

Thoughts on Student Feedback on Teaching at Swinburne University

5767601 - Jason But
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I. INTRODUCTION

Feedback is an excellent technique to help us improve in any endeavour we choose to undertake. Obviously this is also true in teaching. However, being in a service oriented industry, it can be difficult to obtain a true measure of performance and possible areas of improvement. We may also ask who is in the best position to evaluate our teaching performance and how do we go about reliably collecting that information.

Feedback can be obtained via different sources:

- Self - self-assessment of how a particular class progressed while teaching
- Peer - direct feedback from other teachers as to how you might improve
- Student - using the students to evaluate how we teach

In this report I will look primarily at Student Feedback. Using Student Feedback has two particular aspects, one is on how we may better collect data to get useful results, and secondly on how to best evaluate the feedback such that we can improve how we teach.

II. DESIGNING STUDENT FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRES

Designing the questions to ask in a Student Feedback Questionnaire is a difficult task. One of the key aspects is in generating a balanced questionnaire that evenly asks for both quantitative and qualitative assessment of teachers. Swinburne University operates a University-wide student feedback system and the questions asked in this questionnaire are developed by people with greater knowledge than myself. A quick review of the questions show no major problems that I can detect.

It is also important that the questionnaire to be used remain consistent over long periods of time, this allows results from different semesters to be adequately compared. In practice, this means that any changes to the questions asked in the questionnaire must be minimal from year-to-year.

III. OBTAINING STUDENT FEEDBACK

An important issue to in obtaining feedback is what is the best way to obtain useful feedback from students. In this section I will discuss a few ideas on how student feedback was and is now obtained at Swinburne University and how I used to obtain student feedback when it was not done as University policy while teaching at Monash University.

A. *My Initial Forays into Obtaining Feedback*

When I first started teaching at Monash University, I was originally working as a Research Fellow and asked by the Head of Department if I could develop and teach a single Unit. At the time, I had no experience in teaching and so the process became one vast learning experience for me. With no formal knowledge in how to conduct my classes I needed a means for determining my ability in taking the class. While I did not develop a formal questionnaire I developed the following procedure:

- Towards the end of semester, pass some pre-formatted pages around the class
- Inform students that I was seeking constructive feedback on how they thought I might improve how I teach
- Acknowledged that their comments would not affect them directly as the subject was nearly over for them but that I would use their feedback to modify how I taught in the future and that it would improve teaching for any future students

I realise now that my source of feedback was not balanced yet I instinctively knew that use of Student Feedback would be important in improving my teaching.

B. *Manual Collection*

Until recently, Swinburne University deployed a manual form of collection of Student Feedback. In this instance, the Student Feedback forms were printed and supplied to the Unit Convenors, who would then distribute the forms during a lecture. The lecture would be stopped for ten minutes while students completed the forms which were then sealed in an envelope and delivered to a nominated collection point by one of the students.

There were advantages and disadvantages of using this form of feedback, each of which I will outline below:

1) *Advantages:* The use of a formal - printed - feedback form encourages students to be more forthcoming with comments as they are more likely to believe that their feedback will remain confidential

The use of student delivery of feedback to a central collection point provides confidence in the confidentiality of the underlying system

2) *Disadvantages:* Teaching staff are asked to leave the room during the survey. This is insulting to the teaching staff and may create a presupposed condition in the students mind

that teachers are not to be trusted. This could engender mutual discomfort in the overall procedure

The process typically disrupts the limited time available to deliver lecture material throughout the semester

As we progress to a more modern world, the skill of handwriting is depreciating. Students will become more uncomfortable with writing their feedback in a handwritten form. While this is less likely to be an issue in qualitative feedback questions (where a box can be ticked or number score given) it may discourage students from giving qualitative feedback

The forms ask students to keep written feedback to 255 characters, a strange limit to place on people giving handwritten feedback

A non-digitised form of feedback may discourage students from truly believing that their feedback may be used and therefore may decline to give it

C. Online Collection

As of this semester (Semester 1, 2007), Swinburne has moved to an online student feedback system. Working and teaching in a technological area, it is difficult to understand why it has taken so long to move from manual/written feedback to an online system. Having said that, I still don't believe Swinburne has got it entirely right on this attempt and that there are areas of improvement in the administration of collecting feedback

1) *Advantages:* Students are more comfortable with the concept of anonymity of online collection systems and may feel happier submitting feedback using this system. This is however a bit of a false concept - that may not properly be understood by students - in that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed by an online system and that it is possible to determine which students have submitted individual feedback

