



Teaching Toolkit

Gathering Feedback 3

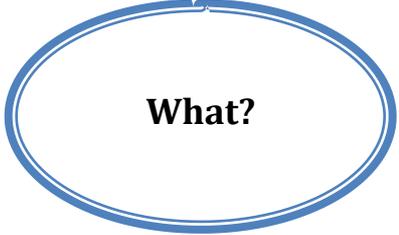
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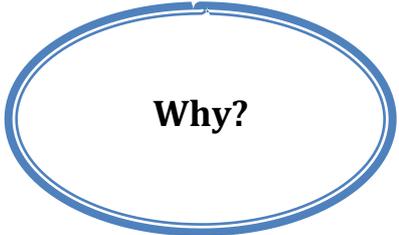
Gathering Feedback 3:

Student Evaluation of Teaching



What?

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) is conducted in universities worldwide (Abrami, Marilyn, & Raiszadeh, 2001; Hobson & Talbot, 2001). Interest in the area has been growing since the introduction of the practice almost a century ago (Kulik, 2001) and few issues have been more researched and debated (Clayson, 2009).



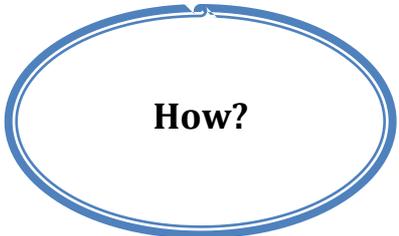
Why?

Often SET is used as a type of satisfaction-barometer, sounding the alarm when ratings drop too low (Edström, 2008). Such an approach to SET fails to recognise the true intended goals and the opportunities provided by the process. Bruner (1966) states that:

“Evaluation is often viewed as a test of effectiveness – of materials, teaching methods or whatnot – but this is the least important aspect of it. The most important is to provide intelligence on how to improve these things” (cited in Ramsden, 2003, p.223)

The primary purpose for engaging in SET is to gather information from students either to improve teaching practice (Youmans & Jee, 2007). SET is a non-judgemental process that invites students to provide a unique learner perspective on their module or course. Due to its ability to serve a number of functions it's important to clearly establish the purpose for conducting the evaluation at the outset, since this will influence the aims, objectives, and design of the process (Hounsell, 2003).

Formative evaluation, as previously established, is a tool that the lecturer can use to improve their teaching, and their students' learning, by gauging students' attitudes and levels of understanding. The information gathered is for the lecturer's own use. While this can be shared or discussed with colleagues, it should not be used as a quality performance indicator.

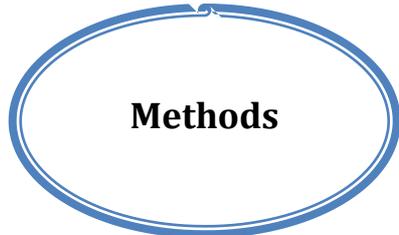


How?

Despite the availability of a wide range of methodologies there tends to be a continued reliance on the questionnaire approach (Smith, Welicker-Pollak, 2008). This is such that the terms 'student ratings of teaching', 'student feedback', and 'student evaluation of teaching' have become synonymous with the idea of data collection via questionnaire (Huxman, Laybourn, Cairncross, Gray, Brown, Goldfinch, & Earl, 2008).

Evaluations conducted by questionnaire tend to be more summative than formative, and as such, are better suited to an audit purpose (Richardson, 2005) than to a desire to develop and improve teaching practice. They tend to be comprised of standardised, closed questions which are more useful for quantifying teaching performance than providing suggestions on professional development as an educator.

MacLeod (2000) states that evaluation systems have to be aimed at developing teacher development. Any method which is employed to further this end can be deemed a formative approach to SET. While this can include open-ended questionnaires, more common formative methods tend to use some form of discussion (interviews, focus groups, formal or informal student-staff meetings), as well as an element of what Schön (1983) refers to as the reflective practitioner.



Methods

Most evaluation questionnaires in literature are quantitative ratings of dimensions of teaching & seem better suited to an audit purpose (Richardson, 2005). In formative SET qualitative approaches are favoured since the range of responses and ideas expressed are not limited to those designed by the lecturer.

The approaches should include an element of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983). This process of reflecting on student responses should be something lecturers should be frequently engaging in – the SET is merely an attempt to formalise the process (Ellery, 2006). Rather than resorting to the traditional questionnaire, several lesser used, but highly effective, formative options are outlined below.

Rapid Feedback

This is a very quick way to general feedback. Students have 5 minutes to identify what they like, dislike, or would change in the module. Their comments can be noted on paper or post-it notes and passed to the front of the class. This is a good method because of the ease & speed, and also the wide range of issues that are generated.

H Forms

Example of an H-Form:

Question: Does the weekly class test help you better understand the material?

Strengths [Perceived strengths are listed here]	Rating 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	Weaknesses [Perceived weaknesses are listed here]
Areas to develop [Aspects that could be changed or developed are listed here]		

The left side of the H is for positive comments, the right side is for negative comments, and the middle is aspects that could be improved. If desired the bar of the H can also be used as a quantitative scale (ranging from 0 to 10) for the question posed. An 'H' is provided for each question asked and feedback is provided in small groups. Students are generally positive about this as a means of SET data collection, and spend extra time and thought completing them (Huxman, Laybourn, Cairncross, Gray, Brown, Goldfinch, & Earl, 2008).

