

Suggestions for Improving the Student Course Evaluations

Yuki Nose & Mitsumune Sakae (University of Tokushima)

The student course evaluations (SCE) have been carried out in each semester in the University of Tokushima some time now. Usually carried out in all our courses, most students get tired of answering these questionnaires. However, these SCEs are an important tool to better our courses from the students' perspectives and for university students to have their voices heard. The SCEs are said to have started after the enactment of the Standards for the Establishment of Universities in 1991, and since has rapidly spread throughout all university campuses in Japan. Unfortunately, the evaluations currently being carried out are not being used for class improvement.

The motto for our team 'e-act (education act)' which is a student support team in the University of Tokushima and one of the few student organizations in the University is 'Students Supporting Students.' We have been working towards create better campus facilities and learning environments. Thus, we assist other university students and learn from them on a daily basis as well as communicate frequently with University faculty and staff. We have also been planning and implementing a variety of Faculty Development events, as well as setting up counseling sessions for our fellow students. While implementing these activities, we had come to the conclusion that there was need to plan a discussion to rethink the significance of SCEs. Therefore, we held an event called *The Ways! Café* with the theme: The Purpose of Student Course Evaluations. We present in this monograph the methods of improving the student course evaluations below.

Challenges and Problems

Thirteen students from the Faculty of Integrated Arts and Sciences participated in our discussion. During the discussion, we formed smaller groups of about five students and discussed our theme. Each group had a large blank white sheet of paper readily available to freely jot down ideas while discussing, and we also had research articles and SCE results available for objective reference. Each group conducted an active exchange of opinions. The beginning of the discussion centered on the current status of the SCEs; for instance, we checked the format of the student course evaluation currently being administered by the Faculty of Integrated Arts and Sciences and thought about its purpose. We came to a conclusion that some items in the survey were not appropriate for the evaluations. Then, opinions such as publicizing

the results, increasing the time to fill out the questionnaire, getting teachers to put more thought and effort into the evaluations they administer to improve their classes started to evolve gradually shifting into the second part of our discussion.

Proposed Improvement Measures

The second half of our discussion concerned improvement ideas for the SCEs based on the first half of our discussion. We felt a drastic improvement of the questionnaire was necessary. Thus, we made a few proposals for improvements that were feasible. For instance, we thought it was critical to raise the awareness of each teacher and their students concerning the purpose of the SCEs. As mentioned above, many teachers said they were only administering the SCEs because they were forced to by university administration making them passive. Also, we found that many students believe that results from these evaluations would not change anything making them passive. Thus, it is essential to reconsider the significance of the questionnaire on both sides.

We also made the following two proposals for improving the evaluation. First, in order to raise awareness among the teachers, we suggest administrators conduct a survey about the SCEs to the teachers themselves to raise awareness. This questionnaire should ask teachers what they think are the problems of the current student course evaluations and ways to improve it. This will also become a reflection for the teachers, and if their suggestions are implemented their awareness of the student course evaluations would rise. In other words, the first thing to do would be to elicit the honest opinions of the actual teachers who administer the SCEs. This awareness raising would make it possible to encourage the teachers to actively use the student feedback and ultimately improve their classes.

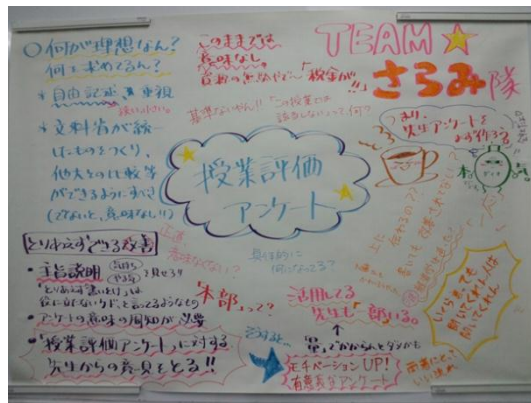
Second, to raise the awareness of the students who actually fill-out the SCEs, we suggest the results be publicized for all students and other teachers to view. When doing so, there should be information on how the data-analysis was handled. This would allow students to feel their voices actually being heard, and in turn would improve motivation into answering the questionnaire. Hopefully, this improved motivation for the teachers and students would lead to improvements in the SCEs as a whole. However, it would be difficult to determine how much of the comments to publish, especially if there were any inappropriate comments.

Initially, the SCEs were conducted for the purpose of the teachers to reflect on their courses from the student perspective to improve future courses. This purpose could be used as a reflection in the form of a Faculty Development activity held together with students. Unfortunately, the current SCEs are not serving this purpose due to various factors, especially those mentioned above. Again, we speculate the biggest reason being the lack of awareness of its purpose on part of the teachers and students. Thus, in order to improve classes using the

student course evaluations, we have to rethink its significance. The most important thing is for each student and teacher to put more effort into using the questionnaire as a chance to improve their courses. As a first step, perhaps we should not be satisfied with the current situation. The evaluations and ultimately university education will not improve in its current state. Certainly, all students hope for better lessons and a high-quality university education. We can take this first step towards bettering the status-quo by rethinking the student course evaluations.



Picture 1. Ways! Café Discussion



Picture 2: Student opinions of the questionnaire

References

Mitsumune, S., Takagi, M., Nose, Y., Inoue, Y., Abe, M., & Yoshida, H., (2012). Supporting learning by students. *Proceedings of University Education Conference in Tokushima* 2011, 44-45.