Evaluating teaching at the University of Wollongong

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Abstract
Teaching is a central activity of the University. Some would say that it is the central activity. Hence, a primary responsibility of the Centre for Staff Development is teaching development. Evaluation of teaching provides feedback to staff and Departments, is evidence of the University’s commitment to quality and informs teaching development.
Evaluating Teaching at the University of Wollongong

Sylvia Huntley-Moore & John Panter

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Types of Evaluation

Researchers and evaluators usually draw a sharp distinction between evaluation conducted for the purposes of providing feedback to academic staff to assist them to make improvements to their teaching (formative evaluation) and evaluation which will provide evidence for personnel decision making such as the granting of tenure or promotion (summative evaluation).

At Wollongong, in an effort to avoid jargon as much as possible, we refer to the two types as 'Diagnostic' and 'Assessment' evaluations respectively.

The distinction is not simply related to the purpose of evaluations. The methodology used and the degree of confidentiality required differ according to the purpose of the evaluation.

Diagnostic Evaluations

Over the years, many academic staff have constructed student surveys of varying levels of sophistication which have provided them with feedback on their teaching and on specific characteristics of the subject such as relevance, quality of textbooks and so on. Some have invited colleagues into classes or submitted subject outlines and assessment instruments for comment by their peers. Nearly all academics seek and gain informal feedback by way of discussions...
with students and shop talk with colleagues. All these activities provide evidence for diagnostic evaluation.

Since 1981, the Centre for Staff Development has provided a centralised diagnostic service. From the beginning, clients were volunteers and the results of the surveys and other evidence were confidential to those clients. This policy remains in effect.

The client works with a member of the Centre's staff to design the questions in the surveys in order to tailor them to the structure of the subject. Obviously, a Lecturer in sculpture will have different requirements from one teaching mathematical logic. The Centre holds a bank of the most popular questions from which clients select as appropriate, but there is no restriction whatever and new questions are always welcome. They may be constructed on the familiar five point Likert scale (to enable optical scanning of the responses) or they may be open ended.

Clients are encouraged to discuss the survey results with Centre staff in order to receive maximum benefit from the feedback.

The results of diagnostic surveys may not be used for personnel decision making in the tenure/promotion or appraisal processes. Since the surveys are tailored to the subject or some specific aspect of it and hence may differ considerably, decision making bodies find it impossible to make meaningful comparisons across campus.

Other diagnostic methods include visits to, or the videotaping of classes. While the former may provide useful feedback to the client, great care needs to be taken. The presence of a staff observer in a class can, and often does, cause the lecturer to change his/her behaviour for better or worse. This problem can be exacerbated where the observer is a colleague from the same Department, or even worse, its Head. For this reason, such visits lack formal validity and are not used in personnel decision making. In addition, observers need to be careful that they do not make judgments based on their own personal teaching style. Teaching effectiveness is not necessarily a function of style.

Videotaping a class can be a useful form of feedback. The Centre will set up an unobtrusive camera for a client, switch it on just as the class begins, and collect it after the class has ended. The tape is then handed to the client for private viewing and if he/she wishes, it may then be discussed with a Staff Development Officer. This method of feedback is particularly useful for revealing distracting mannerisms, poor visuals or lack of clarity in presentation.

None of the three methods of providing feedback described above will diagnose problems of subject design. Centre staff, although qualified in certain disciplines, are in no position to comment on the curricula in others and will take care not to trespass in this area. They can, however, help clients to set clear learning objectives for a subject and discuss ways in which those objectives can be met.

In certain instances, graduates are in a good position to comment on the curriculum of a particular discipline and the Centre will assist staff to prepare and conduct surveys which will provide useful feedback. Other useful advice can, of course, be obtained from colleagues here or elsewhere.

Diagnostic evaluation services are available at all levels from subjects, through majors to degrees. As stated above, all diagnostic evaluations conducted for an individual client are confidential and the results may not be revealed to third parties.

In the case of program evaluations, however, a number of clients will be involved and the degree of confidentiality will need to be negotiated before the evaluation begins. Normally, the results of the evaluation of the teaching in individual subjects will not be revealed to others, but systemic strengths and weaknesses will be.

Assessment Evaluation

Assessment evaluation commenced at the University of Wollongong in 1988 with the requirement that standard
teaching surveys be submitted to the Tenure and Promotions Committee. The following year saw the introduction of compulsory surveys for all coursework teaching. The Centre now surveys the teaching in one third of the University’s Departments/Schools each year.

