



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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IMPLEMENTING ONLINE EVALUATION FORMS TO INCREASE STUDENT FEEDBACK

Nearly all postsecondary institutions use student evaluations of teaching (SETs), and nearly all are expanding their online course offerings. Unfortunately, these two efforts to improve instruction can sometimes collide, as was happening at Okaloosa-Walton Community College (OWCC). The increasing use of technology was decreasing student feedback.

It was ironic that our efforts to improve the web-based course offerings to serve online learners inadvertently decreased their opportunities to provide feedback about their satisfaction with their classes. As faculty gained expertise in online instruction and the WebCT platform, several made their final exams available online. This advance in technology integration and student convenience reduced online student feedback. In the past, OWCC had gathered SETs about web-based courses when online students met with their instructors for final exams. However, with web-based course finals online, opportunity to give feedback disappeared. Even students taking face-to-face finals and filling out a SET instrument were using a survey designed to evaluate more traditional courses.

The Solution

OWCC's solution was to put a SET survey online, tailored to web-based courses. Our objectives were to obtain an SET survey tailored to online learning, encourage participation and a sense of ownership among faculty teaching online, and maximize the response rate among students.

During the pilot project in spring 2002, we encountered several challenges:

- students' difficulties accessing the survey
- students' perception of anonymity
- supervisors' difficulties with accessing the data
- instructors' difficulties with accessing the data

- instructors' concerns about confidentiality, and
- security of the evaluation process.

The Process

Our first goal was to find or develop a SET instrument tailored to online classes. Rather than reinvent the proverbial wheel, the college requested and received permission from the South Dakota Board of Regents to use its online evaluation form. Our second goal was to encourage faculty participation in the project, so we surveyed all OWCC instructors who teach online.

We included different disciplines and course structures, specifically self-paced and more traditionally structured courses—including a self-paced humanities art course, an Internet research course, and traditionally structured classes in English composition, philosophy, and microcomputer skills.

We considered where the survey should be placed and finally chose between hosting the survey in each instructor's course or creating a separate "course," or shell. The advantages to hosting the survey in a separate course were significant—it would reduce students' perceptions that instructors would be able to identify participating students; and management of the survey, particularly facilitating supervisors' access to the collected data, would be simpler. Clearly, placing the survey in a separate course was going to be impractical: students would have to register for the new course—a task with which they had difficulty, even at orientation where instructors were present to help. Asking students to repeat the process without any on-site help, weeks after their initial registration process, was unfair and troublesome. Therefore, the SET survey was placed in each instructor's course.

This decision had its advantages and disadvantages. The major advantage was that student participation in the survey was straightforward. They simply clicked on the survey icon on a course's homepage and completed their SET. Instructors could see the completed surveys immediately, receiving timely feedback. And the project coordinator, a faculty member, would not have access to other instructors' courses. Aware of potential faculty



concerns about confidentiality, we believed this feature to be a most significant advantage.

However, placing the survey into each course created some difficulties. The project coordinator's lack of access, while alleviating faculty concerns about privacy, made administration of the evaluation process cumbersome. She could not place the survey nor maintain it once it was there; consequently, a technical support person had to perform these tasks and print out hard copies of the collected data for the senior administrators overseeing the project. Second, aware of instructors' concerns about one of their peers coordinating the evaluation of their courses, we decided against the coordinator's sending an e-mail (sent by the technical support staff), alerting students to the survey instrument and requesting that they participate. Instead, each instructor e-mailed instructions and an assurance of anonymity. Although we believed that this measure increased a sense of ownership of the project among the faculty, we realized that we sacrificed consistency in the instructions and probably increased students' perception that their instructors were involved in the evaluation process. Our last concern was security. It was possible, although unlikely, that instructors could create a student identity and submit evaluations of their own courses.

The Results

Despite our concern that students would be concerned about the anonymity of the survey, we had a response rate of 73% for courses that were not self-paced; self-paced courses had significantly lower response rates. We hope that by requesting participation at the beginning of self-paced courses and making the survey available throughout the class, we can increase response rates. Placing the surveys in the instructors' courses and having instructors e-mail students the request for participation probably lowered the response rate for all classes; students were concerned that instructors could identify survey participants. In the future, we anticipate that the vice-president for instruction will send an e-mail to all students, thus achieving consistency in the instructions and reducing students' fears about anonymity.

A Better Solution

Fall 2002, we intend to turn administration of the survey over to the technical support staff and host the survey outside WebCT, using ColdFusion. Using ColdFusion, we can place the survey onto a web page, and the collected data will be sent to an Access database automatically. In the last week of class, students will

receive an e-mail from the vice-president for instruction, notifying them of the survey, requesting their participation, and giving instructions and a hyperlink to the survey. (Students in self-paced classes will receive this e-mail during the first week of classes.) Clicking on the link, students will see a new window, outside WebCT, which will present them with the survey. By constructing queries in the Access database, survey administrators will be able to present the data in meaningful form to each instructor and supervisor at the end of final exam week.

Eventually, it is possible that these end-of-term SETs will be supplemented by short evaluations throughout the semester, providing assessments that can affect learning during that course in that semester. These periodic questions can address observable behaviors, such as the length of time students have to wait for an instructor's e-mail response, as well as students' impressions of the course's value. Obtaining information throughout the semester provides a more accurate view of the class, and a learner's relief or resentment over a grade will not skew the survey results.

Conclusions

SETs will be with us for the foreseeable future. They help institutions satisfy accreditation requirements and aid instructors in improving teaching and learning. It is critical, however, that all students—traditional and online—have access to these instruments. At OWCC, we believe we have found a strategy that increases student access to the evaluation process and increases instructor and supervisor access to the feedback, while maintaining security, student anonymity, and instructor confidentiality.

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