Interviews

An interview can be defined as a “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter 1970). There are many different forms of interview but the major distinction that can be made is between ‘structured’ or ‘focussed’ interviews and ‘unstructured’ or ‘exploratory’ interviews.

In a structured interview, the questions are set in advance and the interviewer does not deviate from these. The interviewer may ask for clarification or elaboration but, otherwise, remains ‘objective’ in the sense of not trying to influence what the respondent says.

An unstructured interview is a spontaneous or free-flowing conversation rather than a specific set of questions asked in a predetermined order. Questions are adjusted according to how the respondent is reacting. Consequently, in a series of interviews, respondents might be asked very different things.

The semi-structured interview is the compromise - the general content and order of questions is pre-determined but deviations for additional exploration is allowed. This form of interview is particularly useful in situations where there is a broad understanding of what is not known and / or a broad consensus over what constitutes the key issues to be investigated.

Focus Groups

A focus group is:

... a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research. (Powell et al 1996 p 499)

This emphasis on organised discussion as a key aspect of focus groups was also noted by (Kitzinger 1994) and, given Dexter's definition of an interview as a "conversation with a purpose" (1970 p136), focus groups can be seen as a form of group interview guided by a group facilitator known as a 'moderator'. The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example one-to-one interviewing or questionnaire surveys.

Focus groups probably work best if they consist of between six and ten participants. If possible, a neutral location should be used in order to avoid either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building (Powell & Single 1996).

In order for focus groups to function effectively, they need to have a skilful and effective 'moderator'.

Structured Discussions

There are popular formats for structured discussions:

1. *Structured Group Feedback Meetings* take between 45 and 90 minutes and: [Give] students the opportunity to contribute to the feedback equally and with a degree of anonymity. It also gives them time to think through their own views before being confronted with other people's. It puts extreme and minority views to the test. It gives the teacher a more neutral role and ensures that the outcome is recorded fully. (Gibbs, 1988, p69)

The process is as follows:

- Step 1:** Working alone, students make individual responses to questions about their course.
- Step 2:** Working in groups of about 4, students record those comments which receive majority support within the group. No comment may be recorded which does not receive majority support.
- Step 3:** In plenary, the teacher takes, in turn, one point under each of the headings from each of the groups. If a majority of the whole group agrees with the statement it is recorded. If it fails to receive majority support it is discarded. The process is repeated until all comments from all groups have been exhausted. The whole group is then invited to make adjustments to the overall picture that has emerged.

2. *Nominal Group Technique* is a structured process for identifying and ranking the major problems or issues that a group feels need to be addressed. Its great strength is that it provides each participant with an equal voice and has a focus on future remedial action.

The process is as follows:

- Step 1:** Students are presented with a question or asked to state the problem or issue they feel is most important. Each individual member of the group writes down their own response. If they have more than one response then they should be asked to rank them in order of importance. Discussion is not permitted at this.
- Step 2:** Participants form groups of 6 – 10 and a leader is selected/elected. Without discussion, each group pools their responses to form a composite list. Individuals may make additional responses but this must not be allowed to develop into a discussion. The aim is to compile as large a list as possible.
- Step 3:** After the leader has clarified points and each person understands the points listed, each participant ranks the top five problems or issues by assigning 5 points to their most important perceived problem and 1 point the least important of their top five
- Step 4:** Results are tallied by adding the points for each problem or issue. The problem or issue with the highest number is the most important one for that group
- Step 5:** The group discuss the results and generate a final ranked list of five responses which will be reported to plenary.
- Step 6:** In plenary, all groups come together and the ranked lists of responses are pooled. Overlapping items can be combined or composited. A second 5 point voting system is operated. The outcome is an overall ranking of issues which reflects the concerns of the whole group.
- Step 7:** Participants are asked to brainstorm possible future actions (e.g. changes in the course) that should follow. These are recorded and forwarded to the decision makers.

The Follow Up

Frequently so much attention is focused on the methods used, and on the distribution and collection of data the final and most important step is often neglected. Improvement is only possible when consciously used as part of an aligned set of strategies (Edström, 2008) – the evaluation is only the first part.

Much SET doesn't close the feedback loop (Watson, 2003). Students' feedback should be analysed, acted upon, and the results and actions communicated back to students. The information fed back to students need not be terribly detailed in nature – a list of bullet points summarising the key issues, main findings and actions to be taken will often suffice. Some of the issues raised by students may be quite easily and quickly addressed and evidence of the actions that are being taken should be made explicit to students.

Other issues that arise may not be so easily addressed and may require attention and action over an extended period of time. As long as the plan of action is outlined to students and the reasons for any possible delay(s) explained students will continue to attach value to the evaluative process (Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005). By closing the loop students appreciate the value of the importance and are more likely to participate constructively in future SET rather than using the process to vent frustration (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008).

Lecturers also have to be prepared to open-up to other lecturers and to discuss student feedback (Smith & Krumsvik, 2007). Smith, Welicker-Pollak (2008) found that most lecturers don't seek any support or advice from colleagues. To engage in 'core reflection' (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) requires reflection at numerous levels, from a person level, to professional identity, and activities engaged in. This can only be fully realised by engaging in supportive dialogue with colleagues and to ensuring that feedback is more than a managerial instrument used for accountability (Smith, 2005; Smith & Krumsvik, 2007).