GIVING VOICE TO STUDENTS: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF INFORMAL MID-TERM EVALUATIONS & PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

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ABSTRACT

Standardized end of semester student evaluations of teaching are increasingly used for promotional and tenure decisions. We assert that informal mid-term evaluations, conducted as an opportunity to express voice (i.e., procedural justice), produce positive results for students and full-time professors without the cost and turnaround time required by standardized evaluations.

Keywords: Mid-term evaluations, procedural justice, informal evaluations

INTRODUCTION

Standardized mid-term evaluations (SMEs) have been found to benefit faculty as they have the opportunity to identify and address potential problems (Overall & Marsh, 1979; Price and Goldman, 1980; Baldwin & Blattner, 2003). In fact, (SMEs) can benefit students as they "have an opportunity to express their views and see their possible changes during the remainder of the semester" (Spencer & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 2002, p.406). Evidence demonstrates that standardized mid-term evaluations increase student satisfaction (Brown, 2008). However, standardized evaluations tend to be lengthy, costly and lack the results turnaround needed to be effective for the applicable semester. Moreover, anecdotal evidence supports the use of an informal mid-term evaluation as a "mid-term tune-up" (Milman, 2006), that can benefit both students and professors. Even though there is evidence to support the notion that mid-term informal evaluations are beneficial, it appears that a preference remains for end of semester evaluations as compared to informal mid-term evaluations (e.g., Lindahl & Unger, 2010).

End of semester student evaluations of teaching (ESSETs) have been used extensively for decades (Spencer & Pedhazur, Schmelkin, 2002). ESSETs are often obtained to gather student responses about their course for informational purposes, but they are increasingly used for critical personnel decisions such as tenure and promotion (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003). The increased use of ESSETs for tenure and promotion, especially when it is the sole source of information about teaching, has often resulted in negative responses from professors (e.g.,

Ionnides, 2011). For example, some researchers (i.e., professors) doubt the validity of student evaluations and have discovered that university students are often dishonest on evaluations about their professors.

 Because faculty doubt the validity of SET's, they are often ambivalent about end-of-semester evaluations. For example, some faculty state that they might not read the evaluations and/or comments because they are received after the end of the semester and are not immediately useful (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000). In addition, some professors opt out of reading comments from their evaluations because of the level of cruelty and harshness that is often present in efforts to shield themselves from the emotional toll that may be imposed (Lindahl & Unger, 2010). Interestingly, ambivalence does not only reside with professors. Students are often unsure about providing sincere evaluations as they are not certain that their opinions will be taken seriously (Spencer & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 2002). One suggested solution to this shared ambivalence, is to evaluate at intervals such as at the mid-term of the semester (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003).

While academic institutions continue to base important tenure-track personnel decisions on end of semester evaluations (Lindahl & Unger, 2010) and researchers suggest mid-term evaluations be conducted to mitigate some issues with end of semester evaluations (Baldwin & Blattner, 2003; Milman, 2006), virtually no research has focused on other effects of mid-term evaluations for both students and professors on the end-of-semester outcomes. We look to further discussion in this area of study and suggest that both end-of-semester evaluations and student grades improve as a result of mid-term evaluations being conducted. Supported by the procedural justice literature we look to build the argument that the opportunity for students to express their opinions results in positive outcomes. Procedural justice, in the form of voice, has been found to generate other positive work outcomes (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Dulebohn & Ferris, 1999), and we believe there is an important role that it plays in this area of study that has been overlooked.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. A theoretical framework will be presented; in addition, the methodology and a discussion will be provided.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A significant amount of research has been conducted to determine the role that procedural justice has on business and collegiate outcomes (e.g., Leventhal et al.,1980; Macfarlane, 2001; Tyler & Blader, 2003). For instance, procedural justice has been found to have a positive relationship with outcome satisfaction, trust, and evaluation of authority figures (Colquitt et al., 2001). Procedural justice is assessed by whether or not procedural guidelines were upheld like ethicality, a consistent method, correctability, bias suppression, accuracy of information, and representation (Colquitt, 2001; Leventhal et al., 1980). In addition, voice, or the opportunity to express one's views has been utilized as a proxy to assess whether or not procedural justice or fairness has been observed (e.g., Cremer & Heil, 2008). Interestingly, individuals given "voice" assessed a procedure to be just even when they recognized that it would not influence their outcomes. It is the simple act of being heard or allowed to express one's self that increased their perception of fairness (Lind et al., 1990; Tyler et al., 1985; Tyler & Blader, 2003). In fact, research states that, "having the opportunity for 'voice' had interpersonal or 'value-expressive' worth that was not linked to any influence over the decisions made" (Tyler & Blader, 2003, 351). Thus, prior research shows giving opportunities for "voice" has positive outcomes that we argue

can be at least partially replicated in the college setting when opportunities for "voice" are given to students.

