Response Rates in Online Teaching Evaluation Systems

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How do you get students to fill out teaching evaluations? The question seldom came up when evaluations were collected on paper. Students filled out paper evaluations during their classes, and high return rates were almost guaranteed. Now, with online collection of evaluations, students are free to ignore requests for online evaluations, and teachers can no longer assume that response rates will be high.

This report identifies factors that contribute to high return rates in online teaching evaluation systems. Specifically, it describes the practices of a select group of teachers who received online feedback from all or nearly all of their students when online evaluations were first used at the University of Michigan in the fall of 2008. The teachers were contacted by email and asked whether they had taken any special steps to promote student responses. The report is based on their e-mail replies.

BACKGROUND

To some teachers, anything less than a 100% response on teaching evaluations is unsatisfactory. But it is probably unrealistic to expect a school-wide return rate of 100% on online evaluations. The only schools that have perfect or near-perfect records for return of online evaluations are those that withhold a student's grades until the student submits all of his evaluations. Few schools are willing to impose such severe penalties for such small infractions.

Most teachers would be satisfied if online return rates were similar to return rates from paper evaluations. The evidence suggests that return rates from paper evaluations are typically between 66% and 75%. Northwestern University, for example, reported a 75% percent response rate during the last year in which it used paper evaluations (Oh, 2005). Brigham Young University reported a 71% return rate on paper evaluations in 74 classes in a 1999 experiment (Johnson, 2003) William Cashin, whose IDEA system is the most widely used paper-and-pencil evaluation system, suggests that at least two-thirds of the class should be represented in evaluations. "Some have suggested requiring ratings from three-quarters of the class," he adds, "but experience with the IDEA system suggests that many classes would not meet that cutoff." Based on this and other evidence, return rates between 66% and 75% are a realistic school-wide goal for online evaluation systems.

Return rates in online evaluation systems do not typically reach this level. For example, Brigham Young University researchers reported a 50% response rate for online evaluations in 74 classes in a 1999 experiment (Johnson, 2003). Northwestern University also reported a 50% response rate for classes evaluated online in 2004 (Oh, 2005).

Some schools, however, have taken special steps to get beyond the 50% return level. For example, when Northwestern University went to a school-wide system of online evaluations in the 2005 academic year, it decided to give access to all course ratings and comments to any student who submitted ratings and comments for all of his or her courses. Students who did not complete all their course evaluations did not gain this access. The response rate for online evaluations rose from 50% to 73% with the introduction of this incentive.

At the University of Michigan, students return paper evaluations at about the same rate as at other institutions. In the 2008 academic year, the last year in which paper evaluations were collected, the University printed TQ forms for 16,121 classes with a total enrollment of 476,155, and students filled out 313,504 of the forms, yielding a return rate of 66%. Response rates did not vary much by term: 68% in fall 2007, 64% in winter 2008, and 64% in the spring and summer terms.

University of Michigan return rates for online questionnaires are also consistent with national figures. In the fall term of 2008, the response rate was 61%. In the winter term of 2009, an infrastructure outage interfered with the collection of evaluations two days before the end of the scheduled 8-day data collection period. The response rate was 39%. Had evaluations been collected throughout the full evaluation period, the response rate would probably have been below 45%. In the spring-summer term of 2009, the response rate was 43%. For the full academic year, the response rate will be close to 50%.

SURVEY DESIGN

Response rates in some University of Michigan classes were higher than the average of 50%; response rates were lower in other classes. Of special interest are the classes where all or nearly all of the students submitted evaluatons. Did the teachers in these classes take any special steps to encourage students to respond? Could other teachers learn from their example? To answer these questions, I contacted teachers with perfect or near-perfect response rates to find out how they handled the evaluations.

Because I wanted to hear from teachers of classes of various sizes, I stratified all classes into three groups: small classes (10 to 15 students), medium classes (16 to 75 students), and large classes (76 or more students). A total of 32 small classes had response rates of 100% in the fall term of 2008. I randomly selected 16 of the teachers in this group to contact. A total of 74 medium-size classes had response rates of 100%. I randomly selected 15 of the teachers for the sample. No large classes had response rates of 100%. I selected the 12 classes with the highest response rates for the sample.

I sent an e-mail request to each of the individuals in the sample. The e-mail simply asked the teachers whether they would be willing to share information about steps they may have taken to encourage students to submit evaluations.

RESULTS

A total of 20 teachers responded to my e-mail: 10 teachers of small classes, 6 teachers of medium-size classes, and 4 teachers of large classes.

Small classes

One teacher of a small class attributed his high response rate entirely to the the students in the class and the class atmosphere:

> The ten students in [this graduate] seminar all filled out the online evaluation. Graduate students tend to be a bit more responsible about these evaluations. In this case I think another contributing factor was the fact that all the students seemed to enjoy and appreciate the course as much as I did. Right from the beginning it was obvious that this was an exceptional group of students: they were all smart and engaged, they all participated in the class discussions and developed excellent research projects, they all were talking with each other about their projects, and outside class I was in constant contact with them about their projects. Of the ten students in this seminar in fall term, nine of them continued their research projects as independent studies during winter term.
>   So I'm not sure how far you can generalize from my experiences with this truly excellent group of graduate students.
>
> *-- LS&A Humanities course with 10 students*

The students were apparently eager to express their appreciation for a great class, and the teacher did not have to do anything else to encourage them.

