Activity: Dealing with Mid-term Evaluations

Time needed: 50 minutes

Materials needed: anonymous student evaluations in paper format

Dealing with anonymous student evaluations can be painful, exhilarating, or both. It’s an odd law of teaching mathematics that states “one negative evaluation overwhelms fifty positive ones.” It can also be difficult dealing with evaluations in an organized fashion, especially if you have a large number of students. The following worksheet will help you parse out the results of your evaluations and help you decide what changes to make. This worksheet can be used to analyze mid-term evaluations or end-of-term evaluations.

1. Survive the first read-through:
   a. Print out your evaluations for a single course (or all sections of the same course).
   b. Skim the evaluations.
   c. Sigh heavily.

No matter how good of an instructor you are, there will always be negative evaluations. These opinions, however, do not deserve more weight than the positive comments. And all comments, both positive and negative, should be dealt with logically.

2. Instructor effectiveness.

One question on evaluations usually asks students to comment on instructor effectiveness. These comments can be described as fitting into one of four categories, as listed below:

   a. **Subject** (material choice, level of material) Student comments in this area are about what you choose to cover in class. This may include lecture material, but also if you choose to cover study techniques, external science, or other information.

   b. **Organization** (how material is presented, how discussion time is used) This would include comments on the types of activities, the number of quizzes, or the amount and style of homework.

   c. **Interaction** (how well you interact with students as a group or one-on-one, how well you present material to students) Comments on interaction include how receptive you are to questions, how well you organize and manage student presentations, how responsive you are to email, whether you post grades and worksheets when you say you will.

   d. **Enthusiasm** (attitude towards material and teaching) This includes student comments on whether they are comfortable approaching you, whether you seem to put energy into your teaching, whether you like your topic.
Code your evaluations by marking the margin: S, O, I or E. Some comments may cover two categories. Also put a “+” or “−” in the margin if the comment was clearly positive or negative.

Then count up your comments and score them in the table to the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
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</tbody>
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What category received the most positive comments? _______________________

What category likely needs the most improvement? ________________________

Never try to change more than one category at a time. It’s too hard to do a good job at improving multiple characteristics of your teaching. By having a focus you can better judge your progress.

3. Student requests.
There is generally a section on student evaluations that asks, “what can the instructor improve?” Here there are usually specific requests by the students to do or not do something. After reading through this section, pick the five most common types of requests and list them below, along with a count of their frequency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request</th>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>Final count</th>
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It has been our experience that student requests fall into three categories:

a. Lazy requests: students ask for more lecture, more outlines, more review sessions, or anything else where you are providing answers for them.
b. Valid but time-consuming requests: Students ask for more materials that will help them learn. While their desire to improve themselves is admirable, it is not your job as discussion leader to create additional worksheets and practice exams and office hours to focus that improvement.

c. Valid and doable requests: If you talk too fast, or always forget to post the worksheet, or make your homeworks too long, students will point this out. You may want to check with other instructors to compare your materials with theirs. It may very well be you need to work on this aspect of your teaching.

Draw a line through any request that is flat-out lazy. For time-consuming requests, you may want to type up a short list of resources for the students to look into on their own: book problems, other discussion leader websites, online activities, etc. Then circle any remaining requests that seem reasonable and helpful to your students.

4. Response

Usually, a careful reading of student evaluations will cause you to decide to change some things and to not change other things. Once you have decided, you should craft how you will tell your students about your decision. It is respectful of their opinion to acknowledge their feedback and respond to them. To help you with this, answer the following questions now.

What changes are you going to make as a result of this feedback?

What requests are you NOT going to grant? What are the reasons?

It is best to discuss this in person with the students at your next class. When will this be?

Congratulations! You have effectively dealt with your student evaluations!