

Online Student Survey Comments: a qualitative improvement?

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Abstract

Students' contact with university is becoming increasingly computer-mediated. For instance, students can enrol, check exam marks, even attend some lectures online. Many universities now conduct at least some of their student evaluations of teaching or units online instead of using traditional paper questionnaires. Given the move to more flexible learning environments, with no requirement for students to attend all or any lectures, institutions are beginning to consider whether it is possible to move to online only systems of collecting student feedback. Whilst lower response rates appear to be a major concern with online surveys, commentators have pointed to several important advantages over paper forms: reduced paper use, reduced impact on class teaching time, less time spent scanning paper forms etc. It has also been suggested that the responses to open-ended questions provided online are more frequent, lengthy and thoughtful.

This paper looks in more detail at the issue of student comments and reports the findings of several comparisons between paper and online approaches, looking at students enrolled internally and externally, and also recent graduates. The place of student comments as a valuable source of data is considered, along with the implications for an improvement in qualitative data with respect to the more quantitative aspects of student feedback.

Introduction

Over the last decade Australian universities have increasingly made use of electronic communication in their dealings with students. In many cases students enrol online, access their examination results online, access course materials and electronic journals online and are able to listen to lectures online. Murdoch University has adopted a policy of electronic transmission as the default mode of communication between students and the university. Students who do not wish or are unable to use electronic means of communication are required to make a special request for paper communication. It is not surprising, therefore, that the university is currently at the stage of considering moving its evaluations of teaching and units totally online.

The case against moving to online surveys generally cites the lower response rates which have been found in a number of studies (Ballantyne, 2003; Cody, 1999; Dommeyer & others, 2002; Dommeyer & others, 2004; Hmieleski, 2000; Hmieleski & Champagne, 2000). Johnson (2003), however, found that response rates at Brigham Young University increased over time and even with low response rates there was little response rate bias with online surveys. Sampling error due to web surveys being restricted to a biased group has in the past also been seen as a problem with online surveys (Dillman, 2000; Sheehan, 2002). With the

online access available to students this is less likely and increasing emphasis on flexible learning options in Australian universities may result in a biased group of students completing paper forms at an in-class administration. Students who do not attend classes also need to have the opportunity to give their opinion of the unit of study.

Advantages given for using an online system include cost savings as no printing of paper forms is required, staff time savings in less administration, speed of response and cleaner data (Bothell & Henderson, 2003; Cummings & Ballantyne, 1999; Dommeyer & others, 2004). Concern has been expressed by teaching staff that responses to online surveys may differ from those on paper, however a number of studies have found no difference in the actual ratings given (Carini & others, 2003; Hardy, 2003; Johnson, 2003; McGhee & Lovell, 2003; Thorpe, 2002). While the numerical data from student evaluations provides useful overall information and which teachers can compare over time or benchmark against their own discipline, it is the responses to open-ended questions in surveys which often provide the richest source of data. Online surveys have been found to be particularly good sources of such comments (Hardy, 2003; Muffo, Sinclair & Robson, 2003). Schaefer and Dillman (1998) report a fourfold increase in comments with online surveys. Brigham Young University where all student evaluations have gone online, states on its website that – *Research shows that when forms are completed online, the number, length, and thoughtfulness of student comments are greatly increased. Research at BYU and across the nation has shown that students are much more likely to supply written comments when ratings are online* (Brigham Young University). Ballantyne (2004), in an examination of a mixed-mode survey of student satisfaction, where the response mode was self-selecting, found that while more students commented via the paper form, comments online were more detailed. It is this issue of differences in the quality and quantity of comments that this paper considers.

Online student evaluation at Murdoch

At Murdoch University student evaluation of units is mandatory on a two year cycle. The current survey instrument (under review at time of writing) is a standard fourteen item questionnaire with four open-ended questions. Online surveys were first introduced in 1999 when the School of Engineering agreed to move all of its unit evaluations online as part of a pilot study. Students in Engineering already had a considerable online component in each of their units. That, coupled with the high level of computer literacy of the students and the access available to them on campus, made it an ideal area for the pilot. In 2000 the online system was extended to distance students who had previously been surveyed by mail. The extension of the student email system in 2001 considerably increased the use of the online form for these students. An email is sent informing students of the survey and a paper form only mailed if they fail to respond online within a set time. The School of Information Technology adopted the online system in 2002 as in-class response rates had been low.

