

Thyme room  
1.35-2.00pm

## Student feedback: Reaching down to the root [of] where it really matters

**James D. STEPHEN**

Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore

[elcids@nus.edu.sg](mailto:elcids@nus.edu.sg)

The Student Feedback Exercise is conducted at the end of every academic semester in the National University of Singapore. Students evaluate lecturers' teaching on a scale of 1 to 5 for a number of statements, followed by an open-ended section for qualitative responses. Stark (2013) cautions that in such an assessment, students provide qualitative comments about their *experience*; whether this is an accurate measure of good *teaching* is quite another matter. Further, McCollough and Radson (2011) argue that such assessments conflate the properties of the numbers with the student's response, thus making it difficult to interpret. Three statements from the feedback instrument in this study were found to be problematic to the researcher, and therefore formed the backbone of this research. These are:

1. Overall teacher effectiveness
2. The teacher has enhanced my thinking ability
3. The teacher has increased my interest in the subject

The italicised words are problematic to interpret for both students and lecturers. Statement 1 assumes students are able to discern what merits a "3", "4" or a "5" in terms of "effectiveness" and such discernment is uniform across students. However, what constitutes a 3 or a 4 varies greatly across students (Stark, 2013; McCollough & Radson, 2011). It also assumes that all students have the same understanding of the word "effective", which is interpreted by the students themselves. For example, one student's impression of a "good" teacher may merit a 5, whereas another may think it merits only a 3. With regard to Statement 3, the two points across which the increment is measured is unknown. In the absence of a pre-test of "interest", it is difficult to interpret the student's end-of-semester feedback in terms of an increment. The literature also suggests that the evaluation of *interest* depends on whether it is an elective or a core module (Cashin, 1998; Stark, 2013), as students tend to award a higher score for electives which they are interested in. A further problem with interpreting the responses was that while the three statements require numerical scores, the open-ended section is not targeted at these three specific areas, but at teaching in general. This study therefore attempts to deconstruct the evaluation process from the perspective of the student by inviting them to think retrospectively of what qualities they had in mind when responding to the three statements.

Students were invited to respond to an anonymous online survey about their interpretation or understanding of the three questions, suggesting instances they would award a “3” to a “5” on the scale of 1 to 5. The survey responses were then compared against the numerical scores and qualitative comments from 96 students across two academic semesters’ worth of feedback responses. Tutors teaching the module were also surveyed to explore if they were able to interpret such feedback.

The findings revealed that students did not have a uniform nor did they have a clearly defined concept of what they had in mind when answering the feedback statements, confirming the observations of McCollough and Rand (2011), as well as Stark (2013). As this was an academic writing module and not many had prior experience with it, their answers to Statement 3 were rather impressionistic, echoing Clayson’s (2009) observation that only a small relationship exists between learning and evaluation. There was little one-to-one correlation between the three statements and the open-ended responses. The onus is thus placed on the lecturer to make the connections between the qualitative statements and the numerical scores of the three statements above.

This study has important implications for the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Lecturers will be able contribute to a more conducive learning environment only if they have a clear[er] understanding of the students’ needs as articulated in the feedback.

### Keywords

Evaluation, teaching effectiveness, student feedback

### References

- Cashin, W.E. (1988). Students’ ratings of teaching: a summary of the research. *IDEA Paper No. 20*. Manhattan Centre for Faculty Evaluation & Development, Division of Continuing Education, Kansas State University.
- Clayson, D. E. (2009). Student evaluations of teaching: are they related to what students learn? A meta-analysis and review of the literature. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(1), 16–30.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0273475308324086>
- McCullough, B. D., & Radson, D. (2011) Analysing student evaluations of teaching: Comparing means and proportions. *Evaluation & Research in Education*, 24(3), 183-202.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09500790.2011.603411>
- Stanford Teaching Commons (n.d.). Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching/planning-your-approach/characteristics-effective-teachers>.
- Stark, P. (2013). Do student evaluations measure teaching effectiveness? *Berkeley Blog*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.berkeley.edu/2013/10/14/do-student-evaluations-measure-teaching-effectiveness/>.