Fostering A Teaching And Learning Opportunity: Toward Equity In Student Feedback Of Teaching

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Educators within post-secondary institutions receive input in the form of course evaluations from their students. The aim of receiving student input is to improve the teaching and learning experience for all. There are, however, inherent problems with the current methods of obtaining students' views through course evaluations. In this pilot study, the researchers focused on two problems: universally low response rates of 20% or less of student input in formal course evaluations and the problematic bias associated with anonymous course evaluations. Implementing practices that encourage students to provide course feedback, thus moving away from the term course evaluation was a first step to address these problems. A process was piloted in this study with 16 domestic undergraduate Bachelor of Science students whereby the researchers encouraged reflection, dialogue, and accountability in the new model and compared the differences against the problematic original model of receiving course evaluation input from students.

Student evaluation of teaching (SET) or course evaluations are commonly used terms in academia to describe inviting students' views of their experience following the conclusion of a course. Typically administered through a survey instrument, sometimes online or other times administered face to face during the last class, these student course evaluations are often promoted as helping teaching faculty improve their course and their teaching (Merry et al., 2013). These course evaluations are also relied upon to influence faculty-specific matters such as hiring decisions, the re-hiring of sessional faculty, and decisions affecting tenure and promotion. There are more questions on how online and face-to-face learning in a post-pandemic world has affected educators' ability to "pick up on nonverbal cues and make appropriate changes in the content and teaching methodology" Singh et al., (2021, p. 142). Courses that were offered in person and then offered on-line during or post-pandemic have those challenges according to Singh et al., (2021) as well as the generally problematic student input process of pre-pandemic times. We posit that much of this process of receiving student input is problematic and can be

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greatly improved upon. This pilot study is part of a larger project guided by the following main research question: How can a university better understand and support the student learning experience?

Faced with very low response rates of less than 2% in the courses used in the study, a statistic well below the Canadian Association of University Teacher (CAUT) reported norms of 20-30% (CAUT, 2023), achieving feedback is essential to better understand and support the student learning experience. Addressing the concerning discourse on how prepared students are to give constructive feedback is another strategy toward improving the quality of the feedback and emphasizing the importance of providing feedback through the student voices to improve the learning experience. To address this, our qualitative study included focus groups using semi-structured interview questions and quantitative methods (survey) with 16 participants.

Course evaluation surveys employed after a course have presented problems at Royal Roads University, Victoria, B.C. and other institutions. Some problems include universally low student response rates, making relying on the data received questionable. Low response rates do not provide a full picture of the student experience and leave gaps in the educators' ability to make positive changes. However, more serious problems in student evaluations of teaching include inequity, where equity-seeking educators receive biased evaluations. In our literature review, a serious concern among scholars was implicit bias in comments by some respondents that caused harm to educators receiving anonymous evaluations. For example, some students may give the same score for every question, while others only fill out evaluations when they are particularly upset about something (Feder, 2020). Women, visible minorities or racially marginalized individuals, nonnative English speakers, and educators who teach unpopular required courses may all be unfairly penalized by student evaluations (Eseray & Valdes, 2020; Feder, 2020; Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). While Eseray and Valdes (2020) proposed that student evaluations can be corrected for bias, it would require a much larger data set, achieved through a higher student response rate over several years, to make such a correction. At Royal Roads University (RRU), the goal of achieving consistently high response rates has proven to be difficult to achieve. Reports of harmful comments and evidence of bias in the responses have amplified the need to address this issue with a new way of inviting feedback. RRU employs a signature pedagogy called a Learning, Teaching and Research Model (LTRM) that includes values and direction for the faculty, staff, and administration. This model can be found in Appendix A.

Moving beyond response rates, a conversation about using traditional SETs is urgent and required. The traditional SET may hinder the professional development of educators faced with the fear of student evaluations. Educators may respond to this fear by curbing innovative teaching and learning strategies and choosing not to take risks with their pedagogical approaches. As a result, educators may choose to create a teaching environment focusing on what feels safe, providing students with what they want, rather than what would advance student learning (Clayson, 2021; Simpson & Siguaw, 2000). Furthermore, a typical SET may not capture teaching activities such as office hours to assist students outside of class time, mentoring

students, and similar out-of-class teaching activities (Feder, 2020, p. 27). A new model for obtaining feedback could solve both issues.