Assessment evaluation poses particular and difficult problems. Academic staff need to be satisfied that instruments used to determine the direction of their careers need to be both valid and reliable. It must be realised, however, that no instrument can give a wholly unequivocal and objective measurement of a complex human activity such as teaching. The instruments used provide evidence for assessment evaluation. Professional and collegial judgment must have the last say.

Fortunately, however, the research base on which good schemes of assessment evaluation are developed is vast. Overall ‘...the reported results clearly demonstrate that a considerable amount of useful information can be obtained from student ratings: useful for feedback to faculty, useful for personnel decisions, useful for students in the selection of courses and useful for the study of teaching. Students’ evaluations of teaching effectiveness are probably the most thoroughly studied of all forms of personnel evaluation and one of the best in terms of being supported by empirical research.’ (Marsh, p. 369.)

In contrast, ‘... measures of research productivity, the other major determinant of instructor effectiveness, are not nearly so highly criticized, despite the fact that the actual information used to represent them in tenure decisions is often quite subjective and there are serious problems with the interpretation of the objective measures of research productivity which are used.’ (Marsh, p. 370.)

In 1987, when asked to produce a survey instrument for assessment purposes, the authors were faced with a number of problems. Quite clearly, diagnostic surveys could not be used. Previously a number of academics had attempted to use them for promotion purposes, but the Committee had had difficulty with them. First, because they were tailored to individual subjects, they could not be used for cross campus comparisons. Second, because only good to excellent teachers used them for promotion purposes, the Committee only saw good surveys and tended to believe that students were ‘soft’ on teaching.

Unfortunately, because Wollongong was the first university to require compulsory surveys, there were no models to draw on and overseas examples proved unsuitable or were subject to expensive copyright. It was necessary, therefore, to begin from first principles.

The following principles are those on which the design of all Wollongong assessment surveys were based:

1) Evaluation of teaching must be comprehensive. It must focus on all relevant categories of teaching, not just classroom performance.

2) Evaluation of teaching must be multi-faceted. It must use a number of sources of evidence, not only student surveys.

3) Staff, through their Unions and Deans should participate in the development of instruments and procedures.

4) The evaluation system must allow for the range of teaching methods used in Departments/Schools and by individual staff members.

5) Evaluation instruments should as far as possible assess only those aspects of teaching which are under the control of the staff member and for which the staff member can be held accountable.

6) Teachers should be judged only in comparison with colleagues teaching similar units e.g. - major subjects - service subjects - large classes - small classes

7) Teachers should be required to provide evidence in a standard form for all subjects taught over a defined period

8) Students may not be asked questions about aspects of the teaching (e.g. quality of content) concerning which they may not have an informed opinion.

9) CSD will provide reports on teaching competence only to individual staff members, and they may not use such reports in internal tenure/promotion proceedings.

10) Members of Tenure and Promotion Committees should receive training in evaluating teaching.

11) All surveys should be administered by CSD staff to ensure consistent procedures and to reduce the likelihood of data contamination.

Adoption of these principles does much to maximise the validity and acceptability of the survey results. However, despite the best efforts of CSD staff, occasional lapses do occur. Academics who schedule surveys during classes where assignments are returned or examinations conducted can expect students’ perceptions of their teaching to be distorted. Overall, however, the large body of research evidence together with our own experience suggests that there is no significant correlation between student examination and assignment results and their perceptions of the quality of teaching.
Beliefs about Student Surveys of Teaching

A widely held belief about student surveys of teaching is that they are popularity polls. If this belief were correct, it would be expected that friendly staff who teach soft option subjects would rate well. Not so. In our experience, students who rate their teachers as friendly do not necessarily rate them highly as teachers. On the other hand, teachers who are disliked by their students are often rated highly by them. (This comment does not constitute a recommendation that teachers should be unpleasant!) Murray, (1980, p.13) supports this view:

"Other teacher characteristics, such as clarity, organization, enthusiasm, and stimulation of student interest remained at the top of the list in both importance rating and correlational studies."

Similarly, it may surprise some that most students dislike 'soft' subjects and 'soft' assessment and respect teachers who demand high standards.

Recipients of University of Wollongong Teaching Awards are not noted for their laxity but invariably rate highly with their students.

"... we must keep in mind that a trait identified by students of faculty as an important component of good teaching may not discriminate significantly between good and poor teachers in an actual teaching situation. For example, it is possible that "knowledgeability" or "mastery of subject matter" is in fact a characteristic of outstanding teachers, but is not one of the major factors differentiating outstanding teachers from average teachers. In other words, knowledge of subject matter may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for outstanding teaching."

