

A Semester with a 'Dr Fox': The need to go beyond SETs

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Abstract

Most higher education institutions use some form of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) in order to gather information to gauge teaching performance and unit suitability. The value of SETs has come under increasing scrutiny, particularly in light of the Dr Fox study, which indicated that students are assessing charisma more than content. Similar results to the earlier study were found by the author during the process of moderating a teaching unit with a "Dr Fox" who had received good student feedback, and yet turned out to have poor subject knowledge. Whilst SETs may arguably provide a form of valuable feedback on teaching, the concept of teaching effectiveness needs to be monitored beyond simply the perceptions of the students' derived from a limited set of questions. This study recommends that in addition to SETs, a Reflective Action Learning Process (RALP) model be adopted, involving the use of a critical friend to provide additional feedback intended to assist with teaching improvement.

Key words: Student evaluation of teaching (SET), action learning, Dr Fox.

Introduction

Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) is a common device for assessing units and teaching ability in higher education (Pounder, 2007). The benefits and drawbacks of this approach have been discussed as far back as the 1920s (Wachtel, 1998), with mixed reports on the validity of the instruments and their usefulness in determining instructional effectiveness. Many writers have expressed reservations over the validity of SETs (Sheehan, 1975; Chandler, 1978; Powell, 1978; Vasta & Sarmiento, 1979; Dowell & Neal, 1982; Small, Hollenbeck, & Haley, 1982; Wilson, 1998; Slade & McConville, 2006). In particular, this form of evaluation has been criticised as encouraging inflating grades and “dumb(ing) down material” (Wilson, 1998: A12) in order to receive higher scores. However, it has also been discussed as being valid and accurate (Centra, 1977; Cohen, 1981; Marsh, 1984; McKeachie, 1990; Murray, Rushton, & Paunonen, 1990; Ramsden, 1991; Seldin, 1993; Koon and Murray, 1995) and can be an important product in striving for continual improvement (Wachtel, 1998).

Many higher education institutions have mandatory student feedback questionnaires to gauge feedback on unit and teaching performance at or towards the end of each semester. As many of the questions tend to focus on the teacher rather than the script (Biggs, 2003), SETs tend to measure charisma (the personality of the lecturer) as opposed to content (the coverage of critical issues by the lecturer) (Ware and Williams, 1975). SETs have also been blamed for encouraging some academics to lower their standards and raise their grades in order to “teach to the evaluations” (Wilson, 1998: A12).

The value of the academic’s enthusiasm in influencing students was highlighted in research that sought to examine whether students are motivated by mandatory attendance policies (Verbeeten, 2007). When asked “what can your professor do to make you come to class?” (Verbeeten, 2007:31), the most popular response (90.4%) was “if he/she makes the class interesting” (Verbeeten, 2007:31). The second most common response (60%) was “if he/she is excited about the topic” (Verbeeten, 2007:31). This suggests that there is value in adding charisma to engage students in the learning environment. However, as SETs do tend to focus on measuring charisma, SETs should not be relied on exclusively.

Critics of SETs have seized on Naftulin, Ware, and Donnelly’s (1973) research, which is commonly referred to as the Dr Fox study. In the study, the authors hypothesised that SETs largely rate charisma and popularity and that even experienced educators exposed to an irrelevant and meaningless but charismatic lecture can be seduced into feeling satisfied that they have learned. To examine this, the authors prepared a professional actor “who looked distinguished and sounded authoritative” (Naftulin et al, 1973: 631) to deliver a charismatic but insubstantial lecture on a topic that the actor had no knowledge of. Introduced as Dr. Myron L. Fox, as being an authority on the application of mathematics to human behaviour, he delivered a one-hour lecture on “Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education”. As per his coaching, he deliberately used an excessive amount of “double-talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements...interspersed with parenthetical humor and meaningless references to unrelated topics” (Naftulin et al, 1973: 631-2). In what has become known as “the Dr Fox effect”, the respondents responded favourably to the lecture through feedback provided by an anonymous questionnaire. Across the three groups of respondents, 91 per cent of the 55 respondents believed that Dr Fox stimulated their thinking. Despite Dr Fox having no knowledge of the subject he lectured in, the respondents were seduced into feeling that they had learned.