With inherent problems in the existing assessment or evaluation strategy, a working group of faculty, academic leaders, and managers of teaching and educational technologies, explored better ways to gather information and improve teaching and learning more accurately and equitably. An Alternative to Course Evaluations Working Group was formed in 2019 to review the existing evaluation instrument. This group was on hiatus from 2020-2021 due to the challenges posed by COVID-19 but reconvened in 2022 to continue the work. The first recommendation was to reframe the conversation from *evaluation* to *feedback*. This strategy aimed at reflection and dialogue's cyclical nature (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Student feedback of teaching (SFT) was formed as a new approach while continuing to center on the student experience. SFT also assumed a learning process of giving feedback involving both instructor and learners. This reframing initiative, therefore, reconsidered how feedback is gathered.

The next step was to conduct a small research project to pilot the implementation of a new set of feedback questions employed within an undergraduate student course. In this paper, we discuss findings that suggest that a relational approach based on feedback rather than judgment is a promising way forward. The result is a new feedback model that the researchers will employ to guide future phases of research with a larger sample size.

Significance of the Study

Achieving equity in higher education is an ongoing endeavour beyond celebrating diversity or increasing the representation of marginalized groups. Equity addresses the principle of fairness, where all individuals, regardless of their background, should have equal access to opportunities for success (Henry et al., 2017). The principle of fairness falls short when we identify the systemic barriers that prevent individuals from accessing the same privileges. One way equity is threatened in academia is by using current course evaluation tools and practices that continue to disadvantage women, BIPOC, LBGTQ+, international scholars, and new Canadians (Esarey & Valdes, 2020). The impact of bias and inappropriate interventions is well documented among faculty from equity-deserving groups, such as women who are more susceptible to implicit bias and systematically receive lower assessments than their male counterparts (Mengel et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2016). In the workplace, the women in STEM careers who leave the field due to unhospitable or unfriendly work conditions, wage inequity, lack of mentoring and guidance, and inflexible work schedules for family obligations are abundant (Baruah & Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2021; Overholtzer & Jalbert, 2021; Frank, 2019). Increasing representation by hiring diverse educators is not enough. When the current SET tool is used to preserve systemic bias and inhospitable conditions, universities will not be positioned to retain divergent educators.

SET instruments in the conventional form are flawed (Clayson, 2021; Crumbley et al., 2011; Simpson & Siguaw, 2000). SET issues generally fall into one or more of the following categories: student-related factors, where gender bias, students' academic level, as well as

attitudes play a role in granting higher or lower scores; course-related factors, such as the nature of the course, class size, expectations due to grading, content, and timing of the course influence scores; and teacher-related factors such as educators' deliberate behaviours, such as grade inflation (Pounder, 2007; Stroebe, 2020). Traits such as gender, age, experience, or rank also seem to impact how students rate their instructors (Clayson, 2020). These tools are often the major input used for decision-making regarding faculty promotion or retention, as well as awards or recognition, and as such, may lead to poor teaching, inflation of grades, and overall disadvantages to equity-deserving educators (Eiszler, 2002; Stroebe, 2016). The evidence is available to support moving away from the conventional flawed forms and toward a positive shift in teaching and learning. Consequently, this research study aimed to shift the academic culture from teaching evaluation based on a flawed single tool to one that supports equity and quality of teaching based on multiple sources of reflection, dialogue, feedback, and planning for continuous improvement.

Research Design

This pilot study is part of a larger project guided by the following question: *How can a university better understand and support the student learning experience?* The research questions for this pilot study were as follows:

RQ1. How can post-secondary institutions enhance teaching and learning by providing feedback tools for continuous reflective practice and professional growth of teaching?

RQ2. How does the quality and quantity of responses to the new survey instrument compare with what the old survey instrument yielded?

In this mixed methods pilot study, the researchers sought to answer the research questions by looking for ways to improve low response rates of course evaluations, thereby achieving reliable data while simultaneously examining a new instrument to solicit constructive feedback from students about their learning experiences.

