A Mixed-Methods Study: Student Evaluation Response Rates of Teacher Performance in Higher Education Online Classes

Kelli R. Paquette
kpaquett@iup.edu

Frank Corbett, Jr.
fcorbett@iup.edu

Melissa M. Casses
m.m.vehovic@iup.edu

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
303 Davis Hall, Indiana, PA 15705

Abstract

The face of classrooms in the United States is shifting to reflect the needs of a changing society; hence, online learning is prevalent. The number of students taking at least one online course has surpassed 7.1 million and represents 33% (21.3 million) of all higher education students (Allen & Seaman, 2013). With the growing number of online courses, credibility may be questioned. Are there effective evaluation processes in place? This article will describe the results of a mixed-methods study that identified students’ perceptions of the communication processes utilized in the presentation, delivery, and return of online evaluations of teacher performance.

Key Words: online learning, student evaluations, reflective practice

The face of classrooms in the United States is shifting to reflect the needs of a changing society; hence, online learning is prevalent. This growing market has demonstrated sustainability and credibility with higher education and the general public. Millions of students are engaged in online education encompassing $25 billion of annual tuition revenue (Gallagher & LaBrie, 2012). The number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 7.1 million and represents 33% (21.3 million) of all higher education students (Allen & Seaman, 2013). In the 2013 Survey of Online Learning Report, “The percent of academic leaders rating the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction grew from 57% in 2003 to 74% in 2013.” These numbers represent the current trends in education and offer insight into the wave of future students entering their collegiate careers. With the demand of online classes increasing, questions may arise as to the credibility of these courses, as well as to the instructional quality of those teaching these online courses.

Students’ evaluations of online course content and faculty instruction are important. Liu (2012) advised that student evaluations of online learning are critical to establish and maintain the integrity of online learning. Additionally, student evaluations of teaching have been a source of credibility with regard to advancement for teachers along with their continued reflection and growth as educators. In this article, the results of a 1.5 year-long research study about student response rates for evaluations of faculty performance in higher education online classes will be described. A review of the current literature regarding student evaluations of teaching in non-traditional online classes will be presented, as well.

Purpose

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify the faculty and students’ perceptions of the communication processes utilized in the presentation, delivery, and return of online evaluations of teacher performance. Norris and Conn (2005) expressed the need to collect impressions of student insight that would allow identification of variables that encourage or distract from their responses to online-delivered evaluations. Berk (2013) noted that despite the numerous research articles written on student evaluations of teaching in online environments, few have evaluated non-traditional online and/or blended classrooms. As a preliminary examination, faculty and students were asked to engage in a survey to gain understanding into the current use and perceptions of
communication strategies used in online classrooms to deliver online evaluations. Additionally, interviews and a thorough literature review were conducted to answer the questions of this study.

**Hypotheses**

Student evaluations are important for online courses. When a concerted effort is given by faculty in higher education to explain the purpose of student evaluations, students will complete the evaluations and provide feedback to improve teaching and learning.

**Research Questions**

1. What communication processes in the presentation and delivery of online student evaluations does faculty engage to encourage the completion of these evaluations?
2. How do students perceive and respond to communication regarding the completion and importance of online evaluations?

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it furthers the investigation into methods and strategies that may enable students to complete online evaluations in higher education settings. A high student response rate is significant to faculty in higher education, as contract renewals are often dependent upon these student evaluations. Additionally, tenure and promotion committees highly value student evaluations. Berk (2013) surmised that the format of online teaching varies greatly from the online classroom indicating that research must begin to address the needs of the entire evaluation process specifically for online and/or blended courses. To date and per the researchers’ review, no studies have focused specifically on students’ evaluations of online teaching in this specific context.

