



Student Ratings of Instruction: Principles for Practice

In 1990, the Dalhousie University Office of Instructional Development and Technology surveyed teaching units regarding student ratings of instruction practices. The forty-three departmental responses indicated that Dalhousie has a decentralized system of student ratings with a wide variety of procedures and questionnaires in place. Our survey revealed that student ratings are used widely and are often viewed as an "important" measure of teaching performance.

Student ratings are used in the tenure and promotion decision-making process, for individual teaching improvement purposes, and for departmental planning. Unfortunately, some instruments are poorly designed and not appropriate for the purposes they are meant to serve. How can questionnaires and procedures for summative evaluation be improved at Dalhousie? Not by designing a single questionnaire and central processing, but by identifying principles of sound practice and by adopting policies to ensure that they are respected by all academic units.

The following Principles were adopted by the Senate Committee on Instructional Development in March, 1991. They are now being studied by the Senate Academic Planning Committee. An expanded version of this document and further information on student ratings for summative purposes (personnel decisions) and formative purposes (improvement of teaching) can be

obtained from the Office of Instructional Development and Technology.

The principles are derived from a review of research in the field and reflect those areas in which there is a high degree of consensus about what comprises appropriate and effective practice. The consistency of results achieved by over thirty years of research provides a useful set of guidelines for the development and implementation of student rating programmes at Dalhousie University.

The general agreement on important elements of practice notwithstanding, it is important to take into account the context of the particular teaching evaluation programme. While remaining sensitive to departmental differences and to the need for flexibility in the evaluation process, effective practice nonetheless requires consistency in particular areas. The principles outlined here are aimed at achieving consistency in these areas and at improving the quality of the data on teaching effectiveness which informs the evaluation process.

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Student Ratings of Instruction Principles for Practice

I. General Principles

- The purpose of an evaluation of teaching programme should be clearly defined and understood.
- An attempt should be made to gain student input and ensure students are informed when devising and implementing evaluation of teaching programmes.
- A fundamental distinction must be made between formative (for teaching improvement) and summative (for personnel decisions) evaluation.

THE REMAINDER OF THE PRINCIPLES APPLY TO STUDENT RATINGS OF INSTRUCTION PRACTICE FOR SUMMATIVE PURPOSES

II. Student Ratings of Instruction for Summative Purposes

1. Student ratings should be used in conjunction with other indicators of instructional effectiveness rather than as the sole indicator.
2. Students should be asked to give "overall" or "global" ratings of those dimensions of effective teaching which are within their ability to fairly judge and which are relevant to the particular teaching situation.

III. Planning the Evaluation Environment

3. The student rating form should contain a statement about the purposes the ratings of instruction are meant to serve.

4. The student rating form should contain the following information:
 - a) students are not required to identify themselves;
 - b) the instructor will see the compiled results only, and will not have access to the completed questionnaires themselves;
 - c) comments will be typed before being given to the instructor;
 - d) results will not be given to the instructor until the final grades have been submitted.

The provisions of the Collective Agreement with respect to signing comments must, however, be observed.

5. Detailed procedures for the use and distribution of the results of student ratings of instruction should be determined and controlled at the departmental level.

IV. Student Rating of Instruction Questionnaires

6. Global or "overall" ratings in a number of courses over a period of time provide the most valid and reliable data for summative purposes.
7. The response format should be devised to ensure reliable data in a form useful for expressed purposes. Highly recommended are:
 - the inclusion of both open- and closed-ended responses;
 - in close-ended responses, the use of a continuum of five or more points (to provide more discriminating data than a "yes" or "no" response);
 - employing nominal rather than ordinal measures (verbal descriptors, not numbers).

8. Student rating of instruction instruments should contain five to fifteen questions.
9. Information on responding students (age, sex, major, expected mark, etc.) should be kept to a minimum and should serve a demonstrably valid purpose.*

V. Administration Procedures

10. Standardized procedures for the administration of student rating of instruction instruments should be in force across campus.
11. Student rating of instruction instruments should be administered in the classroom during regular class hours.
12. Student rating forms should be administered during the last two weeks of class, but not during the last class or with the final exam.
13. The response rate should be recorded.
14. The instructor should read the directions to the students, appoint a student(s) to distribute and collect the forms, then leave the room. The instructor must not be present when the forms are being filled out.
15. The student representative should put all used and unused forms in an envelope, sign the envelope and return it to the person responsible for collecting the forms (preferably departmental support staff).
16. Students and faculty members should be informed of mechanisms for reporting failure to follow proper administration procedures.
17. The teacher should not have access to the tabulated results until after the final grades have been submitted.

A more detailed document which elaborates on each of these principles and discusses the relevant research findings is available from the Office of Instructional Development and Technology

*A Note on Bias

Very often, those involved in the student rating of instruction process express concern over potential "biasing" effects (factors not related to teaching, such as student, professor, or course characteristics which might influence the ratings). In general, researchers have found that the influence of such extraneous factors is minimal (a combination of such factors account for no more than 15% of the variance) and reflects genuine differences among students rather than bias *per se*. Much of the concern over potential sources of bias in student ratings appears to stem from a misconception of what the ratings represent. Student ratings reflect the differential values, perceptions and experiences of students and are not absolute measures of teaching effectiveness. However, the differing perceptions of students are themselves important and legitimate inputs into the evaluation process. This process is aimed at forming judgements about teaching effectiveness in a variety of contexts. While it is important to take into account the sources of variation in student responses when interpreting student ratings of instruction, the existence of such variations should not be viewed as evidence that student ratings are not valid or reliable measures of teaching effectiveness from the point of view of learners.

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STUDENT RATINGS: SELECTED READINGS

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