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# Student Evaluations of Teaching: A Tool for Directing and Measuring Course Improvement Efforts

Thomas Worley and Kenneth Casavant

## Abstract

This paper demonstrates how student evaluations of teaching (SETs) provide assistance in making improvement to the quality of teaching and courses. A case study based on four years' experience in an Introductory Agricultural Marketing course illustrates the process of course adjustment based upon SETs results. Changes in specific SETs results are linked to corresponding changes in design attributes of the course. This case experience suggests that SETs can serve as indicators of improvement in specific areas of a course in response to changed course attributes.

## Introduction

Many universities and colleges of agriculture are placing renewed emphasis on the quality of classroom teaching delivered by their faculty. Department chairs and administrators rely heavily on student evaluations of teaching (SETs) as indicators of the effectiveness of faculty efforts to improve their teaching. We fully acknowledge that SETs should not be used as the only means of measuring teaching effectiveness. But, in addition to evaluating teacher performance, we have found them to be a useful tool in our efforts to improve both our course and teaching methods.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that SETs can provide assistance in making improvement to the quality of teaching and courses. A case study based on four years' experience in an Introductory Agricultural Marketing course at Washington State University are used to illustrate the process of course adjustment based upon SETs results. Changes in specific SETs results are linked to corresponding changes in design attributes of the course. Thus, our experience suggests that SETs can serve as indicators of improvement in specific areas of a course in response to changed course attributes.

## Survey Results Contrasted with Our Case

Our case study provides a contrast to survey results reported in a recent article (Broder and Taylor, 1994) examin-

ing student evaluations of teaching in agricultural economics and related departments in the U.S. and Canada. These results, based on survey responses by 56 department chairs, provide much needed insight into the evaluation of teaching process. However, our case experience provides additional insight into two central, underlying themes concerning SETs. Specifically, these two themes are teachers' and administrators' extreme sensitiveness to SETs results and SETs' usefulness in directing and reflecting changes in course attributes.

## Teacher Sensitivity to SET Results

In response to the survey query, "teachers are sensitive to SET results," a quite significant positive response was indicated by the 7.36 level of agreement by the department chairs on a 1 to 10 rating scale, with 10 indicating strong agreement. Teacher sensitivity to SETs merits increased evaluation and emphasis based upon our 4 year course development experience (the case study reported here).

It is a huge understatement to report that, in this case study, a first time instructor's reactions to SET results were received as a disappointing reflection on his initial teaching performance. The teaching evaluations therefore served to instill a sense of urgency and determination to make changes in teaching methods. This personal experience prompts us to believe that teachers are quite sensitive to evaluations, probably even more than suggested by Broder and Taylor's department chair survey. This personal episode of defeated initial expectations led to positive improvements in the course during 3 subsequent semesters.

## Course Improvements Based on SETs

Broder and Taylor remark that, "likewise we did not explore how departments provide, or require faculty with poor SET scores to develop self-improvement programs." We offer the following case study account of "departmentally urged" improvement efforts to report the actions taken and outcomes achieved in response to this unacceptable initial performance in the Agricultural Marketing course.

Our SET instrument is composed of 10 items corresponding to the row names in Table 1. Each item is rated by marking a response on a 1 to 5 scale. Specific student comments are solicited for each item in blank spaces provided on the form.

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Worley is assistant professor and Casavant is professor, Department of Agricultural Economics, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-6210

After the first year, three issues were singled out for focused attention: instructor preparation, course organization and presentation aspects of the course (Worley and Casavant, 1992). In an effort to improve the course in these areas, video segments, guest speakers and preparation of graphic overheads were incorporated during the 1991 course. These changes injected variety of presentation and improved organization into the lectures during each class meeting. These adjustments resulted in the 1990-91 SET percentage changes, showing substantial improvement, especially in these three areas of the course (Table 1). The composite ratings for preparation, organization and presentation increased by 37, 22 and 28 percent, respectively.

### Further Adjustments

The SETs from year two framed further adjustments for year three. Our efforts were specifically directed at the learning emphasis of the course in year three of the course. Our objective was to steer the perceived learning emphasis away from rote memorization of facts toward triggering more independent thinking. We incorporated a group presentation activity and assigned a participatory learning project in lieu of a term paper in the year three version of the course to accomplish this change. These adjustments produced the SET responses for 1992 shown in Table 1, clearly indicating a substantial change, 31 percent increase, in student evaluations of the learning emphasis compared to year two SET results.

During the fourth year of the class, the entire format was changed from an interactive TV delivery method to a traditional classroom environment with instructor and students in a central campus setting. This change in course delivery resulted in one further change in SET results concerning the presentation aspects of the course. The 16 percent increase in the presentation category indicates a very positive student response to having the instructor present each class session as opposed to watching on TV monitors on alternate class days.

### Conclusions and Implications

Although SETs are used quite extensively in measuring teaching performance, it is well understood by most faculty and administrators that SETs should not be used as the only indicator of teaching effectiveness. We do not intend to im-

**Table 1. Composite Ratings and Percentage Changes, Student Evaluation of Introductory Agricultural Marketing, Fall Semesters, 1990-93.**

	1990	1991	1992	1993	90-91	91-92	92-93
	Composite Ratings (1-5 Scale)				Percent Change		
Instructor Interest	3.32	3.79	4.18	4.19	14	10	0
Instructor Preparation	2.84	3.88	4.14	4.07	37	7	-2
Course Organization	2.82	3.44	3.54	3.71	22	3	5
Presentation	2.24	2.85	3.21	3.71	28	13	16
Attitude to Students	3.95	4.09	4.61	4.71	4	13	2
Learning Emphasis	2.58	2.97	3.89	3.79	15	31	-3
Examinations	2.53	2.85	3.57	4.00	13	25	12
Grading	3.28	3.30	4.04	3.96	1	22	-2
Overall Course	2.63	3.15	3.64	3.86	20	16	6
Overall Instructor	2.76	3.09	3.71	3.96	12	20	7

ply that SETs are the only means of measuring course improvements by focusing solely on their use in this article. Other methods of gauging teaching effectiveness such as personal observation, video taping and colleague aided evaluation should not be overlooked. We believe that SETs do, as supported by our case, contain relevant information for improving courses and do reflect changes in specific course attributes.

Based on our experience we can identify with many of the results reported by Broder and Taylor. We believe that our teaching evaluation form is very focused and is performing well by providing feedback that has been invaluable to us in making course adjustments. It is doing this by being designed in such a manner that conflicting signals are not sent to instructors. Each factor is covered by one question and does not permit students to contradict themselves. Thus, SET results are serving as reliable indicators of areas in need of improvement.

Year-to-year results indicate that our improvement efforts, focused on targeted areas of the course in response to SET direction, have been effective. Consequently, as department chairs and administrators continue to use SETs as evaluators and initiators of performance, our experience indicates they are on the right track.

### References

- Broder, Josef M. and William J. Taylor. "Teaching Evaluation in Agricultural Economics and Related Departments." *Amer. J. of Agr. Econ.* 76(February 1994) 153-162.
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