**Literature Review**

The research in the area of online student evaluations of teaching in traditional teaching environments has produced varied levels of concern with regards to response rates (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005; Guder & Malliaris, 2010). Guder and Malliaris (2010) indicated a dramatic drop in response rates for student evaluation of teaching in transition from paper-pencil to online formats, -25.99% from the years of 2005-2008. This lower response rate within online evaluation is reflected greatly in the research (Berk, 2012; Anderson et al., 2005; Opengart & Mau, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Nowell, Gale, & Handley, 2010; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008; Stowell, Addison, & Smith, 2012). Several studies suggest that students who perform better academically are more likely to respond to student evaluations (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005). Adams and Umbach (2012) indicated that students who showed little investment in the class viewed the evaluation as a reminder of their substandard performance, thus influencing their lack of participation. They also reported that students are more likely to respond to evaluations within their major study focus. This sense of responsibility is credited to the major of focus, indicating a feeling of a sense of duty to the department.

Online evaluations have been shown to produce more thoughtful and lengthier comments from which to guide practice and pedagogy (Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005; Guder & Malliaris, 2013). Guder and Malliaris (2010) reported benefits in the transition to online formats, as the comments made by students in the online evaluations increased by 19% of students versus the paper-pencil evaluations. In addition, a reported 149% increase of average number of words written in the comments section was also observed. Students reported to prefer to complete evaluations outside of class time so that they can produce more “effective” and “constructive” (p. 40) responses. Online versus traditional paper-pencil formats have also shown a decrease in time requirements from multiple perspectives. Anderson, Cain, and Bird (2005) reported that students spent ten minutes or less on online student evaluations of teaching and 25 minutes on paper-pencil. Additionally, staff workload decreased by 30 hours when evaluations were completed online (Anderson, Cain, & Bird, 2005). Gravestok et al. (2008) indicated that this decrease in staff time results from reducing the need for in-class distribution, collection, scanning, and storing data.

While there are researched advantages and disadvantages to the use of online student evaluations of teaching, research focus has moved to the ability to increase the response rates of students in the online formats. Overall, online student evaluations of teaching produce lower response rates than traditional in-class methods (Stowell, Addison, & Smith, 2012); however, several studies have indicated that response rates can be increased through the use of multiple and varied strategies. In particular, penalty and reward strategies offer an opportunity to
increase student response rates for online delivered student evaluations of teaching. Ravenscroft and Enyeart (2009) supported that including the evaluation as an assignment has shown to produce desired results for response rates. Anderson, Cain, and Bird (2005) reported on the transition of the University of Florida, School of Pharmacy, and their culture-wide adoption of the required completion of online student evaluations of teaching to obtain a grade, ultimately with favorable results. In addition, Berk (2013) identified positive incentives such as extra credit or dropping the lowest score likewise produced positive results for response rates in online delivered student evaluations of teaching (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Johnson, 2003; Prunty, 2011).

While reward and penalty incentives have shown to increase response rates, Norris and Conn (2005) advised that “simple” communication strategies can show an effect in the positive response rates of students without withholding grades or the penalizing of students. Norris and Conn compared the paper-pencil versus the online evaluation systems and found that while response rates for online evaluations were generally lower than traditional paper-pencil evaluations, response rates were significantly higher for teachers who communicated with their students. Faculty who provided students information about the importance of the online evaluations, instructions on how to complete them, and reminders to do so were successful.

Norris and Conn (2005) completed a series of studies to evaluate a baseline and communication strategies for response rates for online evaluations. In the evaluation, the researchers discovered that through the use of these simple communication strategies regarding the importance of student evaluations of teaching, students were significantly more likely to complete online evaluations (a rate of 74%) than those students who did not receive communication strategies (baseline rate of 34%). This focus on the communication regarding the delivery and importance of online student evaluations of teaching was evident more recently through the work of Knight, Naidu, and Kinash, (2012). In their research, the indicated that “Students were more likely to participate in evaluation surveys if they felt that their feedback made a meaningful contribution.” (p. 226). Through the collaboration of students in the process of development and communication of student evaluations of teaching, the university boasted an 89% response rate for online evaluations. The authors reported that student engagement and collaboration was the key ingredient in the “achieved response rates that exceed those presented elsewhere in the literature.”

Theoretical Framework

Reflective thinking is the theoretical framework for this study. Based on John Dewey’s work, reflective thinking is “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 6.) Learning and performance improvement outcomes can result with the implementation of reflective practices (Handal, Vaage, Carlgren, 1995). The significance of student evaluations of teacher performance in higher education cannot be understated.