Whilst the Dr Fox study (Naftulin et al, 1973) has been criticised in terms of methodology (Marsh and Ware, 1982; Wachtel, 1998) “the most serious charge levelled against the Dr. Fox study is irrelevance” (Kulik, 2001:18). Kulik (2001) points

out that the study does not align with the manner in which higher education teaching and ratings are done, since Dr Fox only presented one lecture before being rated. The point that Kulik (2001) makes on this issue is that whilst Dr Fox may have been able to make a favourable impression to his audience after one lecture, “surely everyone would have caught on to the fraud if Dr Fox were the lecturer in a semester-long course” (Kulik, 2001:18).

An experience with a ‘Dr Fox’

However, a case study experience of a ‘Dr Fox’ (who for the purpose of anonymity will be called Dr SouthPark) indicates that even in a semester-long course, it is possible for a lecturer to receive positive student feedback despite having low subject knowledge. This case study relates to a situation at a University at which the author was previously employed. Dr SouthPark managed to impress enough people to be offered the opportunity to lecture and tutor at one of the University’s satellite campuses in a subject that served as a capstone core unit in a three-year undergraduate degree that was taught across several campuses. In the capacity of Unit Assessor of this unit, the author liaised with Dr SouthPark via telephone and email and had some concerns over his teaching, which were allayed when SETs undertaken two-thirds of the way through the semester showed positive feedback about Dr SouthPark. The SETs particularly highlighted his charismatic manner and enthusiastic teaching methods.

Continuing through to the close of the end of the semester, a major researched essay worth 40% of the student’s total marks was due. The Unit Assessor, asked for six of Dr SouthPark’s marked essays to be sent for moderation purposes. The sample essays marked by Dr SouthPark revealed that major theories discussed by his students had been completely misunderstood and yet had not been picked up by Dr SouthPark. When the Unit Assessor contacted Dr SouthPark to discuss this, he admitted to not liking the subject, not understanding it, and not having put the necessary time in to understand it.

As a result of their discussion, the Unit Assessor conducted an investigation to discover what had taken place. This led to students making reports concerning the teaching practices of Dr SouthPark. One written communication stated:-

I have struggled with (the unit) as has most of the class. I believe that the reason may be because the depth of the theory was not covered adequately enough. In tuts there was not much discussion about relevant topics and plenty of discussion about irrelevant things. Although this was entertaining with all the jokes and stories and south park, it didn't help me or any of the other in our essay of our exam. There was no feedback on tut papers and we received them back on the last lec. There was no revision lec at all (Dr SouthPark) went through a reading from (author) and it took about 20 mins then (Dr SouthPark) bought us a coffee. He is a nice guy but i think he was confused about how much effort he had to put into teaching such a difficult subject. (Dr SouthPark) said after handing in the essay that if we were off the mark in any way, he would send an email to us and instruct us on which parts to fix before we send them back.

Feedback received from other students raised these same issues. This case study indicates that like Dr Fox, it is possible to receive positive feedback based on charisma and wit, despite not teaching content adequately. The case also indicates that even in the event of lecturing over a semester-long subject, that it is still possible to receive good student feedback. The comments from the students of Dr SouthPark indicated that they were aware of the absence of adequate lecture content, however they were seduced into giving favourable evaluations of teaching effectiveness. Dr SouthPark delivered enthusiastic lectures in an expressive manner and guaranteed students to pass this unit, which was reputed to be a difficult unit, and as such was in favour with the students. This case study indicates the risks of relying exclusively on student feedback of teachers.

