



Using Student Evaluations to Improve Teaching

Boysen, G. A. (2016). Using student evaluations to improve teaching: Evidence-based recommendations. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 2, 273-284. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/stl0000069>

At a time when student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are sometimes berated for their use in summative evaluations, this article is refreshing in offering a comprehensive, empirically based guide for the use of SETs to improve teaching. Guy Boysen, of McKendree University, employed meta-analysis in this review of research on best practices in using SETs to improve pedagogy.

Boysen argues that SETs are a key component of the scientist-educator model of teaching, which consists of setting goals, utilizing evidenced-based methods of instruction, collecting data on instructional effectiveness, and using it to make pedagogical adjustments. In applying this model to SETs, instructors should solicit feedback from students, interpret it, set specific teaching goals, and assess student outcomes.

But good scientific practice requires some additional steps. First, select SET instruments that are supported by validity and reliability evidence. Second, obtain an adequate sample of students. Then, analyze student responses to get meaningful results. Finally, incorporate the results into effective professional development.

When interpreting quantitative SET data, recognize that all measures have error. Therefore, evaluations should include other measures of teaching effectiveness. In addition, before making formative or summative decisions about an instructor, SETs should be collected from multiple classes. Furthermore, comparisons between classes and teachers should not be based only on raw scores.

In interpreting students' written comments, Boysen makes some helpful suggestions. Organize the comments according to students' quantitative ratings by creating groups of high versus low ratings. In this way, instructors can decide whether or not to give a higher priority to comments from low raters. Another idea is to break comments down into those that are positive versus negative. From there, negative comments can be classified as things

that can be changed (e.g., providing more realistic examples) and things that cannot be changed (e.g., changing fundamental learning objectives). Instructors can simply choose to ignore both positive and negative comments that do not provide useful information (e.g., best teacher ever, worst teacher ever). Boysen also recommends using multiple coders to establish reliability.

In order to make changes based on results of student feedback, instructors should realize that feedback by itself does not lead to improvement. The feedback must be incorporated into a process that includes consultation and goal setting. However, the whole process need not take more than a few hours. The good news is that feedback used from one semester's data can lead to improvements in subsequent semesters.