Methodology and Methods

The researchers applied an explanatory sequential methodology (Cresswell, 2014) to explore the students' perceptions of their learning experience. In an explanatory sequential methodology, a quantitative phase is analyzed and used to inform the development of the second qualitative phase (Creswell, 2014). This study included a newly designed feedback survey instrument administered to 16 undergraduate students (Quantitative phase). It was followed by a focus group that used semi-structured questions to gather participants' perceptions of the new instrument and how it compares to the old evaluation survey (Qualitative phase).

Participants and Focus Group Recruitment

This study was approved by the university Research Ethics Board (REB). The research population was a cohort of 16 undergraduate domestic students from an on-campus Bachelor of

Science (BSc.) program. The participants had completed term one of their fourth year and were five months away from graduation. Invitations to participate in the focus groups were extended to all 16 students through an invitation by email offered by the administration, and six individuals responded positively to the invitation. The focus group was conducted by a third party following the last class on campus, and this focus group sample represented 37.5% of those enrolled in the course.

Method of Data Collection and Analysis

For one course, the students were asked to complete the new mid-course survey and new end-of-course Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT). The students were also presented with the old Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) for all other courses during that term at the end of their course, as usual. See Appendix B for details about the new mid-course and old end-of-course questions. Although the same students were surveyed for all courses, the instructors differed. A content analysis compared students' responses between the new and the old instruments, followed by a participant focus group to gather perceptions about using the new versus the old instrument. The responses for the mid-course and end-of-course surveys were read by three research group members who independently categorized and grouped the comments based on the emergent relationships between them. The research team then met to discuss their observations and groupings. During this discussion, the groupings were aligned between team members and organized into themes. The analysis of these responses and themes was also used to generate questions for the focus group to provide a richer insight into the students' course experience. The focus group was mediated by a research team member unknown to the students to ensure the observed findings were impartial. See Appendix C, for questions the third-party mediator posed to the focus group. The focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes and involved six participants. The focus group conversation was recorded and transcribed as per the ethical review. For the focus group analysis, three research team members read through the transcript individually and then met to discuss patterns and develop themes.

Findings and Discussion

In this pilot study, we sought to revisit how Royal Roads University (RRU) gathered information from students during end-of-course anonymous evaluations. The aim was to enhance teaching and learning by examining the administration processes associated with course evaluations to increase response rates for more reliable data and reduce the biases against equity-deserving educators. A working group consisting of administration and faculty developed a revised, new survey instrument that included a mid-course and an end-of-course survey, which was used for the first time in this study. The research questions were: *How can post-secondary institutions enhance teaching and learning by providing feedback tools for continuous reflective practice and professional growth of teaching? How does the quality and quantity of responses to the new survey instrument compare with what the old survey instrument yielded?*

Mid-course and End-of-course Surveys

The mid-course and end-of-course surveys provided positive quantitative results, with the new SFT having garnered a 100% response rate at mid-course (16 participants) and a 56% response rate at the end of the course (9 participants of 16). In addition, the qualitative results of both surveys provided a significant source of rich feedback to enhance teaching – something that addresses both the research questions for this pilot study and the over-arching goals of the larger project that this pilot is part of. The mid-course survey provided insight into considerations that may not come up in an end-of-course survey.

The mid-course survey illustrated themes like requests for more participatory learning (e.g. addition of additional videos) and student appreciation of drawing links between past and present learning, "I learned lots and appreciate how things are connected" as well as real-world applications. One student commented "I love learning about current research topics – this was well incorporated into our discussions." It also highlighted themes like joyful learning, teacher strengths, and managed challenges. Students commented on the willingness of the instructor to answer, "a million questions" and making the content "engaging" while translating "technical terms into more understandable language." Suggestions were made for supporting engagement and scaffolding learning. Several students commented that they were nervous about the final exam given the amount of material covered in the course. This provided the instructor the opportunity to have class discussions that would act to review the material as well as reminding students about the study guides that were provided to help them organize their ideas about the material. To reduce exam anxiety, students were also allowed to bring a single page of notes into the exam.

