

The Ethics Of Setting Course Expectations To Manipulate Student Evaluations Of Teaching Effectiveness In Higher Education: An Examination Of The Ethical Dilemmas Created By The Use Of SETEs And A Proposal For Further Study And Analysis

Catherine S. Neal, Northern Kentucky University, USA
Teressa Elliott, Northern Kentucky University, USA

ABSTRACT

Because student evaluations of teaching effectiveness (SETEs) are an important and widely used tool used in the evaluation and reward systems for faculty members in higher education, a discussion and analysis of the ethical problems that may arise as a result of the conflict created by expectations of performance is provided. This discussion specifically focuses on ethical issues related to setting course expectations and attendance policies to manipulate students' perceptions of course rigor and the overall evaluation of the course and the instructor.

Keywords: student evaluations, SETE, attendance, classroom policies, ethics, course rigor

INTRODUCTION

The importance of student evaluation of teaching effectiveness (SETE) to institutions of higher education, and most notably to faculty who teach in institutions of higher education, is indisputable and widely recognized. "The use of student evaluations of teachers in the U.S. is pervasive." (Olivares 2004). "Student evaluation of teacher effectiveness (SETE) has become commonplace as one measure of teaching performance in higher education." (Havelka, Beasley, et al. 2005). "[T]hese evaluations are among the most important sources of information considered by university retention, tenure, and promotion committees and university administrators alike." (Gerstman 1995). SETEs are used for faculty reappointment, promotion, and/or pay increases. (Jackson, Teal, et al. 1999). The use of SETEs in the evaluation and reward systems for faculty in higher education has been criticized for a variety of reasons. Research has both questioned and supported the validity of results of SETEs, the reliability of SETEs, and the biases reflected in SETEs. One further reason to question the wisdom of using SETEs in the evaluation and reward system of faculty members is the potential this practice creates for unethical behavior. The use of SETEs in the evaluation process has the potential to trigger unethical behavior among faculty members in higher education.

UNETHICAL MANIPULATION OF SETEs

Despite the weaknesses inherent in using SETEs, there are important, legitimate, and understandable reasons for using them in the evaluation of instructors in higher education. The results from SETEs can be used to

improve the quality of instruction. They allow instructors to examine their teaching practices, to improve those practices, and become better teachers, and as a result, faculty members are able to provide a better educational experience for students who enroll in their same courses in the future. However, there may be unintended consequences of using SETEs “that have been widely overlooked.” (Olivares 2004). One of the overlooked and unintended consequences of using SETEs as a critical tool in the faculty evaluation process is that the practice may create an environment where unethical practices are likely to occur among faculty members. SETEs are used in “dispensing merit-based salary increases and can create a competitive climate among faculty members within university colleges and departments.” (Obenchain, Abernathy, et al. 2001). The results of SETEs have a significant and personal impact on the lives of faculty members. The results of SETEs help determine success or failure, reappointment, tenure, promotion, and pay raises. And the results of SETEs can be manipulated by faculty members.

Research has shown students’ perceptions of a course and the instructor of a course can be manipulated, and accordingly, student responses to SETEs can be manipulated. Examples include studies that support the theory that giving higher grades results in better ratings on SETEs (d’Apollonia & Abrami 1997; Greenwald 1997), and studies that show that reducing the workload expected of students in a course can raise student grades and thus improve SETE ratings. (Powell 1977). “Student evaluations, many professors charge, can weigh heavily in career advancement and encourage professors to dumb down classes.” (Clayton 1998). Research seems to support the argument that instructors who teach less rigorous courses by setting lower expectations receive better ratings on their SETEs.

ATTENDANCE POLICIES

“Many instructors are also reluctant to require attendance or adhere to due dates because of how it may reflect in their student evaluations . . .” (Hassel & Lourey 2005). Do students perceive courses with demanding attendance policies to be more difficult, and accordingly, will they rate instructors who require attendance more harshly on SETEs than instructors who do not require attendance? Higher grades mean higher student evaluation scores. If there is a rigorous attendance policy, and failure to attend results in a lower grade, a lower grade results in lower SETE ratings.

