



Pizza, Donuts, and SEI's: Influencing Student Evaluations of Instruction through Relationship Building

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Abstract

Use of Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI) in higher education is seldom popular with faculty. Rather than serve as a feedback mechanism, SEI's are typically a key component of faculty performance evaluations. It is assumed students will recognize and reward 'good teaching', yet those students are untrained in the process of evaluation and are likely unaware of what knowledge and information they need for their long-term success. It is suggested here that relationship building techniques commonly used in marketing and sales can be applied in a classroom setting in a way that is positive both for the faculty member and for the students. Relationship and rapport building adds to the perceived level of expertise and trust of the faculty member. This, in turn, can result in student confidence regarding the relevance and importance of course content as well as higher scoring SEI's for the instructor.

Keywords: Student evaluations of instruction; Faculty performance evaluations; Classroom performance.

1. Introduction

Student Evaluation of Instruction (SEI) is, for many universities, a primary measure of faculty performance in the classroom (Darling-Hammond 2013, Evans 2013, Pepe and Wang 2012, Secolsky and Denison 2013). Use of SEI's is has resulted from several factors, namely the difficulty of measuring "good teaching" (Darling-Hammond 2013), the political and administrative desires for accountability that demand assessment (Hernandez 2012), and an increasing view of the student as customer (Vuori 2013, Singleton-Jackson 2010).

Overall faculty performance is typically derived from a weighted measured of teaching or classroom activities, scholarly work or research, and service to the university or community. While the weighted importance of each of these criteria varies among universities and their respective missions, the three categories mentioned are predominately used. Of the three, evaluation of classroom activities or "teaching" is a difficult component to objectively quantify (Darling-Hammond 2013, Pepe and Wang 2012). Many such evaluations measure actions of faculty related to the classroom but often these actions may have little to do with student learning. Thus, SEI's do not always capture the essence of "good teaching" (Darling-Hammond 2013).

Student evaluations of teachers/teaching began in the early 1900's but likely gained increased popularity during the 1960's and 1970's (Medley et. al. 1984). The inception of the process appears to have focused on a "finding" good teachers but in the latter periods of use, evaluations appear to be more a measure of "professional behavior" (Medley, Coker, and Soar 1984). In an attempt to "objectify" the subjective, administrators in higher education depend heavily on student evaluation of instruction as a component to measure faculty classroom performance (Evans 2013, Secolsky and Denison 2013). Within the performance criteria of "teaching," the relative weight of SEI's varies greatly across universities but the ongoing use of SEI's is nearly guaranteed as administrators increasingly believe that measuring the student experience is of competitive important in higher education (Webber, Lynch, and Oluku 2013). Examples include McCollough and Gremler (1999), who offered students a satisfaction guarantee for a marketing course and Bristow and Schneider (2002), who developed the Collegiate Student Orientation Scale for use by institutions in becoming more student-oriented. The idea that faculty are evaluated and

held accountable has popular and political support which further solidifies the use of student evaluations (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

2. Management Theory Regarding Performance Measurement

Most basic management and HR texts will tell you that an important step for proper performance evaluations is to train the evaluators. Evaluator training ensures that each person conducting the evaluation will understand the standards by which they are measuring performance and there will be some consistency in the interpretation of performance activities. The process of administering student evaluations of faculty offers no training for students and no opportunities for students to “standardize” their interpretations of “excellent” vs. “average” vs. “poor” performance. As a result, SEI’s in any given course for any given faculty member can have a high degree of variability, thus creating potential problems with measurement reliability. In addition, validity of many SEI instruments may also be in question. How is the concept of “good teaching” actually measured and do easily measured constructs such as “returns tests within two weeks” truly indicate good teaching and student learning?

3. Personal Experiences with Student/Faculty Relations

In general, many faculty members may assume that SEI’s often bear a correlation to GPA, with the expectation that a more rigorous the course will result in lower SEI’s. Likewise, if we award higher grades in the course, we would likely expect higher SEI’s. As a former university administrator, the author suspects there is only limited truth to these assumptions but it is also recognized that the interpretation of “difficult” or “rigorous” varies by student (and by faculty member). In this author’s experience, “required” courses tend to show lower SEI scores than elective courses, regardless of the professor. This may be attributable to the fact that required courses contain a greater percentage of students who are not majoring in the subject when compared to electives. Thus, the perception of “enjoyment” of the course varies with more students “not enjoying” the required course and thus providing a greater amount of negative feedback. This relationship suggests that SEI’s are less a measure of student learning and more a measure of student “liking.” Experience has also shown that faculty members often attempt various activities aimed at influencing SEI’s. The most notable were faculty members who sponsored “pizza parties” for students in class several times during the semester, with the final party just one or two meetings prior to the submission of SEI’s. While these faculty members were often noted for good SEI scores, it was also recognized by many in the department that those faculty members also tended to relate well with students at a professional level.