Online surveys have now been extended to foundation units (first year compulsory units) and a number of other units where online seems the most appropriate mode. While low response rates continue to cause concern, rates in individual units vary widely. The university has also used mixed-mode surveys - online with paper back-up - in several other areas. the Graduate Destination Survey/Course Experience Questionnaire, the Student Satisfaction Survey, the Postgraduate Research Student Opinion Survey, etc.

Student Comments

If student comments tend to be more plentiful in online surveys whilst the response rates are typically lower, this suggests a trade-off between quantitative and qualitative feedback. The lower the number of respondents, the less reliable the measurement of student opinion. However, an improvement in the value of more qualitative data may turn out to be a major bonus. There has been a distinct increase in the extent to which student feedback in higher education is geared to serve institutional needs such as quality assurance, decisions on promotion, etc. This change in emphasis away from an older model where the focus was simply on students feeding back to academic staff, has been characterised by Barrie (2001) as a tension between ‘improving teaching’ and ‘proving teaching’. Whereas ratings may be seen by staff as a checklist of quality standards which teaching or units should be meeting, the qualitative data of comments is likely to be seen quite differently, especially given that it almost always goes back only to the teacher or unit coordinator concerned. Barrie suggests that teaching was, in the past, more easily described as a ‘transaction between teacher and student that was not open to public scrutiny or critique and was not subject to “corporate management”’. This description seems apt when applied to student comments, and helps reinforce a distinction between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of student feedback data. It also raises the idea that an improvement in qualitative student feedback may even represent a slight shift back to an ‘improving’ rather than ‘proving’ role.

Of course, it is not an easy thing to define what is valuable in student comments, let alone to measure it. Just as academic staff have differing opinions about student feedback in general, preference for ratings versus comments will vary, and in the case of comments, the value of the comments depends on the perspective of the reader. Some staff may be looking for clear suggestions for improvement. Others may feel there is value in a student making positive statements about the teaching/unit in their own words.

In the current analysis of comments on various surveys, however, the proportion of respondents who make comments and the length of those comments are both taken as a rough proxy for comment value. If we presume that students who are more engaged with their studies are more likely to make comments, then it seems reasonable to presume that the quantity of comment material might be a guide to its quality.

The surveys

This investigation of online versus paper approaches to student feedback considered three datasets, each from a different survey type and with a different student type as the respondent.

1. **Survey of External Units**
A survey of externally enrolled students on a unit they are close to completing.
2. **Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)**
A survey of recent graduates on the course they completed
3. **Student Survey of Teaching**
A survey of class-based students on a particular teacher.

All three of the surveys follow a common approach used in student feedback questionnaires, that is, a set of Likert-style questions followed by several open-ended questions asking

students to mention positive aspects of the unit, course, teacher etc. and also any problems or areas in need of improvement.

Both the External survey and the CEQ employed a mixed mode approach, where students were initially emailed by the Teaching and Learning Centre (the TLC - who administer the surveys at Murdoch) and directed to an online survey to provide their feedback. After two reminder emails, non-responders were mailed a paper questionnaire along with a reply-paid envelope. The Student Surveys of Teaching are different in that they are typically conducted as an in-class exercise, with the focus of the survey being face-to-face teaching by an individual teacher. In this instance, however, approximately half of the students completing a Teaching Survey were instructed to do so online instead of via the usual paper form.

External Unit Survey and CEQ

Of the 926 external students surveyed with a Unit Survey, 490 responded giving an overall response rate of 53 percent. The units covered a wide range of disciplines. The online option was used by 67 percent of respondents, with the remaining 33 percent returning a mailed paper questionnaire. In the case of the CEQ survey of recent graduates, there were a total of 1447 respondents with an overall response rate of 61 percent. Online responses accounted for 52 percent of the total, with paper responses 48 percent.