What are faculty members’ responsibilities with regard to setting course expectations, and specifically attendance policies? The stakeholders who are affected by attendance policies include students, the college, the university, the employers who hire graduates, and ultimately society. “By failing to emphasize the value of attendance, college teachers obscure for students the intangible, complex, and ongoing work of education, work that may not be quantifiable.” (Hassel & Lourey 2005) “Instructors who link class attendance to grades send a message to students - - learning is an interactive experience and your time in the classroom is valuable . . .” (Hassel & Lourey 2005) However, because of the pressure that exists to receive high ratings on SETEs, and because the professional and personal consequences of receiving poor ratings on SETEs is significant, even if faculty members believe they can provide a better experience for students by requiring attendance, and even if faculty members believe that all of the stakeholders affected by their course expectations would be better served if they require attendance, the competing interests that are created by policies for achieving promotion, tenure, reappointment, and pay increases may trigger faculty members to set course expectations that are not in the best interests of their students, such as not requiring attendance, because students may perceive the course to be less rigorous if attendance is not required. And if students perceive the course to be less rigorous, the instructor is more likely to receive the desired high ratings on SETEs - - the ratings he or she needs to achieve success in the reappointment, promotion, and tenure process, and in receiving pay increases.

Faculty members are forced to balance competing interests. They must consider what is required or them to receive reappointment, promotion, and tenure versus doing what is best for students. Policies that rely heavily on SETEs to evaluate and reward faculty in higher education create a disconnect between being successful and doing what is best for students and other stakeholders of institutions of higher education. Policies that rely on SETEs create an environment where faculty members are far more likely to act unethically; the policies require faculty members to make difficult, ethical choices between doing what is most likely to ensure reappointment, promotion,

and tenure, as opposed to encouraging faculty members to set course expectations that provide the best educational experience for their students.

PROPOSAL FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ANALYSIS

Does the attendance policy effect how students evaluate the difficulty of a course? Does the attendance policy effect how students evaluate the overall effectiveness of an instructor? Does the attendance policy effect how students evaluate how much they learned in a course? A study is planned where the results of several years of SETEs will be examined to determine whether different attendance policies have a significant effect on SETE ratings. We will compare the results of SETEs from the same course, but with three (3) different attendance policies:

(1) **No attendance required**

ATTENDANCE, PREPARATION, AND PARTICIPATION

All reading and other assignments, as listed on this syllabus, are to be completed prior to each class meeting. This will allow for meaningful discussions during class and will promote student learning throughout the semester.

Regular attendance is expected. Failure to attend classes will affect students' final grades in that students' understanding and mastery of the material discussed during class meetings will be measured on the exams. However, no points will be awarded or deducted for attending or failing to attend classes.

(2) **No attendance required, but indirect consequences to final grade if classes are missed**

*Ten (10) Unannounced In-Class Essays: There will be ten (10) unannounced, unscheduled in-class essays. The assigned essays will be one (1) paragraph long and will be written on topics discussed in class. Each essay is worth ten (10) points. You will receive the entire ten (10) points if you are present and turn in the essay. You will receive no points if you are not present. **YOU MAY NOT MAKE UP AN ESSAY IF YOU MISS CLASS ON A DAY WHEN AN UNANNOUNCED ESSAY IS ASSIGNED AND COLLECTED. NO EXCEPTIONS, REGARDLESS OF YOUR REASON FOR MISSING CLASS.***

ATTENDANCE, PREPARATION, AND PARTICIPATION

All reading and other assignments, as listed on this syllabus, are to be completed prior to each class meeting. This will allow for meaningful discussions during class and will promote student learning throughout the semester.

Regular attendance is expected. Failure to attend classes will affect students' final grades in that students' understanding and mastery of the material discussed during class meetings will be measured on the exams and in the writing project. However, no points will be awarded or deducted for attending or failing to attend. But, see information regarding Unannounced In-Class Essays, supra.