Based on this experience, it is proposed that faculty/student relationships in the academic environment can be viewed much like relationships in the sales environment, whereby faculty are “selling” to students the belief that the information and expertise provided by the faculty member has value to the student. If students respect the faculty member as a professional and perceive course activities as being in their best interest, the perception of “enjoyment” of the course is likely to increase. Please note, the author does not believe in the concept of the student as customer in the academic setting. Rather, it is assumed that employers, or the society into which the student will graduate are the customer and student is both the product and the primary builder of that product. However, it is expected that faculty members who “tell the best stories” and build professional relationships with students are usually rewarded with higher SEI scores from students.

Experts in marketing have known for years that building relationships with clients is an important tool for maintaining and improving sales, especially over the long-term (Abeysekera and Wickramasinghe 2013, Marshal, Moncrief, Rudd, and Lee 2012). Communicating with clients, building trust with clients and maintaining a strong rapport are all seen as important factors in a strong sales relationship (Drollinger and Comer 2013). Similarly, a study by Pepe and Wang (2012) found that students assign higher evaluation scores to instructors they perceive as organized and who can clearly communicate content. This may indicate that students gain respect for faculty who can present material well and “relate” to students on a professional level. Thus, relationship building may also be important to developing higher SEI scores. In a study by Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, and Kardes (2009), findings suggest that relationship building creates a sense of gratitude that drives gratitude-related reciprocal behaviors. Therefore, it is expected that faculty members who communicate well and build a rapport with students will gain a degree of student trust (students believe the faculty member to be acting in the best interest of the student) and in turn the students present a reciprocal gratitude through higher SEI scores. Please note this assumption is separate from student grades. In a strong professional relationship, students will respect faculty members and expect that the actions of the faculty member and the outcomes of the course are in the students “best interest.”

4. How To Influence Sei’s: Three Steps

4.1. Do the Actions Measured by the Instrument

When SEI’s are an important part of overall performance measures, faculty members search for ways to improve SEI’s not just for intrinsic satisfaction of “professional success” and/or “being a good teacher” but also for extrinsic purposes of high evaluation scores. Of course the first suggestion for improving SEI’s is to live up to the

expectations of the questions on the evaluation instrument. For example, a question from one university SEI states “Does the instructor return graded items within two weeks after they are submitted?” Therefore if an instructor wants a higher SEI score, he/she should always return graded items within two weeks after they are collected. Unfortunately two problems still remain. First, in a specific question as stated above, the author has noticed a wide range of student responses even when all graded materials are returned by the next class meeting (see discussion on training the raters). Similarly, one significant problem for faculty attempting to adjust their performance to suit the evaluation instrument is that some (or many) questions on the instrument are non-specific regarding faculty actions. For example, the question of “rate the professor overall.” Such questions tend to have a high degree of multicollinearity within the instrument and there is a lack of understanding by the faculty member as to what actions to take in order to improve upon this score.

4.2. Form Professional Relationships

‘Trust in the salesperson is one of the primary antecedents of customer satisfaction’ (Campbell, Davis, and Skinner 2006). In a sales relationship, building and managing a rapport with customers is fundamental in helping move through various phases of early exploration of the relationship, customer objections, and potential conflicts. In addition, when it is time to “close the deal,” trust and rapport build a relationship that allows both parties to more comfortably discuss terms and expectations with less dissonance or stress (Campbell, et. al. 2006, Davies, Ryals, and Holt 2010). When faculty members build a rapport with students they increase trust. Students trust they will receive fair treatment. They trust the professor is an expert and that proper and sufficient information will be provided for the student. Students trust that the activities and assignments in the course are done in the best interest of the student and students trust that the successful completion of the course will have them properly prepared to succeed in future courses and their future profession.

