What Impacts Course Evaluation?

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ABSTRACT

Today most universities are using course evaluations. However, course evaluations are often discussed and questioned. This paper reports on a survey where we aim at finding out (1) if students have a preconceived notion of a course, (2) if course evaluation scores can be predicted early in a course, (3) if exam throughput impacts course evaluation, and (4) if web-based evaluation reflects the general opinion from students. The results from the study indicate that students do not let preconceived notion impact nor does exam throughput matter to course evaluation. Further, the final web-based results seem to correlate with opinion of students attending lectures. However, the evaluation grades tend to be defined early in the course; hence first impression lasts.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.0 [**General**] Examination, course evaluation

General Terms

Course evaluation

Keywords

Course evaluation, course grading

1. INTRODUCTION

Course evaluations have been used at universities for a long time. Most universities make use of course evaluations. The original idea with course evaluation was to help teachers improve their teaching and for administrators to monitor the teaching quality. However, it is to strong to argue that course evaluations reflects teaching effectiveness.

Course evaluations are often discussed and questioned. Some questions and doubts are: Do students have a preconceived notion of a course? Is it possible to predict the course grading? Is course evaluation done mainly by students who attend lectures? Does low throughput have a negative impact on student's grading of a course?

We report the results from a survey made in three courses. Our intention is not to correlate course evaluation with teaching quality. We focus on finding out when and based on what students do grade a course.

We performed the survey at four occasions in each of the three courses; 1st lecture, 2:nd lecture, mid-course-lecture and at the final lecture. We compared the answers from the survey with the web-based course evaluation from previous year and current year.

We make use of the following rules for the study: If the result from course evaluation from previous year is similar to the result at the first lecture we say that there is an indication that students have a preconceived notion of the course. If course evaluation result change during the course, we say that there is an indication that students define their grades at the end of the course. If the final (web-based) course evaluation results (current year) is different from the result at the last lecture, we say that there is an indication that throughput impacts. If the final (web-based) course evaluation result is different from the result at the last lecture we say that there is an indication that the grading is not representative for students in general.

The Institute of Technology (LiTH) at Linköping University makes use of a web-based course evaluation system to which students are invited to give comments on a course after a course has finished. The course evaluation system is open for all students who have been registered at the course. A number of questions are asked on various aspects of a course. One general question is: "On a scale 1-5 (5 being the best) I give the overall credit to this course" and students can answer 1-5 or blank. For the survey, we selected that question.

The study shows (Table 1) that students do not tend to have a preconceived notion of a course. It seems students form their opinion by themselves. We do not find large differences between the course evaluation at the last lecture and the web-based system; hence the result from the web-based course evaluation seems representative for students attending the lectures and exam throughput has not a high impact on final course evaluation. However, the survey indicates that grades given early in the course tend to remain; hence first impressions seem to last.

Table 1. Average grades in the three courses.

Time for survey	Grade course 1	Grade course 2	Grade course 3
First Lecture	4.1	3.7	3.5
Second Lecture	3.6	3.9	3.5
Mid-lecture	3.9	-	3.4
Last lectrue	3.9	4.3	2.9
2006	3.5	4.1	2.9
2005	2.5	4.1	3.2