Focus Group

The findings from the focus group revealed a shift in student views when comparing the old survey instrument design and questions to the new survey instrument design and questions. The pilot study research team identified the following themes: Early Response to Student Concerns, Feedback Training, and Response Representation.

Theme One: Early Response to Student Concerns

The new questions and lack of anonymity in the midcourse survey received positive feedback from the six participants. During the focus group, participants described the importance of being heard by their instructor in the newly named mid-survey responses. For example, Participant One expressed, "I asked … can you upload the PDF or the word file before you actually teach it, and she accommodated me for that. So that showed me that she's actually listening to me". Further to sharing specific examples, students recommended the integration of a preamble as well as allotting time during class to fill in the questionnaire. These were two important findings that can help shape our follow-up study. For example, the preamble will serve

as a reminder of the purpose of the feedback and how to constructively express opinions through training to further enhance addressing student concerns.

Theme Two: Training

A paradox in the findings was that students stated that they did not need the training to provide feedback but also wanted the reminders in the preamble. For example, Participant Five suggested some training with a few slides to demonstrate good conduct when responding to course feedback requests and to avoid hurtful comments:

> And maybe that would guide the person into thinking, Well, I wouldn't want to be receiving racist comments or things of that nature so that they will have a framework on how they can go ahead and start answering the questions.

This finding will be further explored in the larger participant sample research project.

Theme Three: Response Representation

Participant Two expressed that more survey responses were required to be of any benefit:

> If only like three of us put in a survey, it might not accurately represent that teacher, because it would be…usually people who…are not feeling good in the course. And they don't like the teacher's approach. So, then they go and say something that's bad, but it might not reflect how everyone else felt throughout the course.

Participant Two also expressed this approach as "a bias thing…it's not a good representation of the actual teacher's ability to teach us things." This student's comments reflect conclusions reached by Strobe (2020) who noted that related factors such as student attitude to instructors and student academic level can play a role in how instructors are evaluated.

Adding to the process discussion to achieve a higher response rate, Participant Three offered:

> something that I found super helpful with my last school that they would do for evaluations is they give you like, class time to talk to the evaluation of the process for 10 minutes. Whereas, like, sometimes when it's just like an email sent out, people just discard it or don't really look at it.

Commenting on the new survey benefitting over the old survey, Participant Two offered:

> I think that it's just like more concise. And also, there's no scale to it. So we can kind of, say what's on our mind, rather than limiting it to a scale from one to five. And then also, it's a lot less words on here. So it's, it's more direct.

The positivity expressed by the participants was encouraging, and the ideas they offered for further enhancements toward equity and quality feedback with a larger participant pool support the intent of a newly designed feedback tool. Dialogue promotes critical thinking, open-mindedness, and empathy (Merry et al., 2013). Addressing RQ1 and encouraging constructive conversations among students, faculty, and administrators can provide feedback tools and lead to the exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences while laying the foundation to foster a more inclusive campus culture. Evidence of this from participants in the focus group is agreement with the understandings shared by Eiszler (2002) decades earlier on grade inflation and grade leniency factors. Eiszler noted, "The grade inflation evidenced in the current study was

driven by the way in which student ratings of teaching were used" (p. 499) and cautioned that these ratings can be a crude instrument at best. Diverse perspectives and sentiments were supported by the participants seeking equity through constructive conversations to improve teaching and learning rather than a blunt instrument on instructor effectiveness.

The return rates were higher with the new survey for both the identifiable mid-term and anonymous end-of-term course feedback, helping to answer RQ2. Students responded positively to having the short mid-term course evaluation with open-ended questions embedded in their learning management system. The feedback on the new end-of-course survey will be a catalyst for an expanded study.