4.3. Close the Deal

Marketers recognize the importance of asking for the sale, or what is typically referred to as ‘closing the deal’. It is recognized that a good closing statement is important to encouraging the customer to become a buyer (DeGennaro 2014). The concept of ‘closing the sale’ is to obtain a purchasing agreement from buyer (Prus 1988). Seven general ‘closing’ strategies are recognized in sales (Prus 1988). Of those, the strategy of ‘Closing by Inquiry’ may be most appropriate for use by faculty in a classroom setting. This technique simply requires the sales person to ask for the sale (Prus 1988), or in this case, for the faculty member to inform the students of a desired outcome – high SEI scores. It is recommended that at the beginning of the semester, faculty simply ask students for maximum scores on the SEI. Faculty should show a willingness to work with students regarding the concept of earning those high scores, but it should be clear that faculty want high SEI scores. Informing students of faculty desires for high SEI scores provides clarity for students and demonstrate that faculty members consider the results as important and meaningful.

5. Testing Assumptions

This is an exploratory attempt at learning more about how faculty actions in the classroom affect student perceptions of faculty performance and ultimately SEI scores. Having nearly twenty years experience in higher education and over ten years experience at multiple administrative levels, the author was able to observe SEI scores for many faculty over many years. As an administrator, the author also felt it important to periodically visit classrooms (unannounced) and observe faculty members in the classroom. The author also found it beneficial to allow students to bring forth their comments and opinions (good or bad) and was particularly aggressive at trying to gain opinions of about faculty performance from alumni, three or more years after graduation. Experience gained through these activities indicated several issues of particular interest. Notably, administrator opinion and student opinions of faculty performance were not always equal. Second, student opinions of faculty performance often changed significantly after the student had graduated and was reaching a point of career success. A high percentage of graduates would often attribute their success to one or more professors but while in school, those students thought the professor overly difficult and scored them low on SEI’s. In other word, the student had a low level of “enjoyment” while in the course but gained significantly more respect and trust in the faculty member after they realized the faculty member was acting in the best interest of the student’s long-term career performance.

In order to perform a simple exploratory test on the relationship between “liking”, “trust”, and SEI results, activities over three semesters were adjusted and resulting SEI’s tabulated and compared.

5.1. First Semester: No Intervention

For the control group, the author conducted classes (three different courses with approximately 30 students per course) over the semester term and followed the customary university procedures for administering SEI’s. Unannounced to students, a graduate student would first enter the class (while the faculty member is out) and administer the SEI. The author was contacted when the process was complete and began regular classroom

activities. Results from this semester are categorized as “no intervention,” other than the author’s regular efforts to work with students and to effectively teach course content.

5.2. Second Semester - Intervention 1: Ask for High Scores

Over the years the author has observed many faculty members’ attempts to influence SEI’s, some successful and some not. Given the author’s expectations of how to influence SEI’s, it was decided to experiment in the author’s courses to determine if simple actions could lead to a better classroom experience for the students and higher SEI’s for the faculty member. While this is not a true scientific study (there are not real controls as the courses vary by semester and even though using a single faculty member, we cannot control that teaching behaviors are identical across courses or semesters), it is still of interest to faculty as there seems to be common interests in improving student evaluations.

For the second semester, the author presented course material using a typical relationship building style of teaching and added an intervention specific to SEI’s. During the first day of the class, while introducing the syllabus, the author informed students a desire for maximum SEI scores (all 5’s), and that the author intended to work to attain those scores. Then, the week before administering SEI’s, the author again reminded students of desire of a maximum scores (all 5’s) and that their scoring was a significant portion of the overall faculty performance evaluation. The author informed students that if they felt faculty performance was not worthy of “maximum” scoring that they please provide comments as to how it could be improved – but it was asked if they would still consider maximum numerical scoring. SEI’s were administered the next week through the standard process – by a graduate student while the faculty member was not present.

5.3. Third Semester - Intervention 2: Ask for High Scores and Provide Pizza or Donuts

Having witnessed other faculty members holding pizza parties in hopes of increasing SEI’s, the author used a similar technique. For the third semester, the actions of Intervention 1 were repeated (build a rapport and ask for high scores), and the author provided pizza (donuts for early classes) to the class a week prior to SEI administration. During the “pizza party”, students were reminded of the author’s request for maximum scores. Again, the following week SEI’s were administered according to standard procedures, by a graduate student while the faculty member was not present.

