DO YOU HAVE THESE CONCERNS?

FACULTY CONCERNS, ADDRESSED

MANY FACULTY MEMBERS EXPRESS RESERVATIONS ABOUT ONLINE COURSE EVALUATIONS.
IN ORDER TO INCREASE FACULTY BUY IN, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO UNDERSTAND THE UNDERLYING REASONS FOR POSSIBLE RESISTANCE AND TO PROVIDE ANSWERS TO HELP DIFFUSE CONCERNS. THE FOLLOWING ARE RESEARCH-BASED ANSWERS TO FOUR MAJOR FACULTY CONCERNS ABOUT COURSE EVALUATIONS.

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Concern 1: The online method leads to a lower response rate [which may have some negative consequences for faculty].

Participation in online ratings is voluntary and requires student motivation to invest time and effort in completing the forms. Faculty are concerned that these conditions will produce a lower response rate that may reduce the reliability and validity of the ratings, and which may have some negative consequences for them.

The majority of studies on this issue found that indeed, *online ratings produce a lower response rate than in-class ratings* (Avery, Bryant, Mathios, Kang, & Bell, 2006; Benton, Webster, Gross, & Pallett, 2010; IDEA, 2011; Nulti, 2008). Explanations are that in-class surveys are based on a captive audience, and moreover, students in class are encouraged to participate by the mere presence of the instructor, his/her expressed pressure to respond, and peer pressure. In contrast, in online ratings, students lack motivation or compulsion to complete the forms or they may experience inconvenience and technical problems (Sorenson & Johnson, 2003).

In order to address this concern, we have provided resources:
- Top 10 Ways to Increase Response Rates
- Strategies for Student Participation

Concern 2: Dissatisfied/less successful students participate in the online method at a higher rate than other students**.**

Faculty are concerned that students who are unsuccessful, dissatisfied, or disengaged may be particularly motivated to participate in online ratings in order to rate their teachers low, blaming them for their own failure, disengagement, or dissatisfaction. Consequently, students with low opinions about the instructor will participate in online ratings at a substantially higher rate than more satisfied students.

If this concern is correct, then the majority of respondents in online surveys will rate the instructor and the course low, and consequently, the rating distribution will be skewed

towards the lower end of the rating scale. However, there is robust research evidence to the contrary (for both methods—on paper and online), that is, the distribution of student ratings on the Overall Teaching item is strongly skewed towards the higher end of the scale.

Online score distributions have the same shape as the paper distributions—a long tail at the low end of the scale and a peak at the high end. In other words, unhappy students do not appear to be more likely to complete the online ratings than they were to complete paper ratings (Linse, 2012).

The strong evidence that the majority of instructors are rated above the mean of the rating scale indicates that the majority of participants in online ratings are the more satisfied students, refuting faculty concerns about a negative response bias. Indeed, substantial research evidence shows that the better students, those with higher cumulative GPA or higher SAT scores, are more likely to complete online SRI forms than the less good/successful students (Adams & Umbach, 2012 ; Avery et al., 2006; Layne, DeCristoforo, & McGinty, 1999; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Sorenson & Reiner, 2003).

The author examined this issue at her university for all undergraduate courses in two large schools: Engineering and Humanities (Hativa, Many, & Dayagi, 2010). The number of participating courses was 110 and 230, respectively, for the two schools. At the beginning of the semester, all students in each of the schools were sorted into four GPA levels. The lowest 20% of GPAs in a school formed the Poor group whereas the highest 20%, the Excellent group. The two intermediate GPA levels formed, respectively, the Fair and Good groups, with 30% of the students in each. Results show that the rate of response for the Poor, Fair, Good and Excellent groups were respectively for the school of humanities: 35, 43, 43, and 50, and for the school of engineering: 48, 60, 66 and 72.

In sum, this faculty concern is refuted and even reversed—the higher the GPA, the larger the response rate in the online method so that the least successful students seem to participate in online ratings at a lower rate than better students.

Concern 3: The lower response rate (as in Concern 1) and the higher participation rate of dissatisfied students in online administration (as in Concern 2) will result in lower instructor ratings, as compared with in-class administration.

