

STRUCTURING LONG-TERM FACULTY TRAINING ACCORDING TO NEEDS EXHIBITED BY STUDENTS' WRITTEN COMMENTS IN COURSE EVALUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

A comprehensive adjunct faculty training program is described, whose aim is to improve student perceptions of courses and programs in a private, not-for-profit MBA and Law degree granting university in San Francisco. The program is somewhat novel in that it uses (a) student input from open-ended responses on course evaluations to determine faculty to be addressed, (b) it uses in-place online learning platforms and processes to deliver training, and (c) it includes a plan for monitoring faculty improvement, through hopefully improved course evaluations, mentoring, and course championing by full time faculty members.

KEYWORDS

Teacher training, faculty development, student evaluations, online, face to face

1. INTRODUCTION

Faculty training and development remains difficult and diffuse for some higher education institutions. The many inherent boundaries (between academic schools, departments, and programs), coupled with resource-scarce school environments, often relegate faculty development to one-off or inconsistently presented events, with little accountability on the part of both organizers and attendees. Yet the higher education community understands full well that improved teaching results in a higher quality educational experience for students, and that perceived higher quality teaching and learning can result in improved word-of-mouth "marketing" for programs, as students and alumni discuss their educational experiences among themselves in their communities of influence. This is evidenced in the current dialogues on assessment tools as indicators of course and program quality (Aston & Antonio, 2012).

In the author's institution, these dynamics have long been acknowledged. Until now, there were not resources available to address the teaching quality situation in a positive way. Recently, a position titled "Director of Teaching Excellence" has been created in our private not-for-profit university, and a faculty member with interest and background in pedagogy is charged with creating a visible and sustainable faculty training program. The program integrates institutional resources into an ongoing, reproducible set of teaching/ learning interventions that address negative student perceptions and concerns about their course and instructor experiences with our university. In short, the premise is that a primary, actionable set of assessment products are the actual words of the students themselves, discussing their particular course experiences, utilized as indicators in the structuring of faculty training.

2. THE RATIONALE FOR THE PROGRAM

The institution has much in-house and regional, state and national data about student perceptions of their educational experiences. Most if not all of those data are reported statistically, meaning that we have numerical interpretations of our students' responses. What these data invariably do not have are actual student comments. Thus, we end up with data featuring little context and no interpretation. Additionally, as part of our accreditation (Western Association of Schools and Colleges; see <http://www.acswasc.org/>), we are

on a consistent path to provide program reviews based on various standard and traditional assessment tools and processes. While there is much dialogue on the various support activities faculty need for teaching improvement, (What Types of Support Do Adjuncts Need? 2012) there appears to be less discussion of the role that actual student qualitative data, that is the actual written comments of students on course evaluations, can provide as guidance for teaching interventions that can improve student perceptions of their educational experiences

3. THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM

To address that situation, and to provide a solid grounding for the training program, actual student comments from open-ended questions provided on course evaluations are gathered, analyzed and categorized, and used to shape teaching interventions. This somewhat novel approach allows for targeted adjunct teacher training activities. It is understood that all faculty may benefit from training, but given that a large majority of our courses are taught by adjunct faculty, that group is thought to be the logical starting place for our program.

4. COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM

Institutional resources: one sometimes overlooked dynamic in designing teaching/learning interventions is existing institutional resources. It may be thought that “we don’t have the resources” to design and deliver workable faculty training and development activities. It’s a precept of this paper, and the teaching excellence approach, that institutions may have sufficient resources, considering in house systems and the easy availability of web-based tools. Our use of existing resources is described in other parts of the paper.

Our university features a mature education-delivered-online entity named Cybercampus (<https://elearning.ggu.edu/>) through which we deliver 22 fully accredited degrees in Management, Information Technology, HR, Tax and Accounting as well as various ad hoc courses and programs. The site is also used as a portal for various institutional, school and department resources. This entity is used as a portal for information about the training program discussed here, as well as an archive for materials. It also supports group and individual email contact, and has a WIKI-like structure, which provides for easy group input and communication.

Course evaluations; using course evaluations to identify courses and instructors in need of assistance: All courses offer a formal student evaluation opportunity once during the semester, to be administered in the latter part of the semester. These evaluations are given in person in face to face courses, and administered online in the online learning environment. Scaled questions about students’ experiences with the course are asked: course administration, course management, as well as questions specific to the instructor and his/her presentation of the course. Various administrative questions are asked also, that have no application to the training program.

In addition to the scaled responses, open ended questions are asked. It is here that rich data are often found, but until the program under discussion was put in place, these comments represented only anecdotal data. Over the years, there has been, though, a clear sense that those written comments have represented a form of truth about our courses and instructors that remained untapped.

