Better Use of Student Evaluations for Teaching Effectiveness

MARCIA ANN PULICH

In introducing material on performance appraisals in the junior/senior personnel management classes that I teach, I always ask this question: "How many of you [students] have ever formally evaluated someone's performance in writing?" Seldom do more than a half dozen hands go up from forty or more students. When asked whether or not they have ever filled out a teacher evaluation form, of course, all hands go up. It is an alarming thought that students complete teacher evaluations and do not associate this activity with appraising performance. It is even more alarming when one realizes that these students are juniors and seniors, and have been evaluating their professors' performances for at least the last two years.

As performance appraisals, teacher evaluations are used to make career decisions regarding faculty members. Teacher evaluations are considered in reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions. These teacher evaluations should be handled in a professional manner, or problems such as inconsistency or halo effect may result. Sometimes the scores are the results of variables beyond the control of the faculty member. Yet the scores count in determining whether a professor is outstanding, excellent, good, or average as an instructor.

I would offer some suggestions for modifying the use of student-teacher evaluations to improve teaching effectiveness. It is just possible that better use of teacher evaluations will enable the students to do a better job of performance appraisal and enable the professor to feel more comfortable with the process.

Tailor Evaluation Forms to Class-Needs

A problem results when the same teacher evaluation form is used in different classes. Many classes will have certain elements in common. Many will not. A class with 300 students in a large lecture hall will almost certainly be conducted in a lecture format. A graduate class with fifteen students will most likely be taught in a seminar format. A math class may use not only the lecture method but a question-and-answer technique. A senior wage-and-salary class may have students doing an outside project in a business organization. The point is that the same teacher evaluation cannot be used satisfactorily in all classes; it needs to be tailored to the requirements of the classes in question if it is to assist in making teaching more effective.

The author is an assistant professor in the Management Department at the University of Wisconsin—Whitewater, in Whitewater, Wisconsin. She is also an arbitrator with the American Arbitration Association.
Professor may not use tests in a graduate class but assesses classroom performance in another manner. It makes no sense to ask for feedback concerning tests from these graduate students.

A feasible solution to this problem is to decide what areas are involved in teaching effectiveness. Each department might decide that there are five or six areas on which faculty members should be evaluated. One area might be classroom presentation of material, another might be relationship with students, and so on. Then a list of behavioral statements for each of these areas could be developed with regard to different class formats and needs. For example, presentation of class material somehow exists in some fashion in every class. Different statements regarding this area could be developed; some would be appropriate to graduate classes and some to undergraduate classes. Each professor in that department would then be free to select the statements he or she thought most suitable as long as he or she picked something from each of these areas. This would certainly tailor the evaluation forms to class needs and yet insure that professors are being evaluated in some common areas.

Word Statements Carefully

The statements on teacher evaluations should be worded very carefully. Most teacher evaluations are designed for fast response time on the part of the students. Some evaluations use behavioral statements. For example, the student may be asked to decide if the teacher was or was not available for consultation outside the class. Some evaluations give the student a list of possible traits such as attentive and interesting. These choices may be made to imply words in the same way. Many students read these statements or lists of words quickly. Whether or not they understand them is debatable.

Semantics and clear wording are important. A behaviorally oriented statement is better than a list of traits. Traits generally are open to misinterpretation on the part of the student evaluating the professor. What does “interesting” mean, for example? One student may think it applied to the professor’s personality. Another student may think it means that the professor had a lively manner in presenting the class material. Yet another student may think it means that the professor dressed well. A statement to the effect that the professor used cases, films, or guest speakers is much clearer in the student’s mind.

The main objective is to make the items on the teacher evaluation relevant to the class, and to have clear wording so that the student does not have to guess at the meaning of the statement. It does not provide much feedback on teaching effectiveness if the student’s check the “undecided” choice with great frequency.

Train Students to Evaluate Performance

Students need to be trained to evaluate teacher performance just as any supervisor needs training to evaluate a subordinate’s work behavior. People are not necessarily born with an innate knowledge of how to evaluate work performance. It is something which can be learned.