Three teachers reported that they used explanations and reminders alone to promote student participation. For one of the three, the explanations and reminders were restricted to the classroom.

> I shared with my students the powerpoint that was sent to all faculty that explained the new system & how it would be utilized. I reminded them each time I saw them that the evaluations were available. I also explained to them that this is an opportunity for them to change the class & then I highlighted things that have been changed, added, or deleted based on previous students responses.
>
> *-- Kinesiology course with 15 students*

The other two teachers used e-mail as well as in-class explanations and reminders:

> [This] was a very small class and our students were very close to one another to the extent that there was peer pressure to complete the online evaluation. I did ask students not to forget to submit the evaluation in class as well as via email. But that's about all I did.
>
> *-- Residential College course with 14 students*

> I always encourage students to complete their evaluations, I talk about their importance, I talk about how I have used them in the past to modify my teaching, and I leave time in class to do it. Now with electronic submission I'm not sure what I'll do other than make frequent reminders, not in class but also by email as I suspect that students are online when reading email and could just switch over to the course eval website.
>
> *-- LS&A Social Sciences course with 10 students*

Although gentle reminders worked in these small classes, it is not clear that these reminders would be equally effective in larger classes, in which teachers might not know individual students as well.

The remaining six teachers took additional steps to promote participation. Three of the teachers had students fill out evaluations during regular class time.

> I actually arranged to borrow a laptop cart for the last class and asked the students to complete the evaluations in class. I think all but one or two did. Unfortunately, this would not be possible for many classes because of limited resources (we only have a couple of carts in the School of Education).
>
> *-- School of Education course with 12 students*

> My class was very small (~12) and a studio class thus there was a closer relationship that is less possible with larger classes. I asked them to fill in the survey, said that it was beneficial for adjustments to later versions of the same course, and suggested they complete it by date X, some day that preceded their last bit time crunch for due projects. When that day rolled around, I offered them studio time to go to a nearby computer lab and complete the survey. I was surprised that over half said they'd already done it. So-I'm not sure that I did anything; they were just a very cooperative and responsible group.
>
> *-- SNRE course with 13 students*

> I just told the students to do the evaluations, and I gave them 15 minutes at the end of class to do it.
>
> *-- LS&A Social Sciences course with 15 students*

The remaining three teachers required students to submit proof that they had completed evaluations.

> All we did was remind them constantly and give them extra credit for completing the evaluations. We asked that they print the receipt at the end of the evaluation and give it to either [of us] as proof. Other than that, I don't know if we did anything special to get our students to fill out the evaluations.
>
> *-- LS&A Natural Sciences course with 11 students*

> I spent a great deal of time one class explaining why the evaluations mattered. How it was their chance to have their voice heard. And that they should have an opinion to share about the educational experience that they were paying for -and quite frankly if they didn't have an opinion then they shouldn't be here.
>   I made participation mandatory and had them print out the confirmation sheet and give it to me before I started class the next class.
>   I was extremely pleased by the format of evaluations. It helped enormously that students could fill them out and submit them in private. I was able to use my instructions in class as a way to emphasize their responsibility to speak up and be heard. I also used it to talk about what I though had worked in the class and what hadn't from my perspective - hoping that honesty would jog their memory about how the semester had played out. I am pretty sure I spoke to them about the evals before they came out and as soon as they were 'live' I gave them a deadline that was roughly 24 hours after that point.
>
> *--Architecture & Urban Planning course with 15 students*

> I told the students that I would not submit a final grade for them until I had evidence that they had completed the online evaluation…Clearly there has to be a carrot and stick approach to the students to get them all to participate; otherwise only those with grudges will do so, and everyone's score will go down.
>
> *-- LS&A Humanities course with 12 students*

Thus, some teachers used reminders alone to encourage students, but most of those with high response rates used reminders along with other incentives.

Medium-size classes

Responses from teachers of medium-size classes were similar to those of teachers of small classes. Two of the 6 teachers of medium-size classes reported that they used nothing more than explanations and reminders to promote student participation. One of the teacher provided the reminders personally:

> The one thing I do is to impress upon the students that what they have to say means something to me, and that I try to use their feedback to become a better teacher. I mentioned that very thing in class, and in a follow up e-mail to the students.
>
> *-- School of Education course with 19 students*

The other teacher relied on her school to provide the extra encouragement.

> Our department sent out a series of emails heading into the first set of on-line evaluations (and I think in the Winter too). They made computers easily available (somehow more than usual - I think in our commons area). I didn't really emphasize it in my classes except to say that I shape my courses a lot on what students tell me. Quite honestly, because I try to be responsive to my students throughout the semester, I think they are more willing to take the time to provide feedback to me at the end. So, in part it would seem connected to the emphasis of the department and to the relationship with the instructor.
>
> *-- Social Work course with 26 students*

Both of these teachers are in schools where the participation rate were generally high.