In the collegiate context, students often believe that their opinions and thoughts are not valued (Spencer & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 2002). However, there is evidence that when students perceive that they are given the opportunity to share their opinion and believe that their solicited input is taken seriously, there is a positive result of an increased level of engagement in the course. This can manifest as better student performance and improved attitudes (Brown, 2008). As a result of increased engagement, they may perceive that the instructor has done a better job at teaching. This aligns with previous findings that procedural justice has a positive relationship with how an individual assesses management (e.g., a professor) (Colquitt et al., 2001). In addition, they may participate more in the course, which may lead to higher grades for students.

The literature on SETs, much of which focuses on end-of-semester evaluations, indicates they are used for three main reasons: 1) As a formative tool to provide student feedback to faculty for improving their teaching; 2) As a summative tool for administration to use in personnel decisions, such as tenure and promotion; and 3) As a means for students to convey their opinion to other students in a more formalized manner (Spencer & Pedhazur Schmelkin, 2000). While there have been a number of reviews and syntheses of the psychometric properties of teaching evaluations (Aleamoni, 1999; Marsh & Dunkin, 1997; Wachtel, 1998) that look to investigate the summative use for personnel decisions, there are scant studies that look at evaluations and their impact on the formative reason of improving teaching (Smith, 2008). In fact, faculty have indicated that end-of-semester evaluations are seen as after the fact and might ignore them, particularly if they include cruel comments (Lindahl & Unger, 2010). However, mid-term evaluations are seen as a possible avenue to determine what is not working well and make changes (Hobson & Talbot, 2001; Overall & Marsh, 1979) to address specific concerns of the current semester's students. Mid-term evaluations appear to provide a definitive opportunity for voice, particularly when administered with adequate feedback mechanisms (Simpson & Saguaw, 2000; Overall & Marsh, 1979). Research on student satisfaction of evaluations suggests "that to increase student satisfaction, instructors, when using individual, standardized student-rating forms, should either provide extended reaction to the student opinions or conduct the process at midterm" (Abbott et al., 1990, p. 205). A midterm evaluation discussion with the class can be used similarly to the midterm conference which "build[s] rapport that increases class participation and learning for the rest of the term" (Fluckiger et al., 2010, p.138). With time limitations during the semester for individual conferences and at the end of the semester for providing feedback, the collective midterm feedback process appears to be the best approach. Thus, focusing on a collective midterm feedback process for the preliminary study the research questions are:

> 1: Will the student responses on the end of year formal faculty evaluations be more positive when informal mid-term evaluations are administered?

> 2: Is there a positive relationship between students being afforded the opportunity to express voice via mid-term evaluations and student scores at the end of the semester?

METHODS

Data were collected from eight undergraduate college of business administration courses taught between Spring 2009 and Fall 2010.   There were two types of classes involved - an Organizational Behavior course that focused on managerial and employee behavior skills and an Introduction to Management Information Systems course that focused on technology and problem solving skills.   The before informal collective midterm feedback end of semester evaluation classes had a total of 159 students with 70 in the technology course and 89 in the managerial course. The after informal collective midterm evaluation courses had a total of 157 students with 72 in the technology course and 85 in the managerial course.

In the semesters when the midterm evaluations were given midway through each semester students in each class were asked to complete an evaluation form to provide feedback to how they perceived the course. The forms were administered during class time and were collected in a randomized manner to ensure anonymity.   All forms were reviewed by the administering instructor who summarized and coded the comments according to their content. The resulting list of comments was divided into a two categories – strengths and likes or areas for improvement and dislikes. Comments in each category were tallied as to the frequency of each similar type of comment. The instructors reviewed the feedback and noted those items that were identified most frequently by tallying each feedback comment.

The instructor then provided a review during the class period following the form administration of those items most frequently submitted that the students identified as strengths of the course, as well as detailing what could be modified with regard to the items the students most frequently identified as areas for improvement. If there were high frequency items identified as needing change but could not be modified during the remainder of the semester, the reasoning behind the approach the instructor was using and why it could not be changed was discussed. The goal of the reviews and discussions was to build rapport, give voice to the students as partners in the learning process, give value to students' opinions by acknowledging their viewpoints and improve the course instruction methodology.