Freshmen and transfer students typically undergo some type of general orientation session. The subject of teacher evaluation should be introduced in these orientation sessions. This would include a general introduction to performance appraisal with specific coverage as to what it is and how it is used in tenure and promotion decisions. If the university or college as a whole uses the same basic form, the students could be taught how to fill out the form. If individual colleges or departments use their own forms, these departments should also have a training session with their students for their own specific forms.

Students need to be taught not only how to fill out a form but also about appraisal errors and how to be objective. Students are just as guilty of committing these errors as supervisors in industry. One common error is the halo effect which means that a professor’s teaching behavior could be evaluated favorably or unfavorably on the basis of one trait or characteristic. For example, one professor may keep his class over the time limit most of the semester. This individual may be a very good instructor but have poor overall ratings, due to this time management problem. The student’s entire rating of this professor could be colored by being kept late. Thus, ratings would indicate, erroneously, low teaching effectiveness of this professor. Another problem is leniency which means that the student could simply be reluctant to give low ratings, figuring that the professor is at least average. A professor could receive satisfactory ratings when he really deserved a lower one. Still another common appraisal problem is that of using a current time period. If a student does not pay attention to the whole semester in rating, then the student’s being rating his professor on less than the entire semester, such as last few weeks. A professor may be viewed as satisfactory based on only a few weeks’ performance.

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As performance appraisals are given only once every half year or unsatisfactory because the student is rating only the most current time period. The student must be thought that the entire semester is to be taken into account. The student would be quick to complain if the professor graded the student for only a part of the semester.

The students need to be trained in the meanings of the statements on the evaluation form. They need to be given the opportunity to see the forms ahead of time so they can be alert to events during the course of the semester. They should be given the opportunity to ask questions and receive information from someone who is an expert on performance appraisals. It is too late when the students are evaluating a teacher at the end of the semester. At that point, they fill out the form as best they can.

Allow Enough Time

To do a thorough job of completing the performance appraisal form requires that the students not just simply check a box or blacken a square. It also requires that the students justify their choices in writing. This demands that the students be objective and be able to substantiate why they rated a professor the way they did in a certain area. Checking a “4” or “5” only indicates how a student perceived a professor, not why. The why is important if a professor is to receive adequate response on teaching effectiveness. It does the professor no good to find out that most of a class did not feel that he or she allowed time in class for discussion. Why did the students feel this way? Otherwise the professor will not be able to modify his or her behavior in the future.

The problem is that this takes time. Most evaluations are deliberately designed to take a minimum amount of time. Many students can fill out a form in five to ten minutes. This is hardly enough time to write comments on the back of the sheet or to substantiate each statement on the form.

Considering the importance of teacher evaluations, professors and administrators should be willing to allow enough time for them to be filled out properly. In industry, it may take hours for a supervisor to complete an evaluation form on an employee. Granted this is probably not necessary in teaching, but certainly a half hour or so is not too much time to spend.

Students are accustomed to completing the form during class time. Many professors probably would not want students to carry evaluation forms around for several days while they filled out the form. Some students would not bother to turn the form in. All in all, it is probably better to use class time for this. The students might be given a mimeographed copy of the evaluation questions or statements to study several days before the evaluation period. In-class time could then be reduced to a minimum. But the point is that professors and administrators need to agree to the necessity of using more time, one way or another, to adequately complete the evaluation forms.

Freedom to Evaluate

In most evaluation situations, the professor leaves the room while the students are doing the evaluating. This is to give the students freedom to fill out the form without the professor looking over their shoulder. In most cases, the professor does not see the evaluation results until after the semester grades are turned in.

However, the entire process should be handled without the involvement of the professor. It may be inhibiting to some students to have the professor pass out the forms, even though he or she then leaves the room. Ideally, someone other than the professor would come to the classroom and distribute the forms to the students. This individual should be someone who can answer questions if the student has any, which suggests that some individuals be trained to administer teacher evaluations. This person then collects the evaluations when the students finish, and takes the evaluations to some central storage place until they are tabulated. At any rate, the professor should not see or handle the evaluations until after the semester grades are turned in.