Method

Participants. Two categories of participants, students and faculty, were eligible for this mixed-methods study. Ages ranged from 18 to 67 years of age. Participants were from a university in Western Pennsylvania who were involved in one or more online classes.

Materials. With permission, the survey tools used in this study were adapted from the original 2005 surveys used by researchers, Norris and Conn. Three local experts in research theory and design were asked to review and analyze the research questions and the survey tool to confirm valid and reliable information for this study. The instrument was revised accordingly with minor adjustments being made prior to the survey distribution. (See Appendices A and B).

Procedures. After receiving the institution’s approval to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), names and e-mail addresses were obtained through the university’s Applied Research Lab (ARL) of those faculty and students who taught or took an online class. The information was coded to maintain confidentiality. Via an online survey, the researchers distributed this tool to students (n=168) and faculty (n=9). Following the survey, those faculty and students who agreed to talk further were asked follow-up questions.

Analysis and Findings

To address the research questions, surveys were sent to students and faculty involved in online classes. Initially, the response rate was low; therefore, the surveys were re-distributed. In the end, 25 students and 5 faculty members responded to the online survey; thereby, confirming a response rate of 17%. Additionally, five students
and five faculty volunteered to be interviewed in order to thoroughly address the issues of this study. Thirdly, a thorough review of the literature was conducted and trends were compared to the results of this study.

Demographic information collected indicated that of the students who participated 64% were between the ages of 18-27 (n=16), 15% were between the ages of 28-37 (n=4), 8% were between the ages of 38-47 (n=2) and 12% were between the ages of 48-57 (n=3). Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the participants were male (n=7) and 72% were female (n=18). Predominately juniors and seniors completed the survey. Of the respondents, 68% were juniors (n=17) and 32% were seniors (n=8). Of the three female and two male faculty respondents, one was between the ages of 38-47; three were between the ages of 48-57; and, one was between the ages of 58-67.

Research Question No. 1: What communication processes in the presentation and delivery of online student evaluations does faculty engage to encourage the completion of these evaluations? In response to the question, “When was the end-of-the-semester course evaluation first announced to you?” responses varied. Twenty-eight percent (n=7) indicated that course evaluations were announced “A week before the last day of the semester.” Twenty-eight percent (n=7) indicated that the course evaluations were announced “two weeks before the last day of the semester,” and 28% (n=7) indicated that course evaluations were announced “More than three weeks before the last day of the semester.” Sixteen percent (n=4) selected the “other” category and indicated that the course evaluations were not announced. Faculty responses varied. Two reported “A week before the last day of the semester;” two noted “three weeks before the last day of the semester;” and, one marked “more than three weeks before the last day of the semester.” The student responses to “How was the end of semester course evaluation first announced to you?” indicated that 60% (n=15) stated that course evaluations were announced via email; 20% (n=5) announced it through class discussion; one response indicated it was posted to the website; and, 16% (n=4) said it was never announced. One hundred percent of the faculty who responded to the online survey said that they posted it on the website and discussed it in class.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with five students and five faculty members who were involved in online courses. All five of the interviewed faculty members stated that they posted a notice of the student evaluations on their websites. However, only two of the five students mentioned that they had seen these notices. When asked, “Do you do anything other than posting in the websites?” four of the five participants responded, “No.”

Student interviews revealed similar results. One faculty member said that she had shared with her students the fact that “she was already tenured and that she just wanted to make her class better.” However, her plea was ineffective, as her response rate that semester was simply 11% (2 of 18 students). She was somewhat surprised because she had received numerous positive e-mails from students throughout the semester and she was hopeful that her evaluations would be reflective of those messages. Another faculty member stated that his student evaluation response rate was weak.” “I sent out several pleas for participation, but no incentives. It did not seem to matter.”

Research Question No. 2: How do students perceive and respond to communication regarding the completion and importance of online evaluations?