At the end of the semesters, the students completed the official evaluation form which is used for improving the course pedagogy, as well as input for tenure and promotion decisions for the university.   The university uses the IDEA evaluation form as the survey instrument (see www.theideacenter.org). There are several summary evaluation scores resulting from analysis of the survey instrument. This university focuses on the "Converted Adjusted Score" (CAS) for promotion and tenure purposes, thus this score is a main focus for instructors as well. Ultimately, the desired outcomes from the informal midterm evaluation process are to improve the students' learning process resulting in higher grades and raise students' satisfaction in the learning environment which should be reflected in significantly higher instructor evaluation scores. Therefore, the outcomes of interest for this observational study are semester end student final grades and the CAS score from the formal semester end course evaluation.

RESULTS

We included data from students who were enrolled in both the managerial and technology courses in our analysis. We discovered that there was a positive increase of 16.04% in the technology focused courses and a positive increase of 9.57% in the managerial focused courses. Thus, this data provides support for research question 1, indicating that end of semester instructor evaluations will be more positive when there are informal midterm evaluations with feedback. In addition, we ran analysis to determine whether or not there was a difference in how the students performed in the managerial and technical courses when an informal midterm evaluation was administered. We discovered that there was a positive increase of 4.16% in the technology focused course, and a positive increase of 1% in the managerial focused course when comparing the end of semester student scores in the courses that had no midterm evaluation with the courses that did have midterm evaluations. This data provides support for research question 2, indicating there is a positive impact of the midterm evaluation on students' scores.

DISCUSSION

Both the student population and the faculty population stand to gain insight from student evaluation research. For faculty, the question "Why not try to improve and address the concerns of our students?" (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000, p. 205) echoes the sentiments that "Clearly, faculty members value teaching and have a strong desire to teach well" (Hobson & Talbot, 2001, p. 7). The recommendation to use informal midterm evaluations by the faculty for formative purposes is not new (Hobson & Talbot, 2001; Algozzine et al., 2004) however, there is a paucity of research investigating the potentially positive relationship that is between the informal evaluation and outcomes of interest. This preliminary look at the positive effect of informal midterm evaluations on a key metric for teaching effectiveness provides evidence that giving "voice" to the students helps establish rapport resulting in more positive outcomes.

Researchers have argued that the more mathematical course content is, such as a technology course versus a managerial course, the less students tend to like it (Glymour, 2003). However, the evidence from this research points to the fact that providing timely feedback to student concerns is a positive experience for the students regardless of the amount of mathematical content in the course as both the managerial and technology courses had increases in the instructor's IDEA scores.

The current student population has been characterized as "Millenials: They rarely read newspapers -- or, for that matter, books. They are impatient and goal oriented. They hate busywork, learn by doing, and are used to instant feedback. They want it now" (Sweeney, 2007, interactive session). Informal midterm evaluations with feedback appear to give an opportunity for "voice" to the students and provide the "instant feedback" the students want resulting in not only higher instructor evaluations but higher student scores. Both outcomes provide evidence that timely midterm feedback is a positive experience for the students.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research is acknowledged as preliminary and observational several limitations should be noted. First, grade leniency has been a pervasive issue in academia and some might suggest that the professors in this study received higher evaluations as a result of the students receiving higher grades. We believe the higher grades were related to increased engagement as a result of midterm evaluations providing voice, but a similar future investigation could be conducted where grades are held constant. Second, this area of study is fertile ground for research that addresses midterm evaluations, procedural justice, and generational differences. Enrollment statistics indicate that the majority of the students in our university as well as the College of Business are Millennials or Generation Y'ers. A limitation of this investigation would be that we did not directly identify the ages, and thereby generation, of those who responded to the evaluations. However, future research may want to determine if individuals from different generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation X'ers) might respond differently when a mid-term evaluation is given. This might be particularly the case as Millennials have a unique experience, "(a) they grew up in a time of economic prosperity; (b) they are the most protected generation in terms of government regulation and consumer safety; and, (c) they are used to being indulged as a result of changing child-rearing practices" (McGlynn 2005, 14). Thus, midterm informal evaluations may have a more positive influence on Millenials (as a result of the timely feedback) as compared to other generational groups. Thirdly, the findings of this evaluation are limited as we have relatively small sample size, these findings would be more robust if these analysis were conducted using a larger number of respondents. Future research may want to replicate these findings with a larger sample to further validate our findings.

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