Group Consensus Evaluation: A Procedure for Gathering Qualitative Data

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Abstract. Group Consensus Evaluation, a course evaluation procedure based on qualitative data-gathering techniques, can provide an effective alternative to traditional course evaluation forms. Using this procedure, students come to agreement, first in small groups, then in the class as a whole, on the things they would like to keep the same in a course, the things they would like to see changed, and how that change might occur. This procedure provides the instructor with a single class view rather than a series of conflicting views while providing a forum for students to separate their individual problems with a course from those that are shared with their fellow students.

The young woman with a doctorate in educational technology was the only instructional developer at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. As such, it was her function not only to facilitate the design of courses, but to evaluate them as well. She had been trained at one of the major university development centers whose professional staff included two evaluators and she had studied carefully the evaluation processes they used. Therefore, for each course she designed, she gathered the typical kind of information using a written form composed of a Likert-type scale and a space for comments. It seemed, however, that the results were always the same. About half of the students thought the instruction was clear, interesting, important, and taught at just the right pace. The other half found it to be slightly confusing, somewhat uninteresting, generally unimportant, and taught a little too fast (or a little too slow). The open-ended comments were, perhaps, even less helpful. Some students thought that too much material had been covered in the course while others found the material repetitive. Some students declared that the class was too structured while others complained of no structure at all. Some students wanted more lecture while others argued for increased student participation.

Written evaluation data of this kind are relatively easy to analyze; however, interpreting the results to faculty may create a problem. Let us suppose that the new instructional design for a sociology class included a role play exercise. The professor, anxious to find out how students reacted to this new educational experience, asks that evaluation data be collected. Presenting the data to the professor might create a scene similar to the following.

"Dr. Johnson," the developer might begin, "of the 32 students enrolled in your class last semester, 15 mentioned the role play exercise as the thing they liked best about the class."

"Excellent," the professor might reply. "But what about the other 17 students?"

"Well," the developer might explain, "eight of them really thought the role play was a waste of time, three said they would never enroll in another course where they were forced into a role play situation, and the other six didn't mention that component of the course at all."

"All right then," might be the response. "You're the instructional developer. What should I do about that role play component next semester?"

This dialogue is typical of the difficulties instructional developers encounter in the higher education setting. On the one hand, they are trained to believe strongly in the necessity for formative evaluation as an integral component of development. On the other hand, the data they are able to collect are often contradictory, confusing, and insufficient to provide any clear direction to the efforts to improve instruction.
Group Consensus Evaluation is a procedure for obtaining information using interview and small group techniques.

What Is Group Consensus Evaluation?

Group Consensus Evaluation is a procedure for obtaining from students much the same sort of information that is solicited on the standard evaluation form. However, the information is obtained in the classroom using interview and small group techniques. The procedure follows a fairly simple and straightforward pattern of activities.

The evaluation is conducted at the end of a regularly scheduled class, taking between twenty to forty minutes to complete. After introducing the evaluator and explaining that he/she will gather information for course improvement, the classroom teacher leaves. The evaluator tells the students that the procedure they will use is designed to facilitate class agreement on the strengths and weaknesses of the course and how the course might be improved. He/She assures the students that only a summary of their discussion will be presented to the instructor and that the things said and who said them will be kept confidential.

The students are then asked to divide into small groups of no more than five or six. This physical division, often in classrooms obviously not designed for small group interaction, is actually one of the more difficult parts of the procedure. Nevertheless, at the College of Saint Benedict, effective evaluations were run for classes which ranged in size from five to ninety students.

Each small group is asked to appoint a recorder to report their findings back to the group as a whole. The evaluator then asks each group to take about five minutes to come to agreement on the things they liked best about the class, the things they liked least, and some specific suggestions for improving what they liked best.

At the end of the time period allotted for small group discussion, the evaluator asks for group reports. Spokespersons are asked to report their group's findings on each of the three questions: strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. The groups who are not reporting are asked to listen carefully to see if they agree or disagree with the group that is reporting. When groups disagree on some issue, it is thoroughly discussed. Sometimes, when the issue has been clarified, the groups will then agree on a shared point of view. If agreement is impossible, the evaluator might try a hand count to see what percentage of the group holds each point of view. This procedure continues until each group has reported.

The evaluator has two main functions during this process. First, he/she must listen carefully and record the findings of each group. Second, where general group discussion is needed, he/she should facilitate clarification and communication by asking necessary questions and providing succinct summaries. He/She also acts as timekeeper for the process, being certain that all groups have a chance to report fully on each of the questions within the time allotted for the evaluation.

It can be seen that both written evaluation and Group Consensus Evaluation solicit the same sort of information about a course. In practice, however, while the factual elements obtained may be similar, the outcome of each method is quite different. This is primarily due to the fact that the theoretical base of Group Consensus Evaluation is different from that of the written evaluation.

The Theoretical Base of Group Consensus Evaluation

For purposes of expediency, most instructional evaluation in higher education uses a written format. The theoretical base of the written evaluation method is part of the quantitative tradition in research and evaluation in which numbers are used to predict outcomes. These written evaluations of instruction generally focus on one of two factors: course/component design or teacher effectiveness.

Written evaluation data are collected to assure or improve the quality of new instruction designs. This activity, called formative evaluation, is usually conducted by instructional developers using questionnaires or rating instruments which focus upon a course or a course component being designed and is considered an integral part of the instructional development process. However, as described earlier in this article, the data are frequently ambiguous and provide little clear direction for change.

