

The importance of a dialog between examiners and students for course evaluation

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Abstract

In order to improve courses and educational programmes it is essential to evaluate courses given. This can be done in several ways and depending on how the evaluation is performed; you will receive answers on different questions. This paper describes the methods used at Linköping University, with the main focus on the evaluation organised by the student body and the aspects it adds to the evaluation.

The evaluation process as a whole consists mainly of two parts. One part is a general form that is used for all courses at the entire university. Since the form has to be applicable on very different courses, the questions are of a general character. Naturally, the information you receive will also be. This system is simple and gives clear numbers and graphs on how the courses are working in general. But in order to work more with individual aspects and problems of each course something else is required. Therefore, the other part is important. It focuses on a dialog between the course examiner and student representatives.

This part of the evaluation is organised by the student body. Student representatives collect the opinions, and suggestions of changes in the course, from each student group. The opinions are then presented to the examiner during a meeting. After this presentation, a further constructive discussion concerning the course and its different parts takes place. Most examiners listen to the opinions and try to improve the education in their course. In order to ensure that the students' opinions are taken in serious consideration the students are represented in the programme board. Furthermore, this also gives an opportunity for students to affect the whole educational programme, which courses should be given and their contents.

Introduction

When being part of our program's student organisation's committee for course evaluation, we have been made well aware of several difficulties that lie in the work of course evaluation, but also the many opportunities a well performed evaluation brings to the work of course development. These are our thoughts on what an important part an actual dialogue play in the process of course evaluation. We will discuss the advantages of an actual evaluation meeting between lecturers and students to the quite common standard forms, and how the two approaches complement each other. A brief description of how our evaluations take place will also be presented.

Adding information to standard forms

In order to develop an academic course and improving its quality, an evaluation of some form is needed. What we do not know is broken, we can not fix. This is nothing new and almost all schools performs some kind of evaluation, which is nowadays, often some type of web based form with a set of general standard questions. Hence, the information you receive will also be of general nature. However, this system is simple and gives clear numbers and statistics on how the courses are working in general, so in many ways it is exceptionally useful, especially when it comes to identifying e.g. what courses might need to be evaluated more thoroughly. But in order to be able to deal further with more individual aspects and problems of each course something else is required. An evaluation should, of course, identify a problem, but also form the ideas on how to deal with the problem or situation.

A standard form is only one way communication, and even in the case when parts of a form allows written answers and comments it will never create the possibility for further questions, based on a certain comment. And even though these comments might reveal specific problems and its nature, and perhaps even contain suggestions that might help dealing with the issue at hand, it will still be one way communication. So if a student, when filling out a web based evaluation form, suggests something that he/she feels might improve the quality of the course, the student will never hear what the lecturer's response and reaction to the idea is. The lecturer will also lack the opportunity to, and perhaps a natural forum where he/she might, ask the student more specific questions in order to further develop the idea. In short, no conversation takes place. Therefore a direct dialogue between students taking a course and the teachers responsible for giving it can form a valuable element in the process of evaluating a course.

Difficulties lie also in trying to clarify whether or not a, by one student presented remark, might be a general view among all students participating in the course. This would have to be done by comparing all written comments and identifying common ideas and views. However, to our experience far from all students tend to give written comments in a form where the possibility is presented, an actuality which also makes it complicated to identify general opinions among the comments.

We will now explore the possibility of supporting the evaluation made through forms, by using additional methods, allowing a direct dialogue between the students and course personnel. This is based on our own experience of a system just like this, which we believe in a great way adds information to the form based evaluation, and together the two approaches can be seen as further complete. Important tools in the pursuit to help students get the best possible courses and to give course personnel the ideas on how to improve the quality of their course.

Identification and prevention of problems

Hence, we need means to determine exactly what the problem with a course is. If we do not know this, it is almost hopeless to make the adequate modifications. Hopefully, we can all agree that no one knows better where the problems lie than those who claim that they exist. In other words, the students that attended the course during the last time it was given. After all, they have a reason for giving low credits, and surprisingly often, they also have a suggestion of what could be done about it.

Of course, not all of these are directly applicable, mostly due to practical or organisational aspects not known to the students. However, most of them need only slight adjustments in order to work. In addition, the mere act of giving the student an explanation of why the modification has not been implemented in the course is often satisfactory enough, assuming of course that it is a fairly acceptable one. But who should be receiving these suggestions? Who should be responsible for making the adequate modifications and deliver

the appropriate explanations of what mechanism that works against the proposal to the student?

