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Most student evaluation instruments include a place for student comments, yet the comments are often difficult to interpret. This article illustrates these comments and uses the information for improving teaching and students' learning.

Making Sense of Student Written Comments

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Probably one of the most difficult tasks for faculty who look at their end-of-semester student evaluations is interpreting what students are saying in their written comments. Invariably, some students say, "You teach the most wonderful class I have ever taken at this university," and others (in the same class) say, "You are such a terrible teacher that you should be fired!"

Many instructors may be tempted to dismiss the important information these comments provide about their teaching and their students' learning because they feel students do not know enough to judge their teaching and "these written comments show just how unreliable they are!" On the other hand, many instructors also say that they get more information from student written comments than they do from the scaled items that are typically found on student evaluation forms. Which is correct? Should we dismiss these student comments or embrace them?

The problem arises from the fact that written comments have no built-in structure like scaled items do. They do not come to the instructor compiled into a neat package that summarizes the positive and negative comments. Instead, they are usually read straight through from the top of the stack to the bottom, so that they seem to be a series of random, unconnected statements about the teaching and the teacher. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for the human mind to make sense of the information. There is a need to impose structure and organization on information in order to make it comprehensible. In other words, we must treat these comments as a set of

This article is an adaptation of Lewis, K. G. "Making Sense (and Use) of Written Student Comments." *Teaching Excellence*, 1991, 3.

qualitative data that we need to analyze to make sense of them. This article looks at some ways to impose a little structure on these student comments so that they will make more sense and possibly yield better insights into teaching that might be obscured by a more random presentation of the information.

Qualitative Research Techniques

Qualitative research involves the study of actual situations as they happen naturally, without predetermined constraints on outcomes (Patton, 1990). Philipsen (1982) says that qualitative inquiry is exploratory, openly coded, and participatory. In addition, this type of research seeks to understand the complexity of the whole system under study and recognize that each situation is unique. Wulff and Nyquist (2001) indicate that the primary methods of collecting data for qualitative research are interviewing, observing, and studying printed materials. The student written comments are printed materials and may also be considered a form of interviewing. To analyze the data, we can use conceptual frameworks and matrices. For the purposes of the analysis of student written comments, we will be using a matrix in this article to organize the various ideas expressed by the students.

This discussion of qualitative research techniques and how they pertain to the analysis of student written comments is necessarily very brief. Because teaching environments are complex, each student will probably perceive the teaching and course in a different way. Moreover, individual learning styles can color the way each student reacts to specific environments or teaching strategies. Thus, student comments reflect this complexity. Looking at their comments using qualitative analysis methods can help make sense of what they are saying and provide hints for developing strategies for addressing their concerns.

Getting Started

Making sense of student comments is a multistep process, but it follows a logical course. Most instructors are initially interested in how categories of students perceive the course. Later they find it useful to make further distinctions. Let's consider how you might go about categorizing responses to make them more meaningful.

Sorting by Respondent. Consider the following statements from an engineering course that students generally regard as difficult:

More lecture would help. More explanation of how to do the problems, not just examples. When exams come, I can usually do the problems assigned or worked in class but the new ones are completely foreign.

Would rate the course higher if I were understanding material better.

Inability of the instructor to communicate with me during the lecture. He jumps from one thing to another. He is not consistent and he does not finish the job. (To help us understand the whole thing.) In conclusion, his teaching technique is not right.

The only complaint I have is that the exam problems are always more complex than the homework problems and require too much time.

Makes me want to understand the material and making sure I know the concept and mathematical procedures.

The scaled ratings for the same course show how many students selected the following ratings:

One of the Best	2
Above Average	14
Average	5
Below Average	4
Far Below Average	2

From these ratings, one might conclude that the students generally feel the course is all right, but there are a few things that might be changed to make it better. The written comments, on the other hand, certainly indicate some areas of difficulty. How can the instructor sort out this information to make it more helpful and to reconcile the two results?

