

Learner engagement surveys: applications and limitations based on Australian and American experience.

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An examination of how Australia and the USA use learner-generated data, focusing on Australia's use of the CEQ to establish performance quality indicators while US universities use the CIRP, the NSSE, and the Noel-Levitz inventories for information about student development rather than to assess instructor performance and instruction. The discussion considers how these two approaches may actually be complementary in nature, considering how universities can use elements of both to improve their performance.

Introduction

Measuring learning as a proxy for institutional quality brings to the fore the notion of the appropriateness in using learner-generated data for course program/delivery purposes, ascertaining generic skills of learners, determining program viability in light of professional needs and employability, and the monitoring of continuous improvement from learner and institutional perspectives. “The challenge to institutional administrators and faculty is to establish performance indicators relevant to particular groups of students” (Jacobs & Hundley, 2005, p. 14) while balancing institutional interests with program/discipline needs. The temptation of a “one size fits all” approach toward identifying institutional performance belies the difficulty in permeating the silo-like boundaries between academic departments and other units and the added complication of linking and aligning measures of quality to satisfy external policy preferences or meet actual pedagogical concerns through delivery, assessment, and methodological techniques. As “the market mentality and its associated values triumph nationally and globally, critical analysis of their intended and unintended consequences becomes increasingly important” (Chickering, 2003, p. 41) to campus administrators and teaching staff *vis a vis* mission and independence of purpose.

This paper looks at how Australia and the USA use learner-generated data based on surveys looking for learner (student) engagement data. The approaches are different because the faculty in the USA distrusts learner assessment of instruction and instructors; yet these seem complementary as envisioned by Coates (2006).

The use of learner-generated data in the USA

In the USA, in the academic area, learner-generated data has been used primarily as a means of evaluating instructional effectiveness. Learner outcomes which are now becoming requirements under current and developing accreditation guidelines are using examples from co-curricular activity units (student affairs). Higher education institutions in the USA “are compelled to create learning opportunities outside the classroom, along many dimensions” (Healy & Liddell, 1998, p. 39); therefore, “as teaching staff focused more on scholarship and teaching ... [student affairs] professionals picked up the fallen gauntlet” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 427).

The impetus behind expanding learner-centered is from external stakeholders – legislators, officials, and employers – who are dissatisfied with how universities are performing today. They see graduates lacking necessary skills in an environment where costs are rising faster than the cost of living, thus they are not reaping the expected benefits from a college-educated citizenry.

Teaching staff are leery of learner surveys as part of the teaching staff evaluation process because of the degree of

importance typically placed on these *vis a vis* promotion and tenure; “student ratings of instructor and instruction are still the only component that is regularly obtained and used” (Aleamoni, 1999, p. 153). Complaints ranging from a challenge to *academic freedom* to how the real goals of higher education *cannot* be measured to student learning is affected by factors beyond teaching staff control are often given for reasons to distrust them (Walvoord, 2004). Aleamoni (1999) rebuts sixteen other myths teaching staff have (Figure 1), concluding that a review of 154 articles written between 1924 and 1998 suggests that student ratings plus personal consultations “can be used by the instructor to enrich and improve the course as well as to document instructional effectiveness for administrative purposes” (p. 159). However, the literature also suggests the “disadvantage of gathering student ratings primarily result from how they are misinterpreted and used” (p. 160). According to Aleamoni (1999), normative (or comparative) information is needed to provide appropriate emphasis on student responses. More importantly, “if administrators use the ratings for punitive purposes only, the faculty will find ways to undermine their use and impugn their credibility” (p. 160).

