Evaluation of 2 Key NSS Items

Miriam Sorace

18/11/2022

Cognitive Interviewing

The below are results from a cognitive interview carried out on 20 MAST5953 Year in Data Analytics students in class on November 16, 2022. The cohort is *not* just students from the School of Politics and IR, therefore. But I think the results are informative nonetheless for our potential strategies to do better on both NSS scores.

The purpose of the cognitive interviewing was to teach students about how to perform a cognitive interview, together with testing the comprehension and retrieval stages of the survey answer process in relation to two particularly contested NSS items, and notably:

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "I have received helpful comments on my work."

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course."

The cognitive probes asked students, for each NSS question, to report what 'receiving helpful comments'/ 'University course quality' meant to them; how hard was to answer the relevant question and what went through their minds when answering the questions.

Validation Analysis: Answer Behavior in the Cognitive Probes

How often people chose the 'DK' option? How often did they say that the question was too hard to answer (if analysing the cognitive interview probes)? Some simple descriptive tables/plots can help in getting a sense of how well the NSS survey item performs. For the open-ended congnitive probes (comprehension and retrieval), more qualitative thematic analysis will be used.

```
## Strongly Disagree          Disagree          Neutral          Agree
##                2                 1                6                9
##    Strongly Agree              NA's
##                1                 1


## Strongly Disagree          Disagree          Neutral          Agree
##                0                 0                6               12
##    Strongly Agree
##                2
```
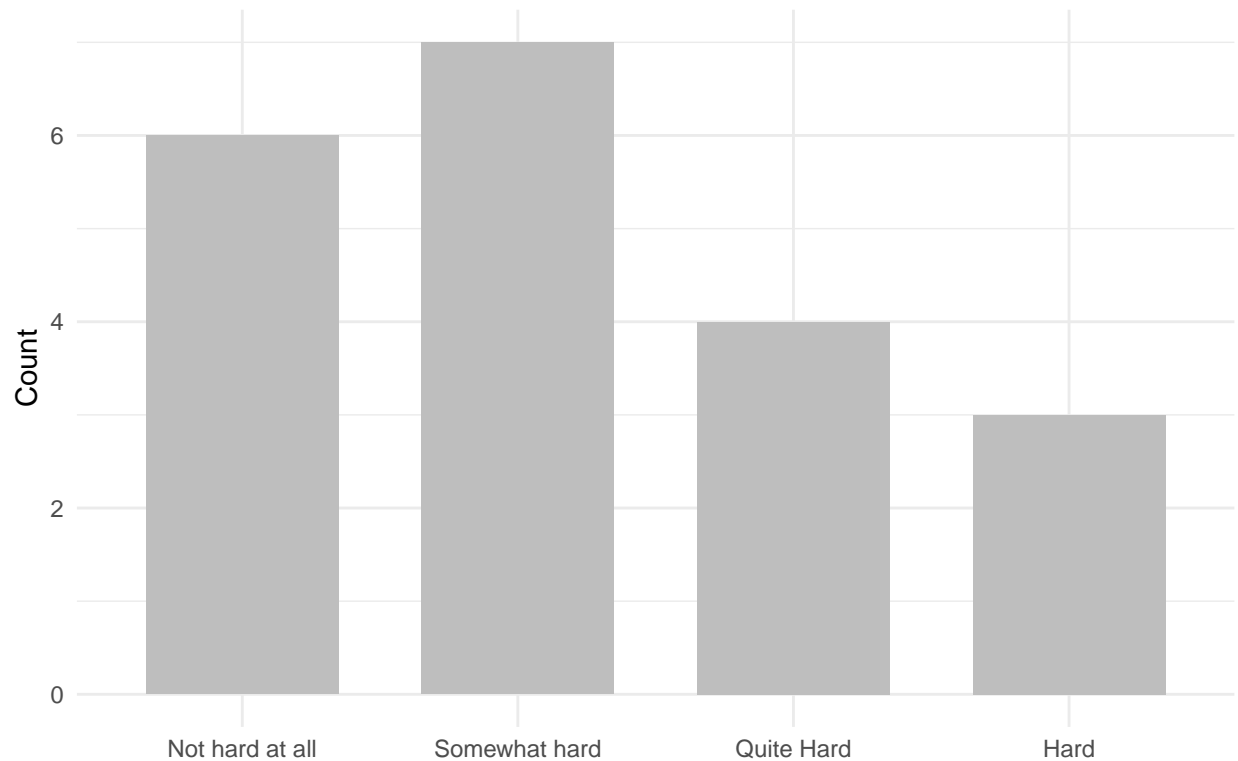
How hard was the item: I have received helpful comments on my work.
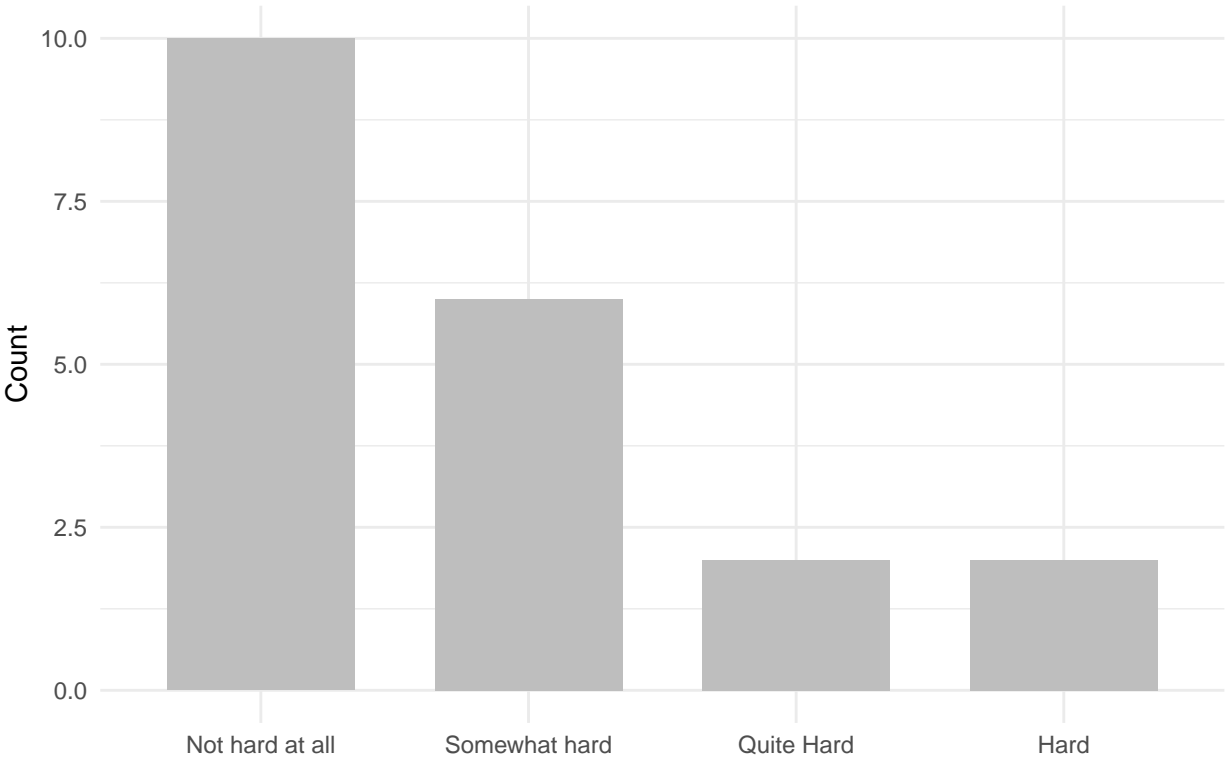

```
##     Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.    Max.
##      1.0     1.0     1.5     1.8     2.0     4.0
```