Faculty members are concerned that if the response rate is low (e.g., less than 40% as happens frequently in online ratings), the majority of respondents may be students with a low opinion of the course and the teacher, lowering the "true" mean rating of the instructor.

Research findings on differences in average rating scores between the two methods of survey delivery are inconsistent. Several studies found no significant differences (Avery et al., 2006; Benton et al., 2010; IDEA, 2011; Linse, 2010; Venette, Sellnow, & McIntyre, 2010). Other studies found that ratings were consistently lower in online than on paper, but that the size of the difference was either small and not statistically significant (Kulik, 2005) or large and statistically significant (Chang, 2004).

The conflicting findings among the different studies can be explained by differences in the size of the population examined in these studies (from dozens to several thousand courses), the different instruments used (some of them may be of lower quality), and the different research methods. Nonetheless, the main cause of variance between findings in the different studies is probably whether participation in SRI is mandatory or selective. If not all courses participate in the rating procedure rather only those selected by the department or self-selected by the instructor, the courses selected and their mean ratings may not be representative of the full course population and should not be used as a valid measure for comparison.

The author examined this issue in two studies that compared mean instructor ratings in paper- and online SRI administration based on her university data, with mandatory course participation. The results of both studies are presented graphically and reveal a strong decrease in annual mean and median ratings from paper to online administration. The lower online ratings cannot be explained by a negative response bias—by higher participation rate of dissatisfied students, because as shown above, many more good students participate in online ratings than poor students. A reasonable explanation is that online ratings are more sincere, honest, and free of teacher influence and social desirability bias than in-class ratings.

The main implication is that comparisons of course/teacher ratings can take place only within the same method of measurement—either on paper or online. In no way should ratings in both methods be compared. The best way to avoid improper comparisons is to use a single method of rating throughout all courses in an institution, or at least in a particular school or department.

CONCERN 4: THE LOWER RESPONSE RATE AND THE HIGHER PARTICIPATION RATE OF DISSATISFIED STUDENTS IN ONLINE ADMINISTRATION WILL RESULT IN FEWER AND MOSTLY NEGATIVE WRITTEN COMMENTS

Faculty members are concerned that because the majority of expected respondents are dissatisfied students, the majority of written comments will be negative (Sorenson & Reiner, 2003). An additional concern is that because of the smaller rate of respondents in online surveys, the total number of written comments will be significantly reduced compared to in-class ratings. The fewer the comments written by students, the lower the quality of feedback received by teachers as a resource for improvement.

There is a consensus among researchers that although mean online response rates are lower than in paper administration, more respondents write comments online than on paper. Johnson (2003) found that while 63% of the online rating forms included written student comments, only less than 10% of in-class forms included such comments. Altogether, the overall number of online comments appears to be larger than in the paper survey.

In Support:

- On average, classes evaluated online had more than five times as much written commentary as the classes evaluated on paper, despite the slightly lower overall response rates for the classes evaluated online (Hardy, 2003, p. 35).
- In addition, comments written online were found to be longer, to present more information, and to pose fewer socially desirable responses than in the paper method (Alhija & Fresko, 2009). Altogether, the larger number of written comments and their increased length and detail in the online method, provide instructors with more beneficial information and thus the quality of online written responses is better than that of in-class survey comments.

The following are four possible explanations for the larger number of online comments and for their better quality:

- No time constraints: During an online response session, students are not constrained by time and can write as many comments and at any length as they wish.
- Preference for typing over handwriting: Students seem to prefer typing (in online ratings) to handwriting comments.
- Increased confidentiality: Some students are concerned that the instructor will identify their handwriting if the comments are written on paper.
- Prevention of instructor influence: Students feel more secure and free to write the honest truth and candid responses online.

Regarding the favorability of the comments, students were found to submit positive, negative, and mixed written comments in both methods of rating delivery, with no predominance of negative comments in online ratings (Hardy, 2003). Indeed, for low-rated teachers—those perceived by students as poor teachers—written comments appear to be predominantly negative. In contrast, high-rated teachers receive only few negative comments and predominantly positive comments.

In sum, faculty beliefs about written comments are refuted—students write online more comments of better quality that are not mostly negative but rather represent the general quality of the instructor as perceived by students.

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