6. Results

Results of overall average SEI scores over the three semesters showed improvements with each intervention. The combined SEI’s with no intervention (three undergraduate courses) was 4.48. Intervention 1 (one graduate and two undergraduate courses) was 4.76 and Intervention 2 (three undergraduate courses) was 4.90. A list of questions and breakdown by item and intervention are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 : Average SEI Scores: All Scores Show Average Results Across Three Courses

Item	No Intervention	Intervention 1	Intervention 2
The instructor organized the course in a logical and effective fashion	4.36	4.83	4.87
The instructor provided pertinent feedback on graded tests and assignments	4.49	4.75	4.83
The instructor's communication skills were clear and effective.	4.33	4.71	4.87
The instructor covered material consistent with the state objectives of the course.	4.67	4.84	4.92
My rating of this instructor to other students.	4.26	4.72	4.89
The instructor provided course materials in a timely manner	4.59	4.80	4.88
The instructor graded and returned tests within two weeks	4.81	4.84	4.92
The instructor made it clear how my grade in the course would be determined	4.69	4.71	4.94
The instructor applied grading standards consistently for student to student	4.47	4.72	4.96
The instructor was willing to provide extra help as needed	4.20	4.71	4.91
The instructor allowed/encouraged relevant questions or comments	4.67	4.85	4.96
The instructor was well prepared	4.59	4.92	4.96
The instructor stayed on the subject	4.63	4.73	4.90
The instructor is a good teacher	4.27	4.76	4.92
Summary Averages	4.48	4.76	4.90

A Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test was used to compare summary averages across the three interventions. Results were not significant but are perhaps still meaningful. Given that SEI's are often a major component of faculty performance evaluation scores, actions that change scores from a middle 4 range to an upper 4 range may have noticeable results on overall performance scores, and thus be of practical value to instructors. It was also noted that the increase from "no intervention" to a simple intervention of "asking for higher scores" gave a greater increase than that of adding the incentive of a free meal or snack. These small samples do not allow conclusive results but do raise the question regarding effective methods for influencing SEI's.

7. Conclusions and Limitations

Of course there are many limitations to the findings and presumptions of this report. Most notably there are very few samples and there are no controls between course offerings. Even when the same course was offered over multiple semesters and the same books, lecture notes, tests, etc. are used, this does not guarantee an equal performance by the instructor. Much of the assumptions made are anecdotal and result from the experience of the faculty member involved.

Despite the many limitations of a very non-scientific experiment, the implications are noteworthy. When SEI's are a significant component of faculty evaluations, there is a strong incentive for faculty members to find ways to improve SEI scores. Unfortunately, simply teaching classes well does not guarantee correspondingly high SEI scores. Despite the lack of statistical support, improving SEI scores by a half point may have enough impact on a faculty member's overall evaluation to motivate a change in that instructor's classroom behavior. Relationship building creates trust. If relationship building between faculty and students is key to improving SEI's, then the process of relationship building and maintaining a rapport with students will increase trust and respect between students and faculty and greatly benefit students both during and after their educational process. Once a good

rapport if achieved, 'closing the deal' by asking for good scores or supplying entertaining activities for students simply furthers the relationship.

Is it ethical? First, all relationships must be professional and are not to be considered 'after hours' or 'personal' relationships. Students must trust the professor. Second, students understand the power they have regarding SEI scores. They know that reporting is anonymous and they know faculty members will not see the results until after grades are submitted. Proper university procedures should always be used to ensure faculty members are not present while students complete SEI's. In general, it is expected that 'asking' for high SEI scores is no more unethical than is using the scores provided by untrained participants (students) as a significant component of a faculty member's performance evaluation.

On a personal note, the author believes SEI's are a great feedback tool for faculty but a very poor tool for performance evaluation by administrators. For example, management professionals recognize the value of 360 degree feedback but do not recommend including subordinate evaluations as part the performance evaluation. Likewise, using SEI's as a primary method for measuring an instructor's teaching performance provides a potentially poor view of the actual quality of instruction. SEI results are more likely to indicate a student's level of 'enjoyment' of a course or professor. This measure can be influenced by faculty through effective communication, building trust, and maintaining a professional rapport between faculty and students.

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