How hard was the item: course quality satisfaction.


```
##    Min. 1st Qu.  Median   Mean 3rd Qu.   Max.
##     1.0     1.0     2.0    2.2     3.0    4.0
```

Helpful Feedback NSS Question

Comprehension   The main themes that emerged when students were asked to report what 'receiving helpful comments' means to them are *usable, practical advice on how to do the work better* (mentioned in 18 out of 20 answers), *praising comments* (mentioned in 5 out of 20 answers), and *clearly highlighting the mistakes* (mentioned in 5 out of 20 answers). Respondents seemed to understand helpful as re-usable, and many mentioned future-orientation in their answers.

One respondent made this point clearly when complaining about 'comments that are too specific to the individual piece of work and don't have much value going forward'. Another wrote: 'In all honesty, the majority of this feedback has been pretty useless to me as I am receiving it AFTER I have finished a module, where those particular skills were useful. Yes, there are some aspects which spread across different modules and assessments, but specific feedback rarely addressed this. Usual feedback was concerned with the content of a particular essay. I'm not going to rewrite the essay. I'm likely not going to look into the topic again in much detail during my degree. Therefore, it is hard to call most of the feedback useful.'

From this initial qualitative overview, 'helpful comments' means: general/multi-purpose/'future-proof' applied pieces of advice that simply signposts what was done well together with mistakes and that can be used in future work to achieve better grades in other modules/assessments.

Retrieval   Most respondents clearly outlined processes of recollection of past experiences (comparison of previous helpful and unhelpful feedback, verbal conversations with lecturers and academic advisors). Some

mentioned that the word 'work' drove them to also include work experiences, rather than simply University assignments. This highlights a potential wording issue in the NSS.

Recommendations

On the basis of the results from the cognitive interviewing on the survey item on helpfulness of the feedback, it appears that the NSS item works pretty well. It is not perceived as difficult to answer, and the memories recollected are in line with what would be expected. Also, the near consensus on the meaning of 'helpful feedback' is a suggestion that the item is generally understood in the same way by different respondents - hence having good reliability.

Satisfaction with Course Quality NSS Question

Comprehension   The main themes that emerged when students were asked to report what 'University course quality' means to them are: (1) *content excellence*, including demonstrating research quality, benefiting from extensive expertise and applied knowledge of academic staff, and the amount of information disseminated (mentioned in 11 out of 20 responses); (2) *enjoable and passionate lecturers* (mentioned in 5 out of 20 responses); (3) *level of student support/responsivenes and approachability* (both academic and related to mental health - responses in this area often mention the availability of good student support teams), mentioned in 4 out of 20 responses; (4) *feasible/realistic workloads* mentioned in 3 out of 20 responses; (5) *utilitarian considerations*, including value for money and career-progression (mentioned in 5 out of 20 responses).

Retrieval   Most respondents clearly outlined processes of recollection of relevant past experiences (in particular, teaching delivery, teaching contents, clarity of module outlines and learning outcomes, feedback and grades). Some mentioned that retrieval also included estimations of the ease vs. difficulty of the content and how much they feel they have learnt as a result of the degree.

Recommendation   There is some agreement on the meaning of this question, with the content expertise and excellence of the academic staff theme being mentioned by more than half respondents. However, it is clear that students understand course quality in different ways and according to very specific priorities. This item was also scored as harder to answer. Clearly this NSS survey item needs some unpacking, and maybe consider specifying what is meant by quality or do a break-down for the various elements that make up a degree course of good quality (research excellence/applied teaching; inspirational teaching and feedback; student support and student services).