The first thing that can be done is to group the comments according to the overall course rating given by each student on the evaluation form. This provides a context for the comments, which now read in this order:

- One of the Best (2)
No comments
- Above Average (14)
“The only complaint I have is that the exam problems are always more complex than the homework problems and require too much time.”
“Makes me want to understand the material and making sure I know the concept and mathematical procedures.”
- Average (5)
“Would rate the course higher if I were understanding material better.”
- Below Average (4)
“More lecture would help. More explanation of how to do the problems, not just examples. When exams come, I can usually do the problems assigned or worked in class but the new ones are completely foreign.”

- Far Below Average (2)

“Inability of the instructor to communicate with me during the lecture. He jumps from one thing to another. He is not consistent and he does not finish the job. (To help us understand the whole thing.) In conclusion, his teaching technique is not right.”

Listing student responses in this way has a number of benefits. To begin, the more positive feedback will be read first, which is not only easier to take, but it will help determine whether students are generally satisfied or dissatisfied. It may also show that some students who are satisfied have the same concerns as some who are less satisfied. In the comments listed, one student who rated the course “Above Average” and one who rated it “Below Average” both said that the exam problems were more difficult than those in the homework. What should be done about this? Is the homework supposed to prepare the students to do similar problems on exams, or are the exam problems significantly more difficult to glean out the students who really understand the material from those who do not? The instructor needs to decide which goal is appropriate and whether it is right for this situation.

Adding a Second Dimension. Although simply classifying the student comments according to their overall course ratings can give the instructor a more realistic view of his or her teaching, adding another dimension can show where changes might be made. A matrix can help with this analysis. One side of the matrix contains the course rating given by the student, and the other side of the matrix is based on five components often cited as components of effective teaching (see Table 3.1).

To make categorizing and sorting the written comments a little easier, these components have been slightly modified in the matrix we are using. “Subject Matter” has replaced “Analytic/Synthetic Approach” to enable sorting written comments that deal with how the student is understanding the subject matter and how it is presented and assessed. Comments such as, “Exams were more complex than homework,” have to do with how the subject is being tested. “Would rate it higher if I understood more” also relates to how the subject is coming across.

“Organization/Clarity” remains the same and relates to how well the students can follow the lectures and how the instructor’s teaching matches their expectations of organization. Comments such as, “Jumps around from one topic to the next,” indicate that students are finding the organization structure difficult for them to follow.

“Instructor-Group Interaction” and “Instructor-Individual Student Interaction” have been collapsed into one category: “Interaction.” Comments in this area relate to how the instructor gets along with the students and what kind of rapport he or she has developed with them. When the comments indicate that the instructor “makes sure students understand,” this means that he or she is relating to the students in a meaningful way and

Table 3.1. Components of Effective Teaching

<i>Teaching Component</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Analytic/Synthetic Approach	Relates to scholarship, with emphasis on breadth, analytic ability, and conceptual understanding
Organization/Clarity	Relates to skill at presentation, but is subject related, not student related, and not concerned merely with rhetorical skill
Instructor-Group Interaction	Relates to rapport with the class as a whole, sensitivity to class response, and skill at securing active class participation
Instructor-Individual Student Interaction	Relates to mutual respect and rapport between the instructor and the individual student
Dynamism/Enthusiasm	Relates to the flair and infectious enthusiasm that comes with confidence, excitement for the subject, and pleasure in teaching.

Source: Hildebrand, Wilson, and Dienst (1971, p. 18).

probably recognizes when students are not understanding the material. At such points in the class, effective instructors ask questions to clear up any misunderstanding.

“Dynamism/Enthusiasm” remains the same and relates to the instructor’s enthusiasm for the subject and for teaching. Comments such as, “Makes me want to learn the material,” reflect the student’s recognition of your enthusiasm.

Instructors can also create their own matrix using variables and categories that are most meaningful to them. For example, an instructor may wish to use a question about fair grading as the basis for sorting comments. How do comments from those who believe grading has been fair differ from those who say grading has been unfair? Or he or she may want to sort the comments according to the students’ rating of whether assignments are clear or the lectures are well organized. The main thing is to determine how the students are reacting to the teaching based on a characteristic that will help the instructor decide what changes he or she may want to make.

