Student evaluation questionnaires and the developing world: An examination of the move from a hard copy to online modality

Erik Blair *, Kimila Inniss

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

A B S T R A C T

Universities typically use student evaluation questionnaires (SEQs) as tools for gathering data for course improvement. Since 2002 SEQs have predominantly been used in online modalities in the developed world. However, the developing world has historically had issues with the reliability of information communication technology (ICT), such that this is the first generation to experience ICT as a dependable commodity. This research is located in a university in Trinidad and Tobago where further historical and contextual matters are at play. Results from a pilot online student evaluation system found that students were just as likely to use online SEQs as they were their hard copy equivalents, and that future students are more likely to favour the online format.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

The significance of the student voice has grown in recent years such that student perspectives are now considered valid insights into the teaching and learning experience (Cook-Sather, 2006). Universities typically collect such information through a student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ). SEQs are an important means of assessing courses and lecturers and providing formative feedback for future improvement and, as such, their worth should be apparent. SEQs predominantly collect quantitative and qualitative data that show how the student body has assessed courses, teaching and lecturers. Kember, Leung and Kwan (2002) report that feedback can improve the quality of the teaching and that universities should feel an obligation to hear the voice of their students. SEQs are stable formats (Piccinin, Cristi & McCoy, 1999) that offer valid indicators of the quality and effectiveness of teaching practice (Greenwald, 2002; Marsh & Bailey, 1993); however, if an evaluation system is not working to its full potential, the significance of the student voice may be diminished. The challenge for universities is for there to be an evaluation system that allows students' voices to be heard and for lecturers to feel empowered to act on such feedback (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008) and for all this to be to the betterment of each individual actor and the organisation as a whole.

The problem with student evaluation data is in knowing the influence that it may have on practice. Schön (1987) suggests that reflection can enhance practice and that two of the key ways this can happen are through reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action involves practitioners making reflective judgements whilst they are teaching. Reflection-on-action happens after the fact and allows practitioners to look back over what has happened with an eye to improve future practice. From this perspective, SEQs are tools that inform reflection-on-action and can, therefore, lead to pragmatic change where the power and agency of the student voice could be used as 'the motor that drives staff development' (Verill, 2007, p.79) and offer significant contributions to curriculum development (Campbell, Beasley, Eland, & Rumpus, 2007).

The importance of giving prompt feedback has been noted as being beneficial to development and motivation in students (Draper, 2009; Jordan & Mitchell, 2009) and, since most positions in the behaviourist-constructivist spectrum hold that teaching is a learning activity, the same is likely to be true in regards to the use of feedback to support the development and motivation of lecturers. Here evaluation systems need to be timely procedures so that resultant data can be reported to lecturers whilst it is still relevant. Delaying feedback means there is no real closure of the feedback loop and that errors in practice are repeated and established (Scheeler & Lee, 2002). Evaluation data may eventually be returned to lecturers but attempts to close the feedback loop can be exacerbated by a process where action and feedback are separated by a significant period of time (Watson, 2003); therefore, the sooner formative information is provided the more effective it

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 868 662 2002x3985.
E-mail address: erik.blair@sta.uwi.edu (E. Blair).

is (Phye & Andre, 1989). Indeed, Azevedo and Bernard (1995, p. 122) state that 'immediate delivery of a feedback message provides the best instructional advantage' a view that is also supported by Kulik and Kulik (1988).

For a student evaluation system to work it needs to hold a certain value. If students don't see the impact of their feedback (through improvements in courses and in teaching) then they are less likely to complete future feedback forms (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). If lecturers have to wait a significant period of time before their data has been analysed and returned, there might be a disconnect between the course as it was taught and the feedback. This disconnect might lead to the devaluing of the returned data such that remedial actions are not implemented as suggested. In such an instance, the lack of closure of the feedback loop 'creates a climate in which students do not take the existing feedback mechanisms seriously' (Tucker et al., 2008, p. 283). One measure that is part of the higher education zeitgeist is that of 'impact' and we might consider, in this instance, that the impact of an evaluation system may be challenged if a lengthy turn-around-time (TAT) leads to feedback that is disconnected from its source. There are two ways in which the TAT of any evaluation system might be reduced: through an increase in manpower and through a review of the process itself. The former is likely to be an expensive way of addressing development and the latter involves the challenge of the new.