Recommendations for Future Research

We aim to conduct an expanded study across all programs in two faculties with over 100 participants. With more data and findings, we can see how transferable our initial pilot findings were and to what extent a larger participant group affects those findings. Where the pilot focused on domestic undergraduate students, the expanded research will include both graduate and undergraduate students, domestic and international students. We propose to explore how student groups may offer different perspectives on their learning experiences when using the new feedback tools. In addition to further research, we propose the implementation of two specific actions as follows:

1. Implement an intentional and comprehensive feedback framework to enhance the quality of teaching, encourage the giving and receiving of constructive feedback, and promote relationality through dialogue and accountability (Boud & Molloy, 2013).
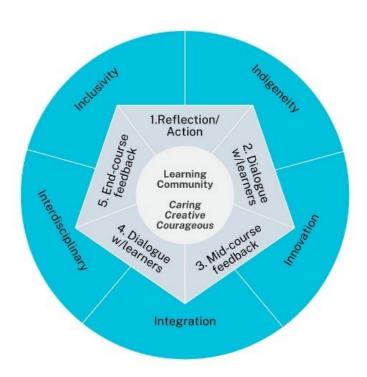2. Implement a new SFT survey and new language (See Figure 1).

An SFT Proposed Framework in Response to RQ1

The proposed framework arose from our findings and the need to identify how SFT aligns with the Learning, Teaching, and Research Model and the institution's strategic academic plan. Figure 1 represents the SFT framework, a cyclical and developmental approach that includes five phases underpinned by the values of RRU and the pillars of the academic strategic plan. RRU's values and its learner-centred focus lay at the core. The details of the pillars in the academic strategic plan are included in Appendix D. To follow each segment of the new framework, we recommend this process:

- The proposed new SFT framework starts with a process of reflection and the input of previous feedback as described by Kolb & Kolb (2005). A conversation with the program head or academic lead is recommended if possible.
- Dialogue with learners at the beginning of the course regarding the need for constructive feedback is essential (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Additionally, the feedback received in previous courses could be made available to instructors and students as a learning tool or example of what to do or what not to do.

- Mid-course feedback is the next step in the process. This occurs automatically within the learning management system at the mid-course and enables positive changes before the end of the course. The constructive feedback will aid the instructor in reflecting and setting goals for the future and starting the cycle again.
- Dialogue with learners is essential and can occur following the mid-course feedback. We recommended non-anonymous feedback at the mid-course feedback to allow for the concerns of specific students to be addressed individually where needed.
- We recommend non-anonymous feedback at the course conclusion to allow students to be accountable for remarks and their important and valued feedback.

Figure 1

SFT Framework Model

Note. This model was created by the research team based on the pilot study's recommendations.

The five pillars of the academic plan (interdisciplinarity, indigeneity, inclusivity, integration, and innovation) are noted in the framework as a reminder of the interwoven actions that the institution is committed to achieving. Without a doubt, there is an opportunity in this

learning for future research, particularly on practices mutually constructed by learners and instructors toward an environment of respect, inclusion, and accountability.

Quality and Quantity of Responses of Old versus New Survey (RQ2)

As the new SFT garnered a 100% response rate at midcourse (16 participants) and a 56% response rate at the end of the course (9 participants of 16), this pilot has shown that a 2% industry norm response rate can be improved upon with the new model. Additional recommendations are to initially conduct a focus group of the participants who experience the new SFT and who would be willing to add more insight into their experience as students at your university. In this case, the researchers had 37.5% (6 of the 16 participants) acceptance of the offer to participate in the focus group.

Conclusion

This work aimed to implement a new Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) framework in alignment with the university's signature pedagogy and academic strategic plan. The findings of the pilot research project suggested that integrating new instruments and teaching how to provide feedback are indispensable for fostering a more inclusive and equitable culture that benefits the learning community, learners, and educators alike. We learned that mid-term non-anonymous feedback allowed students to voice their suggestions, enabling educators to adjust their teaching methods promptly. This real-time feedback mechanism enhanced the learning experience and empowered these students to respond to the survey, making them active partners in their educational journey. Equity practices are indispensable for dismantling barriers for equity-deserving groups. When collaborating, educators, administrators, and students create a culture that values feedback, encourages dialogue, reflection, and accountability, upholds equity principles, provides invaluable information for educators and teaches life skills to students. Our goal is that through the implementation of the SFT Framework, RRU will continue to seek ways to support quality teaching through improved retention of diverse educators and empowerment of all members to collectively shape a university that cares for all partners in learning.