One weakness of the present system is that Point b) above is often ignored because it is not a formal requirement included in the Academic Conditions of Appointment. The Promotions Committee should require evidence that the subjects for which the applicant is responsible are of a suitable academic quality and that their learning objectives are appropriate and matched to assessment methods. This information is as vital to assessment evaluation of teaching as is the students' perceptions of subject organisation and delivery but cannot be gained from students themselves. In the absence of such a requirement applicants nevertheless should seek assessment of the curriculum, objectives and assessment methods from at least one of their referees.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality, in relation to assessment evaluation, is a complex matter. Survey results are needed by Heads and Deans in order to enable them to provide reports to the Tenure and Promotion Committee and the Committee members themselves need access to the results as well as to the summary sheets provided by CSD. Heads are required to take the 'triennial' surveys into account during the annual appraisal process. CSD, therefore, provides copies of all compulsory surveys to the Head every third year and a summary of survey results, where relevant, to the Tenure and Promotions Committee. As of 1992, a summary of compulsory triennial teaching survey results is also given to Departmental Review Panels.

At present Subject Coordinators are not privy to the survey results of other staff who teach in those subjects. While recognising the needs of Coordinators to ensure quality teaching, we have been unable to provide the information, given the general desirability of maintaining confidentiality at the highest possible level.

We welcome suggestions which might resolve the dilemma.

At the time of writing, survey results are not transmitted to Deans, but this policy is likely to change in the near future after revision of their Duty Statements.

Student and Staff Perceptions of the Surveys of Teaching

In 1991, rumours circulated to the effect that students were not taking surveys seriously and resented their frequency. It is certainly true that, in a given year, some students are asked to complete a number of surveys and it would be a matter for grave concern if the rumours were true. We decided, therefore, to ask all students surveyed in Spring Session whether: (a) they took the surveys seriously, (b) they wished the surveys to continue and (c) whether they were happy with the frequency of surveys.

To our astonishment, the positive response to all three questions (with some variation from class to class) was about 95%. Many students took the trouble to write comments which strongly support the quantitative findings. What annoys students is not the frequency of surveys, but the failure of some academics to give credence to students' opinions and to reflect on and modify teaching performance in the light of the feedback they have received.

Subsequently, we surveyed all academic staff about the services provided by CSD with particular reference to the surveys. In our experience, staff from each of the Departments earmarked for triennial evaluation for the first time, were understandably nervous about the process, but as they became accustomed to it, most found it relatively painless and many found it a useful means of gaining an overall picture of their
teaching as seen by their client group. The survey of staff confirmed these impressions. In addition, those who had approached the Centre for advice about interpreting their survey results and assistance with teaching development found the service useful and the staff helpful. Suggestions for improving the service further were noted and implemented where possible. Further suggestions are always welcome.

Teaching Evaluation and Staff Development

From the Centre's point of view, the major benefit of both diagnostic and assessment evaluations of teaching has been the opportunities presented to assist staff to improve teaching.

We have already referred to the value of individual consultations. Access to the survey results across campus has given us insights into best practices which can be applied in all Departments. Such access has also indicated a number of problems which are systemic in Departments and are best tackled on a Departmental level.

Many student complaints, for example, are not related to the actual presentation skills of individual lecturers, but are a consequence of curriculum problems. Coordination of individual subjects and of whole courses are areas of concern in a number of Departments. Widespread discontent with service subjects require action by both the client and provider Departments. The weighting given to different modes of assessment within subjects is a cause for dissatisfaction, although there have been considerable improvements in the quantity and quality of information given about assessment requirements. Subject learning objectives are often missing from subject handbooks and, even if provided, are often not expressed clearly.

Until recently, the bulk of the Centre's activities has taken two forms: centralised workshops and individual consultations. In addition, after each round of triennial surveys, Heads of Departments were asked if they would like to receive an overall report based on students' perceptions of the teaching in their Department (that is, in addition to copies of the actual survey responses). These reports usually took the form of a seminar for academic staff in the Department and led in several instances to development programs tailored to the needs of the Department.

Where Heads did not avail themselves of the offer, no further action was taken. The Academic Senate has now directed that reports of compulsory surveys be sent automatically to Heads who are the persons responsible to Council for the standard of teaching in the Departments. CSD will continue to offer both seminars which interpret the reports and Departmentally based developmental programs.

Conclusion

The University of Wollongong has the most systematic and comprehensive program of teaching evaluation in Australia thanks to the cooperation of staff and students. While some of the program's potential benefits remain untapped, increasing numbers of individual staff and Departments are exploiting them to advantage.

Reading

The literature relating to the evaluation of teaching is both exhaustive and exhausting. Fortunately there are two extremely good reviews which summarise and analyse the seminal debates. Both include extensive bibliographies.