In higher education, there has been a growing interest in student evaluation of teacher effectiveness. This type of evaluation, like the formative evaluation described above, uses written questionnaires or rating instruments; however, these instruments, while mentioning course content and methods, tend to focus on instructor performance. Two important questions have been raised concerning this type of evaluation: Are the factors being rated valid measures of good instruction? Does the feedback received from these instruments improve subsequent instruction? (Chandler, 1978; Levin, 1979; Roten & Glassman, 1979.) Both types of evaluation share a common problem. They separate components of instruction from each other, from the environment in which they occur, and from the human interaction that comprises the educational setting.

Unlike the written evaluation method, the theoretical base for Group Consensus Evaluation is qualitative in nature, with the focus on viewing educational experiences from the perspective of those involved: student, teacher, administrator. There is an attempt at understanding why participants in an educational experience react as they do to that experience. This is accomplished by applying research procedures from the areas where the traditional focus has been upon in-depth study of people: the ethnographic techniques of anthropology and the qualitative methods of sociology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982;
Students expressed their preference for Group Consensus Evaluation as opposed to the written evaluation method.

Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1956) described a modification of the unstructured interview which they called the focused interview. While still aiming at subjective experience, the respondents are asked about a particular concrete situation in which they were all involved. The intent is to clarify the situation by recording descriptions from a variety of participants.

Group Consensus Evaluation incorporates both the unstructured interview and the focused interview into its evaluation procedure with the addition of one further element. Interviews are conducted in a group setting. The evaluator who conducts the Group Consensus Evaluation should be familiar and comfortable with group procedures. During the early part of the process, groups must be allowed to function freely in order to arrive at agreement on the points in question. However, the evaluator needs to be aware of groups who require some prodding on time or task and the point at which to end the small group discussion. When the small groups report to the group as a whole, the evaluator should summarize the points as they are noted, then constantly check to be sure that his/her perceptions agree with those of the students who are reporting and the students who are listening. Clarifying questions should be asked as necessary and large group discussion of the points being made should be encouraged.

Applying the procedures of unstructured interviewing to this group situation, the evaluator should remain neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the opinions being expressed. His/her responsibilities during this data-gathering stage are facilitation and inquiry. Through the use of these procedures, information on the students' perceptions of the class and the basis for these perceptions can be collected.

Clarifying Data Through Group Consensus Evaluation
One of the particular values of this
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These two examples were selected to demonstrate the type of data which can be gathered using the unstructured interview procedures of Group Consensus Evaluation. As can be seen, discrepancies in the data can be followed up immediately, and in many instances, the reasons for the discrepancies become clear. This allows for a fuller understanding of the problems with a specific course and how they might be handled, thus providing a broader base of supporting information when the course was welcomed by faculty under these circumstances where it might have been ignored or resented under other circumstances.

The Advantages of Group Consensus Evaluation

In addition to the points discussed above, there are several other advantages of Group Consensus Evaluation which should be considered. First, due to the nature of the procedure, it can be used to improve the class being evaluated as well as to improve the course in the future. Evaluations conducted at mid-semester provide enough succinct information to allow for immediate adjustments to the class being conducted. Thus students no longer have to be asked to contribute data for course improvements they will never see. Improvements are immediate and are tailored to the individual needs of the class.

Second, both students and faculty like this method of evaluation. Students expressed their preference for Group Consensus Evaluation as opposed to the written evaluation method. They explained that, while they were asked to fill out innumerable written evaluation forms, they never saw any results. With this procedure, they felt that someone was finally listening to their ideas and acting upon them.

Faculty were also enthusiastic about Group Consensus Evaluation. The data were clearly defined and presented a single class view rather than a compilation of many opposing views. Suggestions for improvement were reasonable, possible, and could frequently be quickly implemented in the class being taught. In addition, the fact that the faculty member had requested the evaluation and then acted upon it improved the communication between the instructor and the students.

At the College of Saint Benedict, faculty requests for Group Consensus Evaluation increased from five during the first semester it was offered to thirty the following semester. Faculty who had requested evaluation for one class they were teaching often followed the first evaluation with requests for their other classes to be evaluated. In addition, many of the faculty requested written summaries of the feedback sessions to include in their documentation for promotion and tenure.

Third, Group Consensus Evaluation allows a clear distinction to be made between the problems of individual students and problems with the course. By allowing time for class discussion of each issue, students can see which problems experienced in the class are shared by the group and which problems are the student's own. While the evaluator using this procedure never challenges the opinions students present, other students discussing how their views differ from the one being expressed may do so. For instance, a small group of students in a religion class under evaluation had no positive comments on the course at
all. They complained that the work was too hard, the assignments too long, and the tests unfair. There was immediate disagreement by the majority of the students who defended the instructor and her teaching methods. Several students pointed out quite strongly to the dissenting group that the assignments and work load were more than fair compared to other college courses and that the problem was that this group of students was just not willing to work.

Group Consensus Evaluation is a cost-effective way to gather data.

In Summary

Group Consensus Evaluation, a course evaluation procedure based on qualitative data-gathering techniques, can provide an effective alternative to the written evaluation. By involving the students in a discussion aimed at class consensus, it provides a forum for separating the problems of individual students from the problems with the course and for clarifying ambiguous pieces of data. A single class view is presented for the instructor's consideration rather than a series of conflicting views. Moreover, through the one-on-one feedback sessions, a natural setting for involving faculty members in instructional development activities is provided. The Group Consensus evaluation procedure is useful in any setting where course evaluation is used to guide instructional development activities.

References