The course staff and especially the examiner are experts on what limitations their course has in terms of organisation, economics, staff time and contents. They are therefore well suited to make appropriate adjustments and explain problems in the propositions. Nevertheless, it is important to ensure that the original spirit of the proposal is maintained, and therefore the modification process should not be performed by just the course staff, but more in cooperation between students and course personnel, preferably during a personal meeting.

Such a meeting and dialog has many other positive effects. It's important to realise that it's in fact a lot more than an organised opportunity for the students to complain about the course. In contrast, it opens a possibility for questions in both directions and a common development of solutions to certain problems, some known prior to the meeting and some completely new to both parts. This is a major reinforcement of the standard form evaluation, where an examiner can spend lots of time reading free-text answers trying to see common pattern in these.

Moreover, many examiners ask for the possibility to rephrase and add questions to the standard form and such causing an, for statistical use, unwanted individuality in this. But with such a dialog as we have presented this can be done face to face, and the students themselves could be responsible for finding their common opinions about the course as a whole, as well as at its different aspects. Just the fact that students and examiners know this opportunity exists gives them a stronger confidence in their work and an excellent possibility to receive and give feedback to each others performance.

Also, the possibility to talk directly to each other gives an excellent understanding of each others roles, difficulties and opinions about the education as a whole and the course in particular. It can for example be that the examiner realises that the fact that many students failed on the exam this year was due to that they were having several tests on the same day, or perhaps had a project deadline the morning after it. But it can also be that the students realises the reason for the lecturer being badly prepared for the lectures was the fact that he/she had been forced to overtake them in the last minute. Together they can help prevent such unnecessary prerequisites in the future.

Such a dialog could be established in many different ways, and it can be hard to know which methods works best for each individual university. We are convinced that there exists, however, a number of key aspects that must be present for the method to work no matter the surrounding conditions. One of these is the fact that it is a dialog. The possibility of two-way communication is what really differs this from the standard form. One other is that it has to be a dialog through representatives for both students and university. This is simply due to the fact that a dialog between larger numbers of students and staff would be hard to establish and even harder to extract the essence of opinions from. The third and last key aspect is in fact several ones, but they all concern the representatives and what defines a good representative. In the next section we will look further into this from the students' view, since that is where our experiences mostly lie.

Student organisation and student representatives

One important part of making the students more involved and engaged in their education is to let them be a part of the decision-making. Students are not just receivers of education but should also be part of its evolution. This is very important in order to attain quality within the educational program. It is not only when it comes to courses the student have relevant and creative opinions. They should also have the right to participate in decisions in matters of work environment, social aspects of their situation and other decisions within the university.

The reason to involve students in the decision-making and have them represented in the organisation must not be that it looks good. It has to be because the student perspective

is important and can be given only by students. In order to ensure that everybody listen to the students' opinions it is necessary that they have representatives in decision-making organs inside the university. This is perhaps most important when it comes to course and program evaluation. To our experience this takes representatives at all levels. Consequently, a well organised student body for all the students, with democratically appointed representatives at all levels is necessary. Such a student body ensures that the students' opinions come from a significant part of the students and are taken in serious consideration. The main task for such a student body should be course and programme evaluation. This is the case at Linköping University.

In Linköping the course evaluation process consists mainly of two parts. One part is organised by the university and consists of a general form, like the ones discussed earlier, which is used for all courses at the university. The other part of the evaluation focuses on the important dialogue between the course examiner and student representatives. This part is organised by the student body.

Each educational programs student organisation has a committee solely for this purpose. It is called "the study committee" (SC). The student representatives, normally two from every group of students in the program taking the course, collects the opinions, and suggestions of changes in the course, of each student group, which is presented to the examiner during a meeting organised by the SC. When this has been presented, a further constructive discussion concerning the course and its different parts takes place. In order to ensure that the students' opinions are taken in serious consideration, the SC is represented in the decision-making body of the program.

Conclusions

We firmly believe that this form of evaluation is worth all the time it takes to implement and to operate, and that it has greatly improved the quality of the education at our university. Of course, our model is not directly applicable to universities outside Sweden, due to the surrounding conditions, such as organisational differences. However, you will receive the same kind of information from any method founded on the key aspects described earlier in this paper. Therefore, by only small changes, almost every university have the possibility to implement such an evaluation process if they have not already done so.