With regard to the importance of faculty evaluations and the weight they carry in higher education, results produced interesting outcomes. To the question, “Did the instructor discuss the value of end-of-semester course evaluations with you?” student and faculty respondents reported strong indication that they were not. Ninety-six percent of the students (n=24) responded “No,” and 100% of the faculty reported the same. In response to the identification of reminder strategies utilized by faculty, students overwhelmingly reported that no reminder strategies were used (100%). Faculty participants also confirmed that no reminder strategies were used. Negative reinforcement strategies, such as withholding grades or access to final grades, was explored through the question of “Did the instructor require you to complete the evaluation (e.g. in order to access the last assignment)?” One hundred percent (100%) of the students and faculty responded “No,” indicating that negative strategies were not utilized in the process of course evaluation.

During the interview sessions, one faculty member stated that she gave two bonus points based on the honor system when students completed the evaluations. She said, “Students wrote their names under the discussion board and attested to the fact that they completed the student evaluations. After doing so, these students were awarded the bonus points.” The other four faculty members did not offer incentives of any kind. None of the students interviewed stated that they were offered incentives. During one of the student interviews, it was stated, “Since I never got anything out of it, why bother?”

Based on the survey data, additional qualitative examinations were recorded in response to strategies used by professors and students’ perceptions on how to increase participation in online evaluations. To the survey question, “Please comment on any additional strategies used by the instructor to encourage you to respond to online course evaluations and please add any other insights into this issue (What would it take for you to complete the online student evaluation, if you didn’t already do so?).” student responses conveyed both frustration and consideration into this issue. Frustration was expressed through means of the evaluation seeming to possess little
value with regard to the progression of teacher quality. In addition, students indicated that faculty members were ambivalent with regard to the completion of evaluations. As indicated in the non-existence of reminder strategies utilized, students expressed frustration with only one email with multi-level directions to access the survey.

The method of accessing the student evaluations was cumbersome, and it required students to follow challenging directions. This sentiment was also revealed within a student interview, “The student evaluation system is complicated. You have to sign into your account, go to a section and scroll down, select this, and then click on this, and then, maybe, you can find the survey. It isn’t hard, but it takes patience and time.”

Upon review of the literature and comparison to the analysis of this study’s results, discrepancies and similarities exist. The literature is very clear about there being a concern for student privacy; however, interestingly, privacy was not mentioned as a concern for the students who completed this particular survey. Additionally, Norris and Conn (2005) indicated that through the use of an evaluation protocol timeline with regard to the delivery of evaluations (two weeks prior to the end of the semester) and reminders (one week prior to the end of class with a completion date), response rates increased from 42% to 74%. No consistent timeline notice prevailed within this study. Furthermore, all student respondents indicated that no reminder strategies were utilized. The results of this study were similar in that response rates in this study were minimal which is consistent with the literature. Additionally, a minority of faculty members expressed the importance of these student evaluations to their students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Important insights were gained from this study; however, recommendations for future research exist. Indications that survey fatigue may play a role in the response rates of evaluations can be viewed from the participation rate of students and faculty members at this particular university. Adams and Umbach (2012) indicated that a threshold of survey participation is capped at 11 surveys. Further exploration of this phenomenon is warranted.

While research appears to suggest that a protocol for evaluation delivery has the potential for increasing the response rates of online faculty evaluations, the translation to practice appears to require further investigation.

Despite the numerous studies that indicate the need for communication of importance with regard to faculty evaluations, a continued effort to ensure that translation from research to practice is necessary.

**Limitations**

Limitations to this study included that it was administered to one university setting and, therefore, no generalizations can be made. However, the results are certainly consistent with the literature reviewed.

**Conclusion**

Most likely, online learning and teaching opportunities will continue to grow, and the need for reflective thinking and quality instruction will remain important. As found in this study, students perceive evaluations of faculty as a formality with little influence on the delivery of instruction. While universities utilize evaluations for important decisions regarding tenure and promotion, translation of this importance to students is essential. As indicated through this study, communication efforts of evaluation importance and reminder strategies by the faculty appears to be lacking in practice as perceived by students. While this study was concerned with the communication practices of one University’s faculty with regard to student evaluations of teaching in online classes, it appears that faculty communication requires further investigation in the student evaluations of online teaching. As this study indicated, communication practices were not a formal process in regards to delivery time of online evaluations, reminder strategies, and communication of importance to students; therefore, students’ perceptions of evaluations appeared to reflect the student evaluation of teaching as a formality with disregard for the evaluation importance.