Lower administrative overhead and quicker reporting of feedback to teaching staff. As students use a computer to generate the feedback, it is already automatically collated in a digital format. This alleviates the need for staff to transcribe and collate the data. A quicker turnaround time can be more useful to academic staff in judging their own performance

Ease of use of a digital/online system for today's generation of students could lead to potentially higher levels of feedback, particularly from students who may not have gone to the trouble previously

Ease of access. Students now have access to feedback when they are ready and able to commit time to do so. This should increase the quality and amount of feedback provided but may also come with some disadvantages (see below)

2) *Disadvantages:* One primary disadvantage is that (at least for this Semester) student feedback is open until after the examination period. Creating opportunity for feedback beyond the end of the assessment period may increase the number of vexatious comments made from students who have failed

Full access to feedback beyond the boundaries of the classroom may increase the feedback as noted above, but may also allow for students to give feedback while not fully concentrating on the Unit being reviewed. I believe the

advantages (as above) outweigh this problem but is something that needs to be considered

The current means of accessing student feedback is not directly via Blackboard, but rather via the students MySwinburne portal. Anecdotal evidence (I asked students to complete the feedback during a laboratory class) is that many students do not use the Swinburne Portal, preferring to access Blackboard directly. Unless they are specifically told of its existence or kept in mind that they need to use the portal, it is possible that the reach of the questionnaire may be less than in the traditional paper system which gave opportunity to all attending students. This is not a problem with digital/online collection as much as a problem with the means via which students are able to submit feedback

IV. USING STUDENT FEEDBACK

Collecting data on student feedback of our performance is pointless unless it is used to improve teaching. As mentioned previously, I have always sought student feedback on my performance, even before it was required by teaching here at Swinburne University. The next step is to make use of the feedback supplied to improve the quality of teaching. A further issue is that of the purposes of collection for the University. These issues are addressed in this section of the report.

A. Improving Teaching Quality

As mentioned above, the collection of feedback is only the first step, what is important is how it is used to improve my teaching so that future students may benefit. For this purpose I typically place less emphasis on the quantitative measures of performance, other than that they tell me if I have performed particularly badly in a certain area. In general I find qualitative assessments more useful in terms of evaluating my performance, particularly when combined with my own personal reflections of how particular classes progressed.

A typical approach I use is to exclude any vexatious comments - obvious in that they contain no critical component or are obviously false based on how the classes ran - and then look at any remaining comments to see if students had any ideas on what they thought could be improved. Occasionally these suggestions will be beyond what I can personally do to improve the classes (eg. classroom facilities) but often students will highlight particular things I have done which could be done better. If these correlate with my own observations on what I did wrong then it generally leads to a re-design of that particular component of the class.

One feature I am particularly hoping to see with the introduction of the new online collection of feedback is an increase in the amount of qualitative assessment. The more comments made by students, the more feedback I receive on my own performance.

B. University Goals

One of the measures via which Swinburne University tries to differentiate itself from other Universities is its performance in teaching and the learning experience of students. In order to

effectively advertise in the market, Swinburne needs to back up these claims with solid numbers and the use of Student Feedback is important not only in that it can be used by academic staff to improve their teaching performance, but also in that it can be used to provide quantifiable evidence that Swinburne is achieving its goals in teaching and can project an image that will continue to attract students to the University.

The approach is working - Swinburne was ranked No. 1 for providing students with Generic Skills and No. 2 for Overall Student Satisfaction ¹. Obtaining student feedback is not only used to obtain these sorts of rankings but also to help identify when our performance is slipping such that steps can be taken.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In this report I have looked at how Swinburne University obtains Student Feedback on teaching performance, in partic-

ular at the advantages and disadvantages that may be evident in both the previous and current mechanism for collecting feedback. Coupled with the importance placed on student feedback, it is encouraging to see that the University is moving to an improved (online) system for collection of data. While there are improvements that can still be made, I believe the initial step of moving to a digital system is the key aspect, one following which minor tweaks may need to be made to improve the overall system performance.

In particular I am hopeful that the new system of collection will not only increase the amount of student feedback, but particularly improve the quantity and quality of written - qualitative - feedback, feedback which can be most directly used to improve the quality of teaching for our students.

¹Rankings by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA), information available at <http://www.swinburne.edu.au/survey.htm>