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Are Mid-Term Student Surveys About my Teaching a Good Idea?

This article presents what the research says on how helpful the act of getting feedback from students on your teaching methods is for improving your teaching. It looks like the definitive research on this topic was done some time ago and has been confirmed in a few recent studies. The kind of survey we're talking about is one the instructor creates and administers, that asks for student feedback on learning activities, teaching approaches, and assessment methods rather than rating overall teaching effectiveness. Typical end-of-term Student Opinion Surveys focus on the latter, and are less useful to instructors than midterm feedback about course-specific teaching methods and learning activities (Keutzer, 239).

Cohen's meta-analysis of the scholarly literature on this topic found many advantages for instructors of mid-term surveys, including:

- They improve teaching effectiveness (Cohen 322).
- Instructors feel more intellectual satisfaction at addressing teaching frustrations (Cohen, 323).
- Instructors feel more competent.
- Feedback at mid-term on teaching skill combined with instructor feedback provided to students about what was done with the feedback have the largest impact on subsequent teaching effectiveness of a wide range of options for implementing these surveys (Cohen 336).
- They improve student attitudes towards the course and the subject matter (Cohen, 322). Efforts to improve instruction are viewed positively by students, and students feel they have a stake in the rating process. This spills over into improved attitudes towards subject (Cohen, 332). Students feel empowered (Harris and Stevens, 542); and may favorably alter their attitudes toward the instructor and the teaching process (Keutzer, 239).

Whether mid-term surveys improve student performance is more of an open question. Cohen, p. 334 says this issue is tracked in too few studies, and the more recent research cited does not study this issue. Mid-term surveys do, however, improve instructor end-of-term SOS scores (Cohen 332; Harris and Stevens 542).

Instructor Experiences with Mid-Term Teaching Feedback Surveys

A survey of 82 instructors at a US university of 16,000 students who received mid-term feedback found: (Diamond, 223ff)

- 45% stated they gained insight into the student perspective.
- 31% found teaching approaches and techniques feedback the most helpful (what works, what could be improved and how).

- 22% learned about some specific instructional techniques.
- 35% made changes to in-class teaching techniques.
- 31% modified tests, assignments, or grading.
- 16% modified course material and how it was addressed in class.
- 10% explained course objectives and rationales to students more clearly and completely.

Mid-Term Survey Question Examples

The mid-term surveys used by those 82 instructors cited above asked these questions:

1. What aspects of this course/instruction enhance your learning?
2. What aspects of this course/instruction could be improved?
3. What could you – as a student – do to make the course better for yourself, your classmates, and the lecturer?

Harris and Stevens (p. 547) asked questions on these topics in a paper survey, one page, double-sided:

- Course expectations (clear idea of expectations, comments on what helped know expectations)
- Course performance (clear idea of how you are doing)
- Course workload (knowledge of workload)
- Assignment instructions (written assignments, class discussions, class case studies, team case studies, team projects)
- Teamwork (open- and closed-ended questions)

Keutzer (p. 239) asked these questions about whether the instructor:

- Speaks clearly, audibly, and at a pace comfortable for students
- Uses eye contact
- Listens carefully to students' comments and questions
- Repeats students' comments so that the entire class can hear
- Allows an appropriate amount of time for students to get information from overheads
- Provides continuity from one class to the next
- Writes clear, unambiguous exam questions

Implementation Considerations

The surveys should, of course, be anonymous. Anonymity may be difficult to maintain in small classes.

For mid-term surveys to work, the instructor must report the main findings back to the class, and say what has been changed as a result of the survey (Keutzer, 239). Students will see that their input is important and be more positively disposed to you for taking their feedback into account. The exercise also helps students think about the process of learning and how they learn individually, if they haven't considered this before. They come to see learning as a 2-way partnership between instructor and students, rather than a process in which they are passive recipients. This may help nudge them along the path to becoming self-managing, lifelong learners.

When presenting findings to your class, summarize positives but read negative comments in their entirety. Publicly acknowledge shared irritants (Keutzer, 240).

Mid-term feedback must tell instructor something new, or that differs from their self-perceptions of teaching effectiveness, in order to have impact on improving instruction (Cohen 323).

In terms of survey format, paper or online, students are more likely to include more information in comment boxes online than on paper surveys because it's faster and easier to input words online (Bullock, 95).

This is an excellent resource for mid-term survey creation from Michigan State University:

<http://fod.msu.edu/oir/mid-term-student-feedback>

References

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