Avoiding Dr Fox

There are three primary ways in which teachers can gain information in order to aim to achieve continual improvement: Self reflections of own teaching, student feedback, and through the use of a critical friend (Biggs, 2003). SETs most certainly have important purposes by providing some form of indication on unit and staff performance (Jeong, Horton, Oh, 2004). They also “provide continuous feedback for realigning learning outcomes, course design and offerings, and teaching methods” (Jeong, Horton, Oh, 2004:34). Using peer or colleague evaluation as an indicator of teaching has received debate showing its benefits and drawbacks (Koon and Murray, 1995). However, understanding the limitations of using peer or colleague evaluation as a possible component of a multiple indicators approach to assessing the quality of teaching at least avoids the exclusive use of SETs, which is making use of only one method and does face the “Dr Fox” risk.

Using self reflections of teaching together with the use of a critical friend can be done formally, semi-formally, or informally. Formally, these methods can be taught and encouraged through teachers undertaking post graduate higher education courses. Whilst every institution that offers graduate certificates in higher education will have its own structure, typically self reflection is taught and encouraged, often through the use of a journal. Some courses will include teaching being observed by the teaching and learning centre with written feedback provided and recorded.

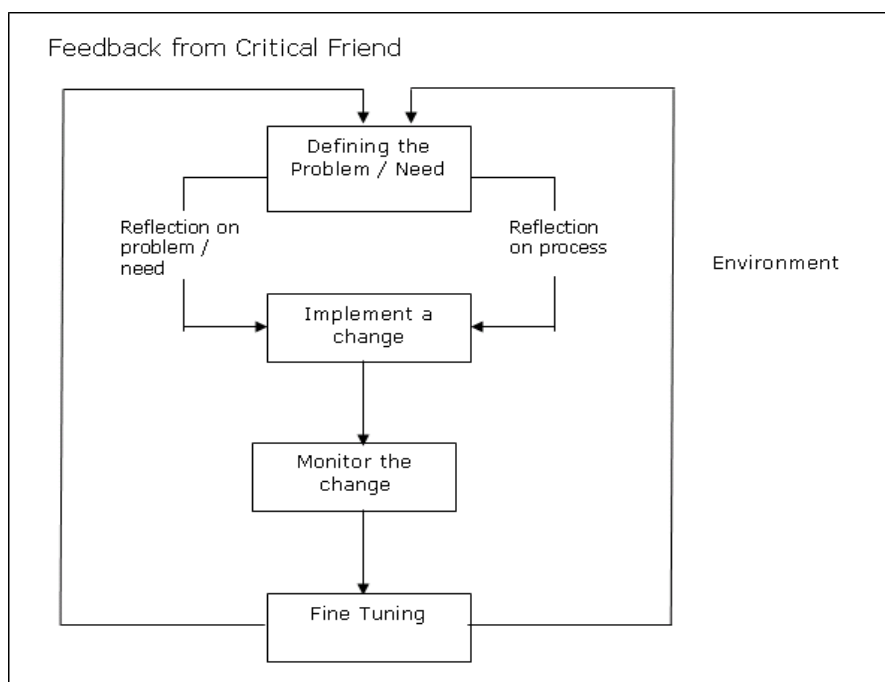
A multi-method approach to gaining information to improve teaching can also be done informally. For example, a lecturer can encourage a tutor in the same subject to observe the lecture and then have an informal discussion over the content and delivery to provide feedback and assist in enabling reflection.

A semi-formal approach can be reached through adopting a Reflection Action Learning Process. This involves the use of a critical friend to aid self-reflection, so that it is then possible to utilise all three forms of information in order to achieve a more holistic assessment of teaching. The ‘critical friend’ can be a colleague or staff developer. Whilst the Dr Fox study revealed the content versus delivery problem, the critical friend need not be an expert in the subject field in order to provide feedback on content.

Drawing on personal experience whereby the author served as a critical friend for a lecturer in law, who in turn served as a critical friend for the author’s marketing lecture, it is possible to provide feedback on content as well as delivery despite not being an expert in the lecturer’s field. The critical friend can observe aspects such as the atmosphere of the classroom, whether the lecture has a logical structure, the session is timed well, student questions are answered clearly, and whether theories are adequately explained. Whilst a critical friend from outside of the discipline is not likely to know whether everything said is accurate, they will know whether it is presented in a clear and logical manner and whether it connects well to the session plan.