- Learners lack expertise (immature, capricious)
- Student ratings are a popularity contest
- Students cannot make accurate judgments until after the course or away from the university
- Student ratings are both unreliable and invalid
- Class size affects student ratings
- Taking the course as a requirement or elective affects ratings
- Courses within majors affects ratings
- Level of course affects ratings
- Marks received by students in the course are highly correlated with their ratings of the course and instructor
- There are no disciplinary differences in student ratings
- Student ratings cannot be meaningfully used to improve instruction

Figure 1. Selected myths often given by teaching staff against the use of student ratings of instructors and instruction rebutted by Aleamoni (1999)

American higher education gives more attention to the concept of “life outside the classroom” (Boyer, 1990). Learner surveys are often used as a means of finding out information about their students for learner development rather than evaluative purposes. Astin’s (1999) involvement theory suggests student involvement has a positive impact on learner development and learning. “Active participation in activities and events that are not part of the curriculum but nevertheless complement the institution’s educational purposes” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991, p. 7).

Astin (1999) is concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development, thus the quantitative and qualitative features to this theory. Along with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theories on student development, it has become the basis for extended research and the foundation for national learner surveys. Three of the most prominent of these surveys are the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys managed by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) now administered by the Indiana Center for Postsecondary Research, and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI).

CIRP (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html>) is the oldest of the listed surveys, created in 1966. The principal purpose is to assess the effects of college on students (Astin, Panos, & Creager, 1966). The 1st-year student survey collects comparative data to use for policy analysis, human resource planning, campus administration, educational research, and guidance/counseling (Sax, Lindholdm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2001). CIRP’s college student survey provides feedback on students’ academic and campus life experiences. The survey of the American Freshman, revised annually, provides a portrait of the changing character of American college life. For example, the 30-year trend report used the seven headings of family background, influence of the Women’s Movement, values, academic trends, attitudinal trends, majors and careers, and eras of rapid change (Astin, Parrott, Korn, & Sax, 1997).

NSSE (<http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm?CFID=372395&CFTOKEN=2d55810bb94e188e-CE952C8E-B559-6076-6D3B16BA10FBFEA2>), created in 1998, asks undergraduates about their educational experiences, correlating

student behaviors with desirable learning and personal development outcomes (Kuh, 2003) to provide benchmarks and comparative information useful in decision-making and action planning. The NSSE should be used to monitor the “vital signs” of institutional performance and not as a means to use student engagement for the purpose of establishing institutional ranking (NSSE, 2001). The survey asks for the following information (Kuh, 2003):

- background (age, gender, race or ethnicity);
- living situation;
- educational status;
- major field;
- frequency of engagement in dozens of good educational practices (e.g., using the institution’s human resources, curricular programs, and other opportunities for learning and development);
- amount of reading/writing done during the current school year;
- the number of hours per week devoted to school work, extracurricular activities, employment, and family matters;
- nature of their examinations and coursework;
- learning opportunities planned or taken;
- perceptions of the campus environment (achievement, satisfaction, and persistence);
- the extent of support students need to succeed academically;
- the quality of relations between teaching staff and students; and
- an estimation of educational and personal growth since starting college (general knowledge, intellectual skills, written and oral communication skills, personal, social/ethical development, and vocational preparation).

The SSI (<https://www.noellelitz.com/Our+Services/Retention/Tools/>) identifies student satisfaction with a number of college experiences, with findings compared to national standards. The Noel-Levitz firm provides three types of instruments that allow universities to compare their results to nationwide results. Students are viewed as consumers. Student responses are rated for importance and satisfaction. A performance gap is calculated for each item; a large performance gap indicates that student expectations are not met while a small performance gap suggests the institution is somehow meeting expectations (Noel-Levitz, 2005). Scales are established in the following areas for 4-year institutions: academic advising effectiveness, campus climate, campus life, campus support services, concern for the individual, instructional effectiveness, recruitment and financial aid effectiveness, registration effectiveness, responsiveness to diverse populations, safety and security, service excellence, and student centeredness.

The Australian approach toward the use of learner-based measures

With a strong awareness of the importance of establishing quality indicators, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) has developed over the last decade a group of measures which purport to provide comparative data on the quality of teaching in all public Australian universities based on one questionnaire, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which measures aspects of the quality of teaching and learning and the development of generic skills by surveying recent university graduates (Baldwin & James, 2000). The CEQ is administered and includes scales such as the Good Teaching Scale (GTS), the Generic Skills Scale (GSS), and Overall Satisfaction Item (OSI) given to recent graduates (Coates, 2006). The Institutional Assessment Framework’s (IAF) four assessment areas – organizational sustainability, achievement in higher education provision, quality, and compliance – still rely on learner feedback in the quality section of the portfolio via the CEQ and the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) (DEST, 2005).