Improvements in information communication technology (ICT) have seen SEQs move from hard copy to online formats, such that in 2002 Thorpe reported online SEQs to be the norm in higher education (Thorpe, 2002). This has meant that the physical administration of paper-led processes has been slimmed down, leaving the focus of the evaluation system fixed on completion, analysis and reporting rather than administrative and procedural tasks (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004). Not only has the movement to using online SEQs sharpened the focus of the evaluation process but it has brought significant improvements in the time it takes for the process to be completed (Kuhtman, 2004). Further, in attempting to close the feedback loop through reducing turn-around-time, we might consider the quality of the data that is produced by both hard copy and online modalities. Here we find that there is no real difference in quantitative sections of the evaluation questionnaires but that students tend to provide more detailed qualitative responses when using an online evaluation system (Hmieleski & Champagne, 2000; Layne, DeCristoforo, & McGinty, 1999).

In considering a move from hard copy to online modalities, it is worth considering the challenges that online systems face. In general online surveys tend to have low response rates (Henderson, 2001) which can mean that they might not be able to produce a viable body of evidence. Another challenge takes a semi-Luddite form where labour-saving technology is shunned simply because it is new. But, in the digital age, such technologies are not really 'new' and the move to an online evaluation system is actually a chance to keep in step with modernity. Research into online student evaluations of university teaching has produced a wealth of literature that tends to pivot around two key points: online systems are quicker but response rates are not always as high as might be hoped (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Henderson, 2001). A useful baseline measure was established in a meta-analysis of online surveys where Sheehan (2001) noted that the average response rate to an online survey was 36.8%. Also, in an age of austerity, Dommeyer et al. (2004) offer some condolence and the 'risk' of adopting a new model is somewhat sweetened by the prospect of reduced running costs. Once an online evaluation system is established, many of the costs of hard copy methods can be avoided, i.e. the costs of printing, distributing, collecting, scanning and storing the paper based questionnaires. The online

method of gathering student evaluations has numerous advantages over the traditional in-class method; however, the move from hard copy to online SEQs should also be considered in relation to the learning context.

Student evaluation questionnaires in context

With the movement to online SEQs, the developed world has, for the last decade, moved the focus of student evaluation systems from process to impact, but in developing nations the movement from hard copy to online modalities has only recently been problematised (Akbaba-Altun, 2006). Whilst the developed world embraces Web 3.0 and 4G mobile technology, in much of the developing world ICT has only recently emerged as a stable and reliable entity (Agbele, Nyongesa, & Adesina, 2009) and, for many developing nations, this is the first generation that has been able to truly embrace ICT usage (Andrade & Urquhart, 2010). Technology, primarily in the form of mobile technology, has now become commonplace within private life but many developing nations have identified skills gaps in relation to the steering of emerging digital technologies at the national and regional level (Mutula & van Brakel, 2007) and established institutions have found it difficult to move to ICT-enabled practices (Ganpat, Ragbir, & de Freitas, 2009).

This study reports the results of an online SEQ pilot at a university in Trinidad and Tobago. The university is divided into five faculties with 12,472 undergraduate students (4449 males and 8023 females) and 4985 postgraduate students (1957 males and 4025 females) enrolled either full-time or part-time during the period under study (2012/13). Undergraduate programmes last three years and entry is free to students as fees are paid directly to the university by the Government. During the Academic Year 2012/13, 97.5% of the students were from the Caribbean region and 92% were Trinbagonian (home) students. This means that the predominant 'culture' of the university reflects that of the nation. The university's recently established evaluation system was a major step forward in allowing the student voice to be heard but had been developed as a hard copy process and, as such, faced issues of lengthy TAT and (possibly) reduced impact. A pilot was undertaken to ascertain whether an online format would not only reduce TAT and help to close the feedback loop but would be a format that students would be willing to adopt. Trinidad and Tobago has been an independent nation since gaining its independence from Britain in 1962; however 'colonialism does not end with political independence' (London, 2002, p. 68) and many of the practices put in place whilst under colonial rule remain woven through the national fabric. Signs of the former coloniser remain evident in the bureaucracy and officialdom that permeate all levels of society (Brown & Conrad, 2007; George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003) with much official business being recorded in ledgers and 'legal' paper (in triplicate, quadruplicate and even nonuplicate). While the developed world looks towards the paperless office nirvana, the workflow in Trinidad and Tobago is paperful and the systems centralised and hierarchical (Amadio, 2009; Rampersad, 2010). The education system of Trinidad and Tobago is likewise a product of the colonial past (Brown & Conrad, 2007; Jules, 2008) and shows a predisposition for 'traditional' teaching and didacticism (Jennings, 2001; Roberts, 2003). Within such a context it is no surprise to find that student evaluation systems are still in their infancy and were (recently) designed as hard copy formats.

The implementation of the hard copy SEQ at the university was fully established in the Academic Year 2010/11 and involves gathering student evaluations of each course taught during each semester. Typically each year of an undergraduate programme of study is made up of 12 courses, six in semester 1 and six in