

Assessing the climate of the classroom in program reviews: Content analysis of student comments in course evaluations

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Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to describe how student comments in course evaluations may be used in program reviews as part of the assessment of the learning environment and the classroom climate at the departmental level.

Rationale

The learning environment affects learning outcomes. The focus on the assessment of learning outcomes has been the overwhelming effort in conducting program reviews at the expense of process assessments. Assessment of how students perceive the learning environment and how they experience the faculty member, characteristics of the course and the way they are delivered are important and are often captured in the quantitative items of course evaluations and student comments. This information is almost exclusively used to evaluate the instructor, usually for promotion and tenure, and is rarely, if ever, aggregated to reflect department or program level factors that impact student learning. Also, instructors most appreciate the open-ended students comments that help them improve their course and delivery mode.

Sampling Student Comments

- Collected hard copies of course evaluations from all courses and sections offered by a department or program during an academic year.
- Removed (whiteout) all references to names of faculty on the course titles and in the content of the comments.
- Randomly picked every third student's comment in the responses to each open-ended question. If fewer than three comments, one was picked randomly. For larger volume of comments (over 50), every fifth or seventh student may be picked.

Open-Ended Questions on the Evaluation Form

1. What were the most satisfactory aspects of this course?
2. How can this course be improved?
3. What were the most satisfactory teaching attributes of this instructor?
4. What can the instructor do to improve his or her teaching effectiveness?

Thematic Domains

1. **Positive** themes related to **teacher** characteristics

Number of categories = 4

2. **Negative** themes related to **teacher** characteristics

Number of categories = 5

3. **Positive** themes related to **course** structure and process

Number of categories = 10

4. **Negative** themes related to **course** structure and process

Number of categories = 9

5. **Negative** themes related to **environment** and **students**

Number of categories = 7

(Specifics categories under each domain maybe found in the summary tables provided below)

Assigning Comments to Categories

- Two trained judges read each comment selected for inclusion together, and agree to assign it to a thematic category
- If there is disagreement a third judge is brought into the decision
- When a comment by one student has multiple themes, then each is assigned to its appropriate category
- When a comment does not fit into any predetermined thematic category one is created
- Comments that are too general or unspecific such as “Great” or “Sucks” they are put in a global positive or negative category

Summary tables for seven programs in the College of Arts and Science

Table 2

POSITIVE themes related to **TEACHER** characteristics found in course evaluation comments of seven programs

(All courses in a given entire academic year)

Themes	GE Core 300 (Theme n=100) %	Biology (Theme n=194) %	Mathematics (Theme n=116) %	Computer Science (Theme n=151) %	Art (Theme n=135) %	Music (Theme n=247) %	Rel/Phil (Theme n=142) %	Average % Across Seven Programs %
1. Caring, positive, nurturing, understanding, patient, approachable, helpful, personalized attention	32	30	43	32	33	41	18	33
2. Enthusiastic, motivating, cares about subject	23	17	11	9	20	24	28	19
3. Knowledgeable, professional, well prepared, high standards	30	39	21	30	36	25	39	26
4. Good communication skills, effective teaching techniques	15	14	25	29	11	18	15	18

Table 3**NEGATIVE themes related to TEACHER characteristics found in course evaluation comments of seven programs****(All courses in a given entire academic year)**

Themes	GE Core 300 (Theme n=67) %	Biology (Theme n=38) %	Mathematics (Theme n=137) %	Computer Science (Theme n=9) %	Art (Theme n=12) %	Music (Theme n=20) %	Rel/Phil (Theme n=18) %	Average % Across Seven Programs %
1. Uncaring, critical, unapproachable, biased	45	18	17	44	1	55	39	31
2. Lack of enthusiasm	7	5	6	0	1	10	0	4
3. Lack of knowledge, and/or preparation	10	13	6	33	1	25	22	20
4. Poor communication skills-monotone, unclear speaking or unintelligible writing on the board	37	63	17	22	50	10	39	34
5. Limited variety of teaching techniques			51					