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Appendix A

Learning Teaching Research Model (LTRM)

Applied and Authentic	• Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary • Experiential and participatory • Flexible and individualized • Outcomes-based • Openly practiced
Caring and Community-Based	• Inclusive and diverse • Learning community-based • Supportive • Team-based • Co-creative • Place and virtual space-based
Transformational	• Socially innovative • Respectful of Indigenous peoples and traditions • Impactful • Reflective

(adapted from Belcher, 2016)

Appendix B

New Midcourse and End of Course Survey and Old Survey

New Midcourse SFT Survey	New End of Course SFT Survey	Old Survey (SET) administered only at the end of the course
How are you finding the course so far?	What worked well for you in this course?	Please rate your satisfaction with the overall quality of instruction provided.
What would you like to see more of?	What do you suggest for improving future students' experiences in this course?	Please describe the highlights of the instructional approaches and strategies used in this course. Please confine your comments to the instruction of this course only.
Is there anything else I could do to improve your learning in this course?	Please share your feedback to 'enhance' my teaching in this course?	Please provide any suggestions for improvement related to the instructional approaches and strategies used in this course. Please confine your comments to the instruction of this course only.
Is there anything else you would like to share with me?	Is there anything else you would like to share with me?	Please rate your satisfaction with the overall quality of the course.
		Please describe the best things about this course. Suggested topics include: course structure, level of academic challenge, alignment of course content, resources, and activities with learning outcomes, assignments and assessment approaches, etc. Please confine your comments to the course itself. Return to the 'Instructor questions' if you have further comments regarding the instructor.
		Please provide any suggestions for improvement of the course. Suggested topics include: course structure, level of academic challenge, alignment of course content, resources, and activities with learning outcomes, assignments and assessment approaches, etc. Please

	confine your comments to the course itself. Return to the 'Instructor questions' if you have further comments regarding the instructor.
	Are there any other comments you would like to make about your experience in this course? Please describe these below.
	We want this course to be easy to navigate so that you can quickly find the information you need. Please share your user experience of navigating in this course (i.e. finding the assignment descriptions and dropboxes, readings, discussion forums, and learning activities) and any suggestions for improvement you might have.

Note: This is a comprehensive list of the questions asked in the new mid and end-of-course survey and the old survey, all administered through the learning management software.

Appendix C

Focus Group Comparative Tool Assessment Questions

On Assessment	On the Assessment Tool
Why do we assess? How do you think we use the information?	What survey are you most likely to fill in? Why?
How do you want to give feedback to your instructor? (Middle course/end?)	Which one is clearer? Why?
If any, what kind of training do you think you need to assess your instructor?	Are there any questions that we did not ask that you would like to see?
	How do you want instructors to use the eval?

Appendix D

Academic Strategic Plan Five Pillars

Any age, any stage, any place Explore, share, advance Invite in, venture out Vibrant and sustainable	Implement the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and honour the spirit of the United Declaration on the Rights if Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Promote research and education to tackle the climate crisis, rapid advances in technology, and interconnected social, economic and political challenges Build on our strengths in applied and professional programming, inter and transdisciplinarity and innovative delivery Advance sustainability in all our academic programs and operations, with a focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals Grow our innovative and entrepreneurial culture, and respond quickly to changes in the workplace and society Enhance the inclusion and engagement of people of diverse backgrounds and ideas in all aspects of university life	Interdisciplinarity	Learning, Teaching and Research Model
			Strategic Research Plan
			Anti-Racism Action Plan
			Climate Action Plan
	Indigeneity	Learning, Teaching and Research Model
			Indigenizing Royal Roads - Wassenas Report
			Anti-Racism Action Plan
			Climate Action Plan
	Innovation	Strategic Research Plan
			Climate Action Plan
			Learning, Teaching and Research Model
	Integration	Strategic Research Plan
			Anti-Racism Action Plan
			Indigenizing Royal Roads - Wassenas Report
	Inclusivity	Learning, Teaching and Research Model
			Climate Action Plan
			Anti-Racism Action Plan
			Strategic Research Plan

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