The remaining teachers also encouraged students to fill out their evaluations, but they went further. Each of the four remaining teachers required their students to submit proof that they had completed an evaluation.

> My student's had a final take-home examination. Rather than have them submit the exam on Ctools (which I usually do), I required them to submit a hard copy to me during an extended office hours period. During those special office hours, in addition to collecting their exams, I also told students that they should allow time to meet with me to review all of the assignment and participation points I had recorded for them to make sure their grades were going to be calculated correctly. I also told them that, while voluntary, I would be happy to see a printed "receipt" evidencing that they had completed the online evaluation of my class. All of them brought the "receipt." And, here is the important part....they reported that since they were already in the system completing my evaluation, they went ahead and evaluated their other classes as well.
>
> *-- LS&A Social Sciences course with 28 students*

> My main technique was to say that part of their participation grade was to forward me the page indicating that they had completed their online eval for the course. This was cumbersome, but somehow it worked.
>
> *-- LS&A Humanities course with 18 students*

> I had arranged for my students to go up to the 3rd floor computer lab in SOE but the evals were not up for my last class. I asked the students to send me the confirmation that they had done the eval before I entered grades on Wolverine. That seemed to do it! I do impress on the students that these evals are very important to me and to the University.
>
> *-- School of Education course with 22 students*

> . . . what I did with my class was that I made a reward that was based on the entire class completing (and presenting evidence of completing) the evaluation. If everyone did it by a deadline I set (something like a few days or a week before the actual deadline), then I promised to bring them cookies (I had done something similar earlier in the semester, and they had been asking for more cookies since then).
>
> That said. I think any reward--especially one that slowly disappears the longer they take to fill out the form, or one that requires most or all of the class to complete the forms--does the trick nicely.
>
> If the university would provide a small incentive (sweets or something) for any class that has 95% or some other arbitrary percentage completion, that would make it easier on the instructors.
>
> The only other ideas I have is that response rates are higher if students really like, or dislike an instructor.

It also may be worthwhile to tell students how much these are used for job applications. I know when I was an undergrad, I had no idea that these were looked at by anyone but the instructor; I especially had no idea that the instructor needed them to apply for jobs or tenure.

One other thing, I told my students that if they had nothing else on which to give written comments, that they should comment on something I was interested in. Basically prompting their written responses if they had nothing else to say.

-- LS&A Natural Sciences course with 27 students

Compared to the teachers of small classes, the teachers of medium-size classes appeared more likely to treat teaching evaluations as a class assignment.

Large classes

Three of the teachers of large classes assigned points for completion of evaluations.

We offered extra credit points to students for filling out the evaluations (1 point for lecture and 1 point for discussion). We also had students bring their laptops to their last discussion section and reserved 15-20 minutes for them to fill out evals. For those who were not able to do the evaluations in class, they could do it on their own time and still get credit by bringing in a hard copy of their confirmation page. From the feedback that I received from my GSIs, it was very painless and students were more than happy to get a few extra points.

-- LS&A Social Sciences course with 279 of 287 responding

Students in my class got to drop their lowest HW grade (out of 12 sets) if they showed proof of completing the evaluation.

-- Engineering course with 110 of 115 responding

Short answer: yes -- two things. One, more benevolent/altruistic: I emphasized in a couple of different classes leading up to the date that I read them carefully and gave a few examples of things I had changed in past years based on student feedback. The second, though, is probably what worked -- question number 1 on the homework assignment right after evaluations were posted was to turn in a copy of the certification sheet proving they had submitted their evaluation -- worth 10 points! Nothing like bribery to get the job done :)

-- Engineering course with 78 of 84 responding

A fourth teacher made the completion of evaluations an in-class assignment:

I got a pretty high response rate from [my} students because I told them to bring their laptops and I sent those who didn't have laptops to the SOE labs for the last portion of a class period. In other words, I made them do it during class! It was a big group, but most of them have laptops and our labs could easily handle those who didn't have them.

I also told them that it was important for me to have feedback, and I gave them an example or two of a feedback pattern I had noted in the previous class and how I had modified the course structure in response to the feedback. Basically, I illustrated that the feedback mattered and that I took it seriously.

We also had a reasonably good relationship as a class, so I think that helps.

--School of Education course with 73 of 79 responding

Teachers may need to treat evaluations as an in-class or out-of-class assignment to achieve such remarkably high response rates in large classes.

CONCLUSION

National as well as local data suggest that response rates in online evaluation systems will be around 50% if communications alone are used to promote student responses. Some teachers at the University of Michigan had much higher response rates in their classes in the fall term of 2008, however. In some highly successful small classes, students seemed eager to thank teachers for their efforts, and no special incentives were necessary to get students to fill out evaluations. In other small classes, teachers guaranteed high response rates by making teaching evaluations a class assignment or arranging for completion of the evaluations during class time. The situation may be different in large classes, where it may be necessary for teachers to treat evaluations as an in-class or out-of-class assignment in order to insure high response rates.