One point to keep in mind is that research on student evaluation data indicates that student learning is correlated with the overall course and instructor ratings (Cohen, 1981; Feldman, 1989). That is, the classes in which the students gave the instructor or course higher ratings tended to be the classes in which the students learned more (measured by scoring higher on the external exam).

Creating the Matrix

Table 3.2 shows the comments from the engineering class placed in the matrix according to the rating the student gave the course and the characteristics of effective teaching.

The matrix shows that the students who rated the course higher indicated that the main problems they encountered concerned the exams. For example, students who rated the course above average said, “Exams more complex than homework,” and those who rated the course below average said essentially the same thing: “Exam problems harder than homework.” These students also had a positive feeling about the instructor: “Makes me want to learn the material.” On the other hand, students who rated the course lower seemed to need more assistance in structuring the content and determining what was and was not important—for example, “Jumps from one thing to another.” Thus, increased specificity in analyzing the student comments could aid the instructor in determining what instructional adjustments might benefit which students.

Multiple references to the same positive or negative comment should be noted by placing the number of times it was written by the students—for example, “Exams were too long (3).” This will also show how many of the students are concerned about a particular topic or are pleased with a particular instructional technique.

Table 3.2. Written Comments Analysis Grid

Rating	Subject Matter	Organization/ Clarity	Interaction	Dynamism/ Enthusiasm
Excellent				
Above Average	Exams more complex than homework	Exams too long	<i>Makes sure students understand</i>	<i>Makes me want to learn material</i>
Average	Would rate higher if I were understanding better			
Below Average	Needs more lecture Exam problems harder than homework	Needs more explanation of how to do problems		
Poor	Inability to communicate material to students	Jumps from one thing to another Inconsistent		

Note: The italicized comments are positive; those not italicized are more negative.

Increasing the Usefulness and Frequency of Student Written Comments

Theall and Franklin (1991) have been studying student ratings for teaching improvement for many years and have found that “about 10 percent of a class responds with narrative comments unless an extreme situation arises, whether good or bad. In the extreme cases, comments match quantitative results in terms of frequency and intensity, but in more ‘normal’ situations (that is, ‘average’ ratings in courses with normal distributions of scores) comments usually come from either the very satisfied or the very dissatisfied” (p. 87). It is easy to overinterpret these few comments and blow the negative comments out of proportion and think, “All of my students say I’m a terrible teacher” (when only five of fifty students made such comments).

To increase the usefulness and frequency of student comments, prompts can be used. In some departments, the following three questions are printed (with space between them) in the comments section of the evaluation form:

- What helped your learning the most in this class?
- What hindered your learning the most in this class?
- What suggestions for changes do you have that would have improved your learning in this class?

An instructor could also put these prompts on the board or overhead and ask the students to respond to them if they are not printed on the response sheet itself. Students tend to write more and provide constructive comments when the prompts are provided than when they are not. Or an instructor might use the categories shown in Table 3.2 and encourage the students to comment on whichever of the topic areas they felt had some meaning for them. Many instructors already take this step by appending some specific course-related questions to the standard forms. This practice helps the students structure their written comments more succinctly and yet more completely because it triggers their thinking about what is of interest to the instructor. Of course, it is good to make one category an open-ended item in which any other comments may be made.

The Happy Ending

The combination of these techniques for analyzing and improving student written comments can help instructors gain insights into how different students learn best in a given course so that instructional efforts can be more tailored to their needs. It has the added advantage of keeping instructors from overreacting to a single negative comment, a constant of human behavior in reaction to evaluation. Finally, it can help instructors avoid the frustration of dealing with seemingly contradictory comments, which might be

giving student evaluations the undeserved reputation for unreliability. In the end, instructors will find that bringing a little order to the chaos of written responses will reveal the treasure of information they can provide.

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