

Reading Your Student Evaluations in a Student Customer Orientated Environment

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Reading Your Student Evaluations in a Student Customer Orientated Environment

This session will look at how the student evaluation of teaching (SET) can be interpreted and applied in an environment in which the student is seen as a customer of the educational experience. The evaluation process has been studied and debated extensively for over 50 years, and much of the findings have been controversial. At the same time, colleges and universities have increasingly seen students as customers whose perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards the educational experience can and do influence how instructors are rewarded. This session will review pertinent aspects of the SET process and reveal how an instructor can interpret SET results and apply those interpretations to their teaching.

Rationale

The confusion over usage and interpretation of SET can be demonstrated by two actual cases. Professor X, although performing within acceptable standards on all required duties, was denied merit pay over four years because of low scores on the school's SET. During this period, he was praised by his administrators for his teaching and for the performance of his students. Not once was it suggested that he should change anything in the classroom. How was it possible that this administrators, who are assumed to be educational professionals, could be so at odds with the professor's own students?

Professor Y taught at two different, but similar universities. The students at both schools identified his teaching style in almost identical terms. Yet, he consistently received below average evaluations in one school and was rated as one of the best instructors of the university at the other. What were the students reacting to that was so different between the two schools?

It is relatively easy to look at both cases and suggest causal factors, but are they substantiated by the research base?

As examples:

Do grades influence SET? Yes, but it depends largely upon other variables, some of them social, rather than the grade itself.

Do students react to their perception of fairness? Yes, but what do they mean by “fair?”

Do students reward learning? No, but there is a fascinating exception.

Do students exhibit gender, racial, religious and other forms of discrimination in the evaluations? Yes, but they are remarkably unaware of it.

Are the evaluations reliable? Yes and no. They demonstrate a strong pattern of test-retest, and equivalent form reliability. They generally have strong inter-item consistency, but at the same time show almost no inter-rater reliability. What this means to the instructor is complex and challenging.

Are the evaluations valid? Yes and no. It depends on what is meant by “valid.” It also depends upon the purpose of the evaluations and how they are utilized.

Format

The topic of the session will be introduced, several examples given of SET research, how these findings have been interpreted, and how these interpretations can be applied to actual classroom behavior.

Participants will be encouraged to ask questions and dialog with each other and the session administrators. Examples from participants will be used as topics for discussion and exploration of possible action following from research findings.

Participants

Dennis Clayson: Dennis is a professor of marketing at the University of Northern Iowa with almost 30 years of research experience with SET.

Debra Haley: Debra is a professor emeritus at Southeastern Oklahoma State University and was an active researcher in the area of SET.