The Reflection Action Learning Process is best done in a systematic manner Biggs (2003), which the author has put forward as a model (Figure 1) to visualise the steps involved. The aspect of the environment has been added to recognise that environmental factors such as personality types, moods, the relationship between the critical friend and the practitioner, the dynamics of the group, the lesson structure, and the configuration of the room and the interpretation of the aspect being reflected upon can all play a role in affecting the quality of the teaching.

Figure 1:
The Reflective Action Learning Process Model



(Source: developed from Biggs, 2003)

The Reflective Action Learning Process (RALP) Model commences with the issue (problem / need) that is being considered. This needs to be clearly defined and understood by the critical friend who will provide feedback. This may involve concentrating on one particular aspect such as student engagement, lecture plan, or visual materials, or can be to provide a more general overview. After examining what problem / need is being defined, this is followed by reflection on the process and the problem / need. Reflection should not just be limited to difficult or doubtful elements; it should also be used to reflect on what things were tried and were considered successful, to continue the constant striving for excellence.

During the reflection process, the aspect of the teacher's strongest teaching qualities are considered as part of the interrogating practice (Brown, Fry, and Marshall, 2003). Through this, the skills possessed are assessed to consider what might usefully be developed or used to increase effective facilitation of groups (Brown et al, 2003). The role of the critical friend can be very beneficial and essential in the reflection process to add perspective to the problem (Biggs, 2003). However, it is important for the critical friend to remain impartial and to not "tell you what to do, because that shuts down the reflection process" (Biggs, 2003:254). The importance and usefulness of the critical friend can of course be limited by the person selected. A critical friend who is from a different department is likely to lack the technical knowledge in the particular subject they are reviewing, which may limit the extent of feedback during the process. However, regardless of the departmental differences, the critical friend can still function as a "mirror" (Kember, Ha, Lam, Lee, Ng, Yah & Yum, 1996: 3; Biggs, 2003: 254). And it should be this that remains the focus in the reflection process. The critical friend should assist through enabling the practitioner to reflect in a positive way. Where the practitioner focuses on one aspect of negative feedback, the critical friend should redirect thinking back to other aspects. "Simply having an outsider who poses questions in a supportive way" (Kember et al, 1996: 3) can assist greatly in the reflective process. This feedback assisting reflection then feeds back into the cycle of teaching and learning through the teacher considering what element could be changed

to aid improvement, then this should be monitored through further reflection and fine tuned if necessary.

The cycle should then continue to encourage continuous improvement. By involving a critical friend a supportive sounding board to the teacher is provided. Used in conjunction with SETs, this approach would encourage improvement, provide support at a peer level, as well as provide an additional form of feedback to avoid exclusive reliance on SETs. This in turn can reduce the “Dr Fox effect” risk, because an additional form of feedback is gained, which may identify aspects that would not be raised through student evaluations.

Conclusion

Healy (2007, 1) suggested that the University lecture must evolve and “be more of a performance” in order to have a purpose. Whilst there may be sound reasons to believe that “Lectures are increasingly taking on the characteristics of small group experiences as academics introduce lots of interactivity, with student discussions, debates with the lecturer, time-out discussions and problems solving exercises” (Healy, 2007, 1), there is valid concern that content knowledge is important if the lecture is to be more than just a “performance”. This study highlights the fact that having Dr Fox’s charisma can indeed add much to the classroom atmosphere and can result in a high SET score from students. However, as was the case with this Dr Fox charisma alone was not enough to be a good teacher especially when it came to understanding the subject which became apparent in the marking of student essays.

The experience gained from this case suggests that Academics can apply the Reflective Action Learning Process (RALP) Model in their teaching practice. The role of the critical friend was a key aspect of this case and provided a means of managing some of the externalities, in particular to pose questions that assisted in the reflection process. For example, where students say the lecturer is unclear, then the critical friend may suggest that that perhaps the microphone is not being used properly. Something the lecturer may not realise and students may not suggest. The RALP Model should be adopted and understood as a process in which reflection is used constantly to enable constant improvement.

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