilize the feedback received from them. The authors also hope to highlight the importance of engaging students in curriculum development to improve teaching effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new. This quote by Albert Einstein expresses the importance of continually evolving the college classroom. There are a wide range of attitudes toward student evaluations of teaching or SETs, from complete rejection to acceptance and use. Nevertheless, they are important student feedback. They are the thoughts and opinions of the students in the classroom. Over 90% of schools in higher education use student evaluations of teaching (SET) (Gallagher 2000). These evaluations are used in several different ways, such as making decisions for promotions or measuring teaching effectiveness (Berk 2005). In addition, evaluations help professors look at the course from a different perspective, the student perspective. SETs can be very helpful if the instructors not only give them, but also read and consider the suggestions and comments given on the evaluations (Gallagher, 2000). Gallagher (2000) also suggests suggests that professors should rationally consider all comments both positive and negative and make the necessary changes. Yet, many times professors get defensive and take the comments too personally (Spillers and Ferguson 2011). This can lead to mistrust in the SET itself. Exactly how professors view SETs is still unclear in the current literature (Beran & Rokosh 2009). One study reported that previously faculty had strong negative feelings towards SETs, but now the majority of faculty members in all subject areas have mildly positive views on student evaluations (Berk 2005). Yet, it seems that there is still a wide range of views from complete rejection of SETs to acceptance and use of SETs (Nasser & Fresko 2002).

Those instructors reporting positive attitudes toward the increased use of SETs indicate that the evaluations satisfy students' rights to be heard (Kulik 2001), and these instructors strive to take feedback into consideration. Faculty members have shared positive reactions to the feedback they received, indicating that the feedback helped to provide them with a rationale for changes to the teaching style and course content (Moore & Kuol 2005). Aultman (2006) administered formative evaluations that asked students to share any questions they had about the course, rate the quality of instruction, and comment on ways that the course could be improved. The formative evaluations helped students realize the importance of their input, resulting in more class participation and better student-teacher communication. This process appeared to "provide the foundation for an educational partnership" (p. 251) that would help to improve not only teaching effectiveness, but also student learning. Further, instructors indicate that positive comments on evaluations help them feel more confident not only in their abilities as a professor, but also their personal identity and likeability (Arthur 2009). Faculty members found different parts of the evaluations useful for different purposes. Administrators found written comments to be too subjective when trying to make decisions such as who should be promoted (Marsh 2007); therefore, administrators use the Likert scaled parts of the SETs when making faculty promotion decisions, and then if the administrators needs further information they may consult the written comments next. Yet these written comments are very helpful for instructors who want to improve their courses. Professors found rated questions specific to their courses to be the most helpful, then student written comments, and then global rated questions to be the least helpful (Marsh 2007).

BACKGROUND

Some instructors are suspicious of evaluations because not all of the questions on a SET specifically apply to their classes (Spiller and Ferguson 2011). Other opponents of SET indicate feelings that feedback is too often influenced by factors unrelated to learning or teaching effectiveness. This could bring into

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