Table 4**POSITIVE themes related to COURSE structure and process found in course evaluation comments of seven programs****(All courses in a given entire academic year)**

Themes	GE Core 300 (Theme n= 425) %	Biology (Theme n= 247) %	Mathematics (Theme n= 129) %	Computer Science (Theme n=144) %	Art (Theme n= 150) %	Music (Theme n= 149) %	Rel/Phil (Theme n= 171) %	Average % Across Seven Programs %
1. Appropriate, helpful assignments/ activities	8	20	30	13	23	34	10	20
2. Well organized	8	8	6	16	3	5	4	7
3. Interesting subject matter in lecture and/or text	22	17	2	11	16	11	34	16
4. Class involvement and good student involvement	17	2	7	6	3	5	14	8
5. Effective resources, audiovisuals, handouts, speakers	4	37	5	9	7	14	7	12
6. Relevant or applied material	9	4	7	3	3	1	4	4
7. Productive- learned content,	12	8	30	17	22	9	18	6

informative								
8. Productive-learned specific skills	10	1	10	18	15	21	5	11
9. Effective use of groups	2	1	0	2	0	0	2	1
10. Relaxed informal atmosphere	7	3	3	3	8	0	2	4

Table 5

NEGATIVE themes related to COURSE structure and process found in course evaluation comments of seven programs

(All courses in a given entire academic years)

Themes	GE Core 300 (Theme n= 229) %	Biology (Theme n=195) %	Mathematics (Theme n=152) %	Computer Science (Theme n=102) %	Art (Theme n= 83) %	Music (Theme n=78) %	Rel/Phil (Theme n=131) %	Average % Across Seven Programs %
1. Inappropriate or unhelpful assignments	9	1	10	2	0	1	2	4
2. Poorly organized-poor sequencing, lack of structure, unclear grading policies, tests did not match assignments, books required but not used	23	26	10	22	31	19	15	21
3. Subject matter not interesting, dull, repetitive, too elementary, irrelevant	18	7	4	9	8	5	16	10
4. Lack of enough student involvement	14	5	11	4	10	5	18	8
5. Poor resources-dull or inappropriate audiovisuals, speakers	6	26	6	13	1	9	14	11
6. Overly rigorous workload or harsh grading, too much	16	26	35	28	28	28	19	26

material, too fast a pace								
7. Limited presentation, wish for additional topics or topics covered in more depth	16	10	17	23	23	32	16	20
8. Poor scheduling and timing			4					
9. Irrelevant course material			3					

Table 6**NEGATIVE themes related to ENVIRONMENTAL and STUDENT factors found in the course evaluation comments of seven programs****(All courses in a given entire academic year)**

Themes	GE Core 300 (Theme n=28) %	Biology (Theme n=32) %	Mathematics (Theme n=16) %	Computer Science (Theme n=26) %	Art (Theme n=16) %	Music (Theme n=26) %	Rel/Phil (Theme n=14) %	Average % Across Seven Programs %
1. Poor facilities	7	6	6	38	13	15	0	12
2. Other students	37	0	50	8	6	23	0	18
3. Time slot too lengthy	22	22	0	42	56	12	14	24
4. Time slot too short	19	38	19	0	0	46	79	29
5. Inconvenient class time	15	28	0	8	0	4	7	9
6. Lack of readiness for the course	0	3	25	4	19	0	0	7
7. Couldn't afford the materials	0	3	0	0	6	0	0	1

How are these data used?

- They are part of the program review of a department or a program and included in the final document
- Department faculty consider the data as they deliberate what action recommendation to make
- These data have been used to improve course syllabi, restructure delivery of course material, and mentor faculty on their teaching styles, the way they deliver courses, and relate to students
- Aggregating data across programs can provide a school or college level profile of the way students experience the classroom environment
- The data may be disaggregated for upper and lower division courses
- The data may be disaggregated by courses taught by graduate assistants, adjuncts and full-time faculty
- The data may be disaggregated by regional campuses if courses are taught away from the main campus