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Lian Hee Wee

Hong Kong Baptist University, lianhee@hkbu.edu.hk

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PROFILE-ESTABLISHING TEACHING EVALUATIONS

L.H. Wee

Department of English Language and Literature, Hong Kong Baptist University

ABSTRACT

There are two problems with most Teaching Evaluations (TE) today: (i) students, who lack professional training, are asked to provide evaluations on the professional capabilities of the teachers and (ii) students are asked to evaluate teachers along the same standards for every discipline. This paper explains how both problems can be solved by TE questionnaires that aim at deriving classroom dynamic profiles rather than evaluating the teaching or teachers. The effectiveness of the teacher may then be measured by the deviation from desired profiles without prejudice to demanding teachers and subjects that are inversely related to student popularity. This allows for evaluations to vary with the subject matter taught while relieving students of the burden of assessing the teacher's professional capabilities. In order for such TEs to be done efficiently, such an evaluation form should require students to rank statements that describe classroom and learning situations rather than to have them assess certain qualities on a scale.

KEYWORDS

Teaching Evaluation, Classroom Dynamics, Discipline specific, Profile-establishing, Student feedback, Quality education

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues for a Teaching Evaluation¹ (TE) where students provide information on the classroom dynamics rather than an actual evaluation of the teacher and/or the teaching. Such a move is desirable given the two main problems presented in the ensuing paragraphs.

TWO ASPECTS AND THEIR PROBLEMS

Hitch 1: Asking too much of the students

In the pursuit for quality education, it is necessary to obtain information about the teacher's teaching from the direct observers of the class. Only students can play such a role. However, one must be careful to note that students are incapable of judging the teacher's professional ability as educators and as scholars in the field. And yet, this is exactly what some teaching evaluations are doing when they ask students to score on a scale if "the teacher has taught me to think critically"; if "the teacher has shown in-depth knowledge in the subject"; or on "the overall teaching effectiveness of the teacher". Students, however, are capable of expressing their responses to the teaching they receive. They could accurately state their subjective feelings of being confused, frustrated, intimidated, guided, encouraged or challenged.

I am reminded of Dr. Alex Alsina, who taught me syntax when I was an undergraduate in NUS (1994-98). Dr. Alsina was then already an established expert in linguistics, and certainly one of its finest teachers. However, there were students who judged him to be a mediocre scholar because he took great care, and therefore time, to formulate his response to their questions.

It is clear that while the feedback from students is important, it can only come about if TEs ask questions that students can answer.

Hitch 2: Rigidity

The same quantitative TE questionnaire is given to every student in the institution, with each response ranging from the most positive to the least. Such a structure presupposes that all disciplines and all educational goals require the same teaching method. Consider the following statements:

- (1) The teacher has provided clear explanations of important issues/principles in the subject.

Is (1) a definite virtue? Clearly, (1) would be bad for subjects that seek to inculcate the habits of independent learning by pointing learners towards resources instead of providing answers.

¹ Note that TE should not be used for assessing learning outcomes. Learning outcomes can only be obtained by assessing student-learning (through examinations etc), not by evaluating the teacher's teaching strategies and effectiveness.

Different disciplines at different levels require different training. If education in any field consists of propositional knowledge, relevant skills and philosophy for establishing new knowledge, then clearly a single-value TE does not fit all purposes. Also, such single-value TEs allow for vengeful students to undermine a teacher's good work by simply giving a low score to everything.

PROFILE-ESTABLISHING TE

What is needed for effective evaluation is a Profile-Establishing TE (PETE), where students provide information on the classroom dynamics, something within their ability since it involves no value judgment on their part. PETE thus obtains students' descriptions of what it is like to be in class without bias against strict teachers and tough subjects (see PETE sample below). Obtaining such a profile allows the evaluator (say the Head of Dept etc) to match the profile with the desired teaching method. Here's an example.

Suppose that one of the objectives of a module like "Introduction to Chinese Language" is to get students to evaluate the belief that Standard Mandarin is superior to dialects. Now consider the following statements:

- (2) The teacher stressed that dialects are linguistically not inferior to Mandarin.
- (3) The teacher asked for evidence to believe that dialects are linguistically inferior.

(3) would indicate that the teacher was not replacing one doctrine with another, unlike (2). By asking for evidence, the teacher would be teaching the students to think independently and critically about any claim/belief. However, if the objective is to familiarize students with a list of propositional knowledge, then profiles consistent with (2) would be desirable.

It should be clear that PETE avoids the problems faced by the traditional surveys. However, there may be concerns on how one would have to execute PETE. Firstly, students are generally reluctant to write lots of prose. Secondly, is there a way for establishing profiles that could be statistically compiled and interpreted?

The answer to both questions lies in the structuring of questions. To illustrate, consider the following PETE sample.

Profile-Establishing Teaching Evaluation	
<p>Instructions: For each question, please rank the statements provided on a scale. Use 1 to indicate most appropriate and subsequent numbers in diminishing appropriateness.</p>	
<p>Section 1: Interaction Profile</p>	
Question 1	Ranking
(A) The teacher asks lots of questions in class.	
(B) Students ask lots of questions in class.	
(C) The teacher provides lots of information about the topic under discussion.	
Question 2	Ranking
(A) The teacher responds directly to student query.	
(B) The teacher gives the students clear instructions on how to find answers to their queries.	
(C) Teacher restrains from answering questions when appropriate.	
Question 3	Ranking
(A) The teacher is accessible electronically.	
(B) The teacher is accessible in person.	
(C) I don't have the habit of meeting with the teacher.	
(D) The teacher is inaccessible.	
<p>Section 2: Off-classroom learning dynamics</p>	
Question 4	Ranking
(A) I actively engage in discussion with my classmates.	
(B) I actively learn alone.	
(C) My classmates actively engage in discussion with me.	
Question 5	Ranking
(A) I read all the obligatory readings.	
(B) There is too much obligatory reading.	
(C) Readings are mostly optional.	
(D) I read outside of obligatory readings for the subject.	

Figure 1: Sample of a Profile-Establishing TE

Many improvements can be done to the above sample. However, it should be clear that such a structure would make it possible to statistically plot a profile of the teacher's teaching which can then be matched with the learning objectives of the module. Take Question 1 for example. There is no reason to believe (A) is more important than (B) or (C), it all depends on the level of independent thinking desired as the learning outcome. Likewise, Question 4 does not require that teachers always get a high-ranking for any of the statements. Independent Study

modules could arguably prefer a high ranking of (B) while other modules may prefer a high ranking of (C).

Since these rankings are done numerically, it would be easy to obtain statistics for each question. These statistics could then be translated into a clearer picture of the teaching profile. With those statistics, administrators can easily rank teachers (if such ranking is desirable and necessary) by the degree of deviation from the target profiles.

ESTABLISHING A TARGET PROFILE

Given all the above, evaluation is possible only if a target profile is established for each subject. One way to obtain desired profile for comparison would be to get the teacher to fill in a TE at the onset of the semester. Statistics obtained from student feedback may then be matched against this. This process does not guarantee that the teacher's desired profile is most optimal for the subject being taught. However, it does give the institution a clear indication on the teacher's education philosophy on the subject and a clear indication on whether that teacher has been effective in reaching that self-set goal. Should it be the case that the teacher's chosen target profile conflicts with the institution's, then an explicit statement of justification could be requested from both parties.

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