(3) **Attendance Required**

Attendance: Attendance will be taken during every class meeting. Students will receive 100 points for attendance over the course of the semester. Students may miss four (4) class meetings for any reason with no direct negative effect on their grade. For each absence after the fourth absence, students' grades for attendance will be reduced five (5) points, regardless of the reason for the absence.

How do students judge the "level of difficulty" of a course? In SETEs, students are typically asked to evaluate "how challenging was this course?" or to rate the level of difficulty of a course. What factors influence students' perceptions of the level of difficulty, or whether a course was challenging? Does the attendance policy influence students' perceptions of the rigor of a course?

Does the attendance policy of a course have any influence on how students in that course evaluate how challenging the course was for them over the course of the semester? Do students perceive a course with a more rigorous attendance policy to be more challenging than a course in which they are not required to attend class meetings?

A study is planned in which data will be collected from students to determine whether their perceptions of course rigor are influenced by the attendance policy of the course. We will also apply ethics research to examine faculty responses to the conflict between reappointment, promotion, and tenure policies that require high ratings on SETEs and the desire and professional responsibility faculty members hold to do the right thing for their students. We anticipate forming strategies to be used by institutions of higher education to minimize the potential for unethical behavior among faculty members.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Teressa L. Elliott, J.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Accountancy at Northern Kentucky University. Her teaching specialties are business law and business ethics. She has taught business law since 1992. Prior to joining Northern Kentucky University in 2003, she had thirteen years experience practicing law. Ms. Elliott has published and presented articles about the Federal Arbitration Act, ethics and college instruction. Ms. Elliott graduated magna cum laude with a BA from Northern Kentucky University and received her J.D. from the University of Kentucky College of Law.

Catherine S. Neal, J.D., is an Assistant Professor of Business Ethics and Business Law in the Department of Accountancy at Northern Kentucky University. Prior to joining the Haile/US Bank College of Business at NKU, Ms. Neal was an Assistant Professor of Legal Studies at the University of Cincinnati – Clermont. Ms. Neal spent several years in private practice in Cincinnati, Ohio. Her research interests include business ethics, ethical leadership, ethics in higher education, and business law. Ms. Neal graduated summa cum laude from Northern Kentucky University and she received her J.D. from the University of Cincinnati College of Law.

REFERENCES

1. Clayton, M. (1998). Give me an “A” professor - - I’ll give you one, too. *Christian Science Monitor*, 90(70), B6.
2. D’Apollonia, S. & Abrami, P.C. (1997). Navigating student ratings of instruction. *American Psychologist*, 52, 1198-1208.
3. Gerstman, B.B. (1995). Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness: The interpretation of observational data and the principle of *faute de mieux*. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 6(3), 115-124.
4. Greenwald, A.G. (1997). Validity concerns and usefulness of student ratings of instruction. *American Psychologist*, 52, 1182-1186.
5. Hassel, H. & Lourey, J. (2005). The dea(r)th of student responsibility. *College Teaching*, 53(1), 2-13.
6. Havelka, D., Beasley, F., & Neal, C.S. (2005). An analysis of the relative importance of criteria used on student evaluation of teaching effectiveness instruments. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 2(11), 1-8.
7. Jackson, D.L., Teal, C.R., Raines, S.J., Nansel, T.R., Force, R.C. & Burdsal, C.A. (1999). The dimensions of students’ perceptions of teaching effectiveness. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 59, 580-596.
8. Obenchain, K.M., Abernathy, T.V., and Wieste, L.R. (2001). The reliability of students’ ratings of faculty teaching effectiveness. *College Teaching* 49(3), 100 – 104.
9. Olivares, O.J. (2004). Student evaluations of teachers; Intended and unintended social consequences. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 15(3), 105-127.
10. Powell, P.W. (1977). Grades, learning, and student evaluation of instructors. *Research in Higher Education*, 7, 193-205.