The present CEQ is an extended version including broader aspects of the student experience: e.g., the availability and quality of learning resources, the extent to which learners are engaged in a community of learners, and issues pertinent to lifelong learning (McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001). Nonetheless, Baldwin and James (2000) point out a number of concerns posed by the prevalence of the CEQ in the Australian assessment framework:

- the use of a single instrument to assess teaching quality in all courses at all universities with different histories, missions, approaches, student characteristics, and intrinsic challenges to diversity;
- the CEQ represents only one teaching philosophy; and

- the distortion caused by having students generalize across all of their subjects in up to six years of study.

Discussion

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) believes university quality assurance has to pay more attention to occupational rather than traditional academic needs (Symes, 2004). Europe is attempting to monitor teaching and research from a Humboldtian perspective because universities “have to convince parliaments and governments of the vital contribution of graduates and higher education-based research to social and economic welfare” (Reichert & Tauch, 2004, p. 41). According to the Australian Vice Chancellor’s Committee’s (AVCC) (2006) view that “the frameworks in existence in Australia ... are in many ways ahead of developments in Europe” (p. 6) because it has been able to link system improvement with social policy concerns by the IAF.

A similar argument can be made for comparing Australia as being farther ahead of current practice in the USA. The recent Measuring Up initiative by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2004) evaluates higher education on six criteria: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits (to the state), and learning. Learning data are inconclusive because of a lack of consistency in reporting systems across all 50 states. Learning seems to be based more on traditional institutional research measures rather than student engagement/experience data. Rather than relying on an instrument such as the CEQ, the focus will be on (1) surveyed abilities of university-educated populations in literacy and mathematics, (2) institutional contributions to “educational capital” based on the number of graduates ready to pursue additional study or professional licensure, and (3) performance of college graduates in different types of cognitive-based instruments.

Coates (2006) suggests Australia consider an Australian student engagement survey because it is a point of intersection between individuals and critical elements for learning. To him, a revised indicator framework and new data collection techniques would enhance determinations of quality in Australian higher education. He proposes the NSSE as an example because this type of instrument is becoming more prevalent around the world to monitor and improve university quality. The descriptive nature of the data (even at unsophisticated levels) provides information that is useful. What he suggests for Australian universities is a new approach to maximizing the quality of student survey information (Coates, 2006a). Interestingly enough, in the USA, the decision to use the CIRP, NSSE, or the SSI are institutional ones and not mandated by accrediting agencies.

During this review what has become apparent is the difference in how learner-based measures and information are used. Australia depends on its CEQ for data about instructors, instruction, and other quality parameters while in the USA student engagement tends to be primarily used for student development purposes and, occasionally for performance quality purposes (although this last is increasing rapidly). What Coates (2006) suggests is to use learner engagement data not only at the end as a summative process but at the beginning as a formative element. Universities should look at learner data as they are coming in to ensure their services are aligned with student background and needs as well as look at what learners have to say about their experiences after they have left. Both perspectives yield data that are meaningful and useful at the planning, activity, evaluation, and improvement phases of university life. The challenge as noted in the American experience is how the use of learner data has been distorted because, when used punitively, teaching staff react accordingly and become resistant to change, not because they are against change and improvement but because they are worried that no good deed goes unpunished. There is an inherent degree of distrust that tinges the arguments for external accountability, with teaching staff being constantly asked to prove the value of their work and told that the intrinsic value of what they do is irrelevant because what matters is the economic benefit teaching staff work accrues to learners and society (see Linkon, 2005). The caution is to ensure multiple data sources that are based on appropriate proxies of quality. There is a significant debate left out on imprecise goals and technology that has to be taken into account which is reflective of the tension between policy-makers and educators.

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