In many universities and colleges, the professor does not receive the results of the evaluations until after the beginning of the following semester.

This procedure would safeguard the students from any retaliatory action on the part of the professor. It would also negate the need for anonymous teacher evaluations, as the student’s grade would already have been recorded in the registrar’s office.

Eliminate Student Anonymity

One very common feature of teacher evaluations is that the professor does not know how individual students completed the forms. There are usually no identifying marks on the forms themselves. In industry, the employees know what their supervisor said about them. One hears of the benefits of anonymous appraisals for teacher evaluations. The students are pro-
ected from retaliatory actions by the professor. They will give their true opinion of the professor. It is not necessary for the professor to know who said what to get feedback on teaching effectiveness.

One seldom ever hears of any disadvantages of student anonymity. The major disadvantage is that the student has no accountability for his or her remarks. Accountability means that the student assumes the responsibility for his or her comments. There is no identification on the teacher evaluation form and the student completes the form feeling free to say whatever he or she pleases. Many students do try to do a good job of teacher evaluations. However, there are always those students who do not take this seriously. These students might even use the evaluation as a means of retaliation against the professor. Requiring a student to identify his or her form would force the student to become more objective and rational about teacher evaluations. They would at least have to stop and think whether or not this is really what they meant to say about the professor.

Having students perform teacher evaluations allows them to become involved in administrative decision making involving reappointment, promotion, and tenure areas. Education is sometimes criticized for not being part of the real world, as the students refer to it. Performance evaluators outside academia have to identify themselves. The students as performance evaluators should be no different.

Furthermore, a professor who receives a less than satisfactory teacher evaluation without any real supporting facts would then be in a position to gather further information pertaining to teaching effectiveness. A professor could survey students who expressed below average sentiments or discuss the student’s comments if and when the professor saw this student again. The opposite is also true. Sometimes students as a whole think this professor is truly outstanding. It would be helpful to this professor if he or she knew exactly why the students felt this way.

It is recognized that this is a rather unusual idea. Not everyone will agree with it. However, if the professor does not see the results of the teacher evaluations until after grades are turned in, then the students should not feel alarmed. As far as having a student in a future class, professors would have to learn to overcome halo effect in appraising that student’s future performance. The converse already exists when a student takes a subsequent class from a professor. This student may have received a low grade in the previous course and now has to try to overcome any retaliatory feelings he or she might have towards that professor. It is stressed that while the student’s rights should be fully protected, the professor should also have the right to know what individual students said when these evaluations are used to determine that professor’s career with regard to reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

It is doubtful that many universities and colleges will drop the use of teacher evaluations. Some institutions place more emphasis on them than others. But if they are going to be used, they should be used in a responsible manner.

I do not offer many radical suggestions for using them but rather offer suggestions for modifying or fine tuning the system currently in use. These suggestions do not require a lot of money, but some will require time such as training students to complete teacher evaluations and tailoring the evaluation forms to different classes. But, a primary purpose of using them ought to be to improve teaching effectiveness. It is impossible for a professor to do this unless he or she has full, complete and objective information from the students.

The current process is hit-or-miss in that a professor may be doing the same basic things in a classroom semester after semester. Some professors receive evaluations which are pretty much the same from a statistical point. But some professors, even the good ones, experience ups and downs with their evaluations. Professors ask themselves what happened this semester? What is it that was done differently? They theorize that this was a class of different students. The other class was brighter or less smart. But this is only a guess. The professor does not know for sure.

Consequently, one knows professors who feel that the evaluations are an evil to be endured. They are too completed as quickly as possible and the results filed in a cabinet, never again to be reviewed. This is unfortunate as one hears constantly that there is no other system for satisfactorily evaluating teaching effectiveness since the students are the only ones who know how the professor performs in the classroom. A professor’s immediate supervisor such as a department chairperson or dean might never enter the classroom evaluation purposes. Unless academicians are willing to use a system which provides adequate information for improving teaching effectiveness, all educators ought to quit kidding themselves that teacher evaluations are anything at all to do with teaching effectiveness. Teacher evaluations could then be abolished.