Therefore, in both these mixed-mode surveys there was a good uptake of the initial online mode. However, our particular interest in this study is how students responded to the open-ended questions. As Table 1 shows, in both the CEQ and External surveys, the proportion of students who responded to the open ended questions was very similar for both modes. However, both datasets indicate that students who do comment write more online than on paper: 25 percent more for CEQ and 31 percent more for Externals.

		Number Responding	Mode of Response	Percent of responders commenting	Average words per commenter
CEQ	Online	750	52%	77%	40
	Paper	697	48%	80%	30
Externals	Online	328	67%	75%	91
	Paper	162	33%	75%	72

Table 1: Online versus Paper comments: CEQ and External

The Teaching Surveys

Whilst the first two datasets were of use in considering the basic questions of comment frequency and length, the mode of response (online or paper) was self-selected by the respondent. The third dataset was an attempt to overcome this potential weakness by randomly allocating students to one or the other mode. It also provided an opportunity to make a proper comparison of response rates between the two modes.

Other comparisons of online and paper modes in student feedback have involved studies which controlled the allocation of mode to student groups. For instance, Hardy (2003) used

six ‘similar’ classes from the same department and allocated four to online and two to paper. Dommeyer (2004) split the survey mode within the same teacher, but surveyed only business school students.

In the present study each of the six teachers who ran a Teaching Survey agreed to use tutorial groups/practical classes as the means of allocating one of two modes of response. This way, although the scale of the study was small, the teacher and their teaching could be assumed to be equivalent to both those student groups responding online and those responding through the paper survey. Additionally, a range of education fields were covered: two Media units, one Politics unit, one Psychology unit and two Science units.

One further and important distinction between the first two datasets considered in this paper and the third dataset, is that the paper administration for the Teaching Survey was conducted in class, rather than as a mailout survey. Currently, about 80 percent of Murdoch’s surveys of teaching and units are conducted as paper in-class. Given the intended move to a more comprehensive use of online surveys at Murdoch, it is the comparison between in-class paper surveys and online surveys which is probably most important.

With the Teaching Surveys, for each teacher, the paper groups were surveyed in the usual way, with scannable forms distributed by the teacher and collected up by a student. For the online groups, the teacher told students that he or she would like feedback on their teaching and that the group was being asked to complete an online questionnaire. These students were told to check their email for the message sent by the Teaching and Learning Centre and click on the URL. The teacher also distributed a small flyer with details of the survey and the URL, to reinforce the request to participate. Over the course of the following three weeks, two email reminders were sent by the TLC to non-responders.

		Number responding	Response Rate	Percent of responders commenting	Average words per commenter
Teaching Survey	Online	77	53.1%	74%	44
	Paper	142	70.3%	79%	30

Table 2: Online versus Paper comments: Teaching Surveys

Firstly, the comparison of response rates in the two modes appears to be typical of that found in previously cited studies, with online clearly lower. When looking at the comments, just as was the case with the External and CEQ datasets, the proportion of responders making a comment was similar for each mode, but online commenters again wrote more, on average, than their paper counterparts: approximately 50 percent more.

Discussion of findings

The analysis of comments from the three datasets used in this study show a fairly consistent picture. Paper based surveys resulted in a similar proportion of commenters to those found in online survey data (marginally more in fact). However, the length of comments is clearly greater online. These results show a rather less remarkable increase in online comments over paper than were found in other studies such as those cited earlier, but most notably in the proportion commenting. However, whereas both Hardy (2003) and Johnson (2003) found

about 10 percent of paper responders provided comments, the equivalent proportion for the three Murdoch datasets used here were far higher – around 75 percent.

The nature of the three surveys involved may have something to do with this. External students, many of whom have very little communication with academic staff during the course of the unit, are typically keen to take advantage of opportunities to make themselves heard – whether on paper or online. Again, with the graduates responding to the CEQ, this is generally the only opportunity most have to give feedback on their whole university course. The paper Teaching Surveys in this study were administered in tutorial groups of about 15 students. These were convenient groupings to use in arranging a split-method study. However, in such small classes where the teacher hands out the survey forms and is also the direct focus of the survey, students may feel a sense of social obligation to be contributing to the process, and tend to at least make a brief comment after completing the ratings.