The Process: It can be said that the process outlined below follows a systems model, (input = course evaluation written comments; process = analysis of those comments; output = training based on data) with feedback being provided by an instructor’s performance in subsequent courses.

Overall course evaluation scores (5 point scale) for a control semester were ranked and placed into quartiles. Evaluations falling into the top and bottom quartile were chosen for analysis. The rationale is that we need to understand satisfaction factors among both high-performing and under-performing instructors in order to create appropriate training activities. Results were also divided between face to face and online courses, so as to make evident similarities and differences in responses between the two instructional modes.

Overall, student evaluation scores in our university are high, with an average of 4.3 on a 5 point scale. An important irony is that this remains generally (not always) true, even when written comments about a course are negative.

Findings: students' comments for high-scoring teachers and courses are, not surprisingly, the obverse of comments for lower scoring teachers and courses. In high-scoring course/instructor evaluations, students feel that positive factors are

- Teacher engagement

- Teacher enthusiasm and curiosity

- Effective course management

- Effective use of outside resources in a course: guest speakers, use of media (TedTalks, YouTube for example)

- Content Expertise (in all modes and courses, content expertise is not often mentioned)

There is a direct connection between course content and the student's professional life. (This type of response is important, given that our institution features "practitioner-based instruction" that is applicable in professional business environments).

In low-scoring course/instructor evaluations, students report

- Performance expectations are not clear

- Course is managed poorly

- Lack of teacher engagement

- Lack of preparation

- Lack of respect for students

- Course uses dated materials; materials not updated from a previous semester

- Lack of understanding of the diverse classroom (we have many international students as well as our "target" student, the working business professional).

- Faculty are arrogant, egotistical and/or disrespectful

- Gradebook is not up to date (most often reported in online courses)

- Faculty are unprepared to teach in the online environment (online courses)

- Faculty are not present in the course; faculty enter activities rarely, or not at all (online courses)

5. UTILIZING THE FINDINGS

The findings are being used to design training interventions, to occur prior to a teaching semester, to provide the instructor time to make suggested adjustments.

Within this time frame, a session is held for low-scoring adjunct faculty instructors, in face to face and online (Adobe Connect) modes. The sessions are intended to be archived. Instructors are highly encouraged to attend, both "as-needed" instructors and mentor faculty. Given that adjunct faculty are hired at will, improved course evaluation scores are seen as an attractive outcome.

The outcomes from the previous recent evaluations will be used to direct content for the training events. In initial sessions, importance is placed on the design of the syllabus, as a course management document, as an organizing principle for the instructor and students, and, perhaps most importantly, as a visible contract containing implicit and explicit course management and performance expectations for both the instructor and students.

In addition to design of the syllabus, faculty are acquainted with the results of the student comments, and various activities are presented intended to address those specific concerns.

What has not been done yet is to present separate trainings for adjunct faculty teaching online courses. Student comments re online courses fall into distinct categories, but we have not yet been able to undertake training specific to online courses.

It should be said that our online learning entity has highly skilled course designers who are active in the design of online courses, and who engage faculty throughout the design process as to effective online teaching. However, it is clear that some teachers who teach poorly online are requiring the additional impetus of training presented by peers in the teaching community.

As to tracking and subsequent interventions, we are at the beginning stages of our next steps. We will monitor the evaluation scores and student comments from courses the next time a “trained” faculty member teaches a course. This will be somewhat difficult, given that courses are not offered consistently across semesters. Another mitigating factor is that faculty may receive “lower quartile” scores when teaching one course, but not when teaching another. If an instructor continues to receive low evaluation scores, further intervention may be required, via other trainings, mentoring, through interactions with Course Champions, and perhaps by not being rehired.

6. SUMMARY OF THE PROCESS; CONCLUSION

A characteristic of this program that separates it from ad-hoc training is the use of actual student comments as input to shape training activities.

We intend that this program results in an ongoing, reproducible faculty training process that will over time become enculturated, that will move among the other entities in the university, and that will survive personnel changes. Much of the management of faculty data can easily be managed by support staff by slight adjustments to formal and ad-hoc enrollment and faculty reports, easily generated by university data systems, leaving the implementation of training to the Director of Teaching excellence and mentors as well as Course Champions.

The technology issues have proven relatively easy to manage. We use a combination of face to face / Adobe Connect session, and the sessions are archived. The online learning “portal” for the training program is easily accessible by all faculty in our School of Business.

The content of the trainings can, we feel, remain generally the same over time. It is our experience that student comments about the perceived high and low points of their courses are consistent. Faculty who are successful teachers exhibited the same characteristics in the past as the do now, and probably will in the future. Likewise, weak points in teaching have been the same in the past as they are now.

While several aspects of this program may be innovative, it is the use of course evaluation data over time, to both identify needs and track progress, that differentiates the program from others.

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