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APPENDIX A – Qualtrics Survey for Faculty

YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IS INDICATED BY COMPLETING THIS SURVEY.

Section 1
Age Range: (please check where appropriate)
- 18-27 [ ]
- 28-37 [ ]
- 38-47 [ ]
- 48-57 [ ]
- 58-67 [ ]
- 68+ [ ]

Gender: (please check)
- Male [ ]
- Female [ ]

Experience:

(B) Please select your faculty status (please check one)
- Assistant Professor [ ]
- Associate Professor [ ]
- Professor [ ]
- Temporary [ ]

Section 2

1. When was the end of the semester course evaluation first announced to students (choose all that apply)?
   a. A week before the last day of the semester
   b. 2 weeks before the last day of the semester
   c. 3 weeks before the last day of the semester
   d. More than 3 weeks before the last day of the semester
   e. Other (please specify)

2. How was the end of semester course evaluation first announced to the students (choose all that apply)?
   a. E-mail announcement
   b. Posted to class website
   c. Posted to class assignments
   d. Posted to a class discussion board
   e. Other (Please specify)

3. Did you discuss the value of end of semester course evaluations with your students?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please explain when and how:
4. Did you use any reminder strategies to encourage students to respond to the evaluation (choose all that apply)?
   a. E-mail reminder
   b. Posted reminder to class website
   c. Posted to class discussion board
   d. No reminder strategy used
   e. Other (please specify)

5. Did you offer students credit (participation points, extra points, etc.) for completing the evaluation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please explain what kind of credit was offered:

6. Did you require students to complete the evaluation (e.g. in order to access the last assignment)?
   If yes, please describe the requirement:

7. Please comment on any additional strategies used for encouraging student responses to online course evaluations and please add any other insights into this issue.

This adapted from the original report.
APPENDIX B – Qualtrics Survey for Students

YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IS INDICATED BY COMPLETING THIS SURVEY.

Section 1

Age Range: (please check where appropriate)

- 18-27 [ ]
- 28-37 [ ]
- 38-47 [ ]
- 48-57 [ ]
- 58-67 [ ]
- 68+ [ ]

Gender: (please check)

- Male [ ]
- Female [ ]

Experience:

(B) Please select your undergraduate status (please check one)

- Freshman [ ]
- Sophomore [ ]
- Junior [ ]
- Senior [ ]

Section 2

1. When was the end of the semester course evaluation first announced to you (choose all that apply)?
   a. A week before the last day of the semester
   b. 2 weeks before the last day of the semester
   c. 3 weeks before the last day of the semester
   d. More than 3 weeks before the last day of the semester
   e. Other (please specify)

2. How was the end of semester course evaluation first announced to you (choose all that apply)?
   a. E-mail announcement
   b. Posted to class website
   c. Posted to class assignments
   d. Posted to a class discussion board
   e. Other (Please specify)

3. Did the instructor discuss the value of end-of-semester course evaluations with you?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please explain when and how:
4. Did the instructor use any reminder strategies to encourage you to respond to the evaluation (choose all that apply)?
   a. E-mail reminder
   b. Posted reminder to class website
   c. Posted to class discussion board
   d. No reminder strategy used
   e. Other (please specify)

5. Did the instructor offer you credit (participation points, extra points, etc.) for completing the evaluation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If yes, please explain what kind of credit was offered:

6. Did the instructor require you to complete the evaluation (e.g. in order to access the last assignment)?
   If yes, please describe the requirement:

7. Please comment on any additional strategies used by the instructor to encourage you to respond to online course evaluations and please add any other insights into this issue (What would it take for you to complete the online student evaluation, if you don’t already do so?)

This adapted from the original report-