In terms of proportion of students who comment, and in a more broad sense, the real test is probably a comparison between online and paper where the paper forms are administered in the less intimate environment of a lecture, and with the less personalised focus of, for example, a survey about the unit as a whole, rather than an individual teacher.

Maintaining the qualitative improvement?

If online response rates could be improved would there be a corresponding loss in qualitative data? We might assume that, where response rates are low, responses tend to be from more engaged students who are more motivated to respond - the online method is not based on using a captive audience available in a classroom. Is it more likely, then, that such students will also tend to provide more comments? This would fit with the general idea of a trade off between quantitative and qualitative data in student feedback, where lower response rates in online surveys tend to correlate with higher frequency of comments and/or longer comments.

In an analysis of one of the datasets in this study (the CEQ), however, it appeared that over the course of the survey, as the response rates rose there was very little change in the average number of words per commenter. Even the proportion of respondents offering comments only dropped slightly.

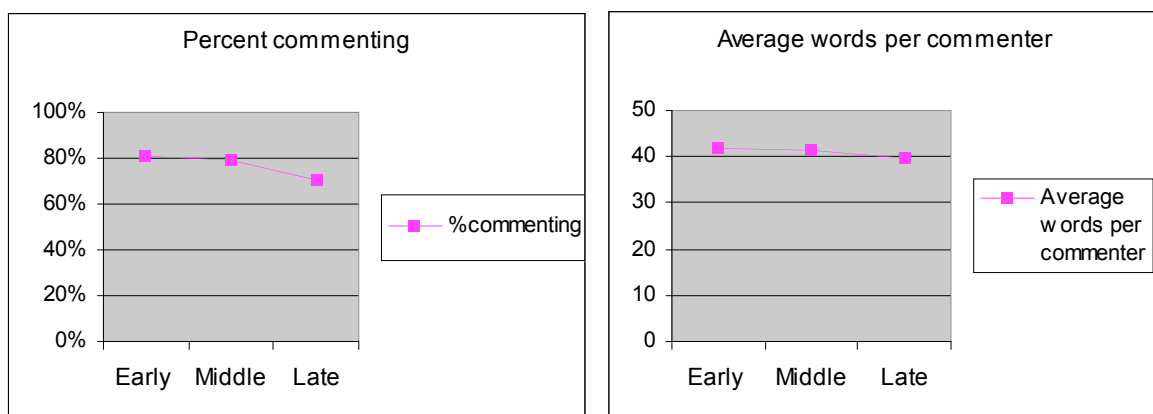


Figure 1: Comments from online responses over the course of the CEQ survey.

The CEQ dataset for online responders was divided into three groups according to the date of submission. The first group consisted of responses up to the first email reminder, the second,

responses up to the second reminder, and then all subsequent responses: early, middle and late responders. Figure 1 illustrates the relatively small drop in both measures – even when comparing very prompt responders with stragglers.

Conclusion

In the literature on student feedback, the issue of student comments to open ended questions generally comes a poor second to the issue of ratings. The shift to a more online approach to surveys seems a good opportunity to reconsider the value of qualitative data in the feedback process. This paper describes the results of an exploratory analysis of comments based on how many respondents provide them, and how long they are. A development of this kind of analysis would ultimately need to understand better what constitutes value in comments-based data, and in comparison to data based on ratings. A more sophisticated assessment of this would require consultation with the users of the data themselves, in particular those who coordinate units and teach classes.

Nevertheless, given the limitations of the two measures used here, it might be worth considering the relative worth of each. The proportion commenting is important if we hold that the more representative the data is of the class the better. There are always concerns that one or two negative comments can give a far worse impression of student opinion than is warranted. Also, where the proportion of commenters is high this usually provides some validation of the ratings given by students. However, representativeness and generalisability are better achieved by the quantitative approach of ratings. Qualitative data is by contrast supposed to be richer, able to generate new insights, and not concerned with trying to find the average position. Research on online feedback points to an improvement in qualitative data. Even if we limit an analysis of such improvement to a quantitative count, perhaps it is comment length, rather than an increase in the proportion commenting, which is more likely to be the key to increased detail and richness in responses.

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