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Evaluation Online offers a variety of options to faculty who want to solicit formative feedback electronically. Researchers interviewed faculty who have used this system for midterm student evaluation.

Online Collection of Midterm Student Feedback

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The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has experienced, as have many other institutions, an exponential increase in the number of courses offered online. The instructors of these online courses share the desire for, and in many cases the requirement of, a systematic process by which their students can provide feedback on their courses and teaching. At UIUC, the Division of Measurement and Evaluation (housed in the Office of Instructional Resources) oversees the traditional paper-pencil Instructor and Course Evaluation System (ICES). This division initiated the original concept, eventual development, and implementation of an online system to evaluate online courses and instructors. The development of this system was funded by the president's office. It is known as EON (for Evaluation ONLINE) and has been available at UIUC since the summer semester of 2001.

One benefit of the new EON system is that it includes a mechanism for instructors to collect midterm (formative) feedback as well as end-of-term (summative) student ratings. In the traditional paper-pencil system, there was no mechanism for collecting and summarizing midterm student feedback. An online system for collecting and summarizing midterm student feedback has great value in higher education for a variety of reasons. First, it provides a snapshot of student perceptions about a course while course changes that semester are still possible. Consequently, the same students that provide the feedback can benefit from its implementation (Angelo and Cross, 1994). An added benefit of this mechanism within the EON system is that the results are immediately accessible once the evaluation period has ended. In addition, they are presented in a user-friendly format that can be easily summarized.

This chapter focuses on midsemester online student evaluations for online courses and instructors. It briefly describes the EON system and then reviews the pertinent literature. The bulk of the chapter includes results from interviews with faculty using the online midsemester feedback system. The goal is to provide useful information about the midsemester online component for those teaching online and for those charged with facilitating the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education.

Review of the Literature

The first step in conducting the study was to identify areas within the literature to review. It was important to understand what makes a midterm evaluation system effective. Second, it was important to understand what, if anything, might be inherently different in collecting midterm feedback using an online system as opposed to a traditional paper-pencil system. It also seemed valuable to review the literature on future trends in collecting online midterm student feedback. The results from the literature on these topics are reviewed below.

Midterm evaluations, by the nature of their purpose and timing, are almost always formative (Scriven, 1967). Instructors typically use the results from formative, midterm student feedback solely for instructional improvement and rarely for inclusion in personnel documents (Overall and Marsh, 1979).

Student feedback has the potential to benefit the students who provide it (Kulik, 2001). Consequently, midterm results are most useful when received and interpreted in a timely manner. In addition, midterm evaluations include more open-ended questions than closed, or forced-choice, questions (Angelo and Cross, 1994).

One inherent element of paper-pencil feedback is that students' comments are handwritten. This can affect quantity and quality of student responses as well as the way the results are summarized and used. Compared with the paper system, the online system for midsemester feedback encourages students to write more and be more honest in their responses. Using an online system, students can type their responses rather than handwrite them. Because they are typing their comments, they are likely to include more information in response to each item than if they were handwriting their responses (Ballantyne, 2000). Furthermore, with the online system, students who lack understanding of a course concept can make this known to an instructor without revealing their identity through their handwriting (Sheehan, 2001). In addition, the timeliness of online systems allows instructors to receive midterm feedback quickly and respond to it in class the next day.

EON System

The UIUC has a strong tradition of the institutionalized use of student ratings. The student-rating system, typically called ICES, has been in place at UIUC since 1976. About six thousand courses per semester—taught by

faculty, nontenured instructors, and teaching assistants—administer ICES to collect student feedback. Twelve outside institutions also use ICES for student evaluation of instruction. Originally developed for formative evaluation, ICES also plays an important role in summative evaluation (for example, promotion, tenure, and merit increases).

EON grew out of the ICES system to provide an online system for evaluating online courses. Until the EON system became available, online instructors who wanted or needed to collect student ratings would often mail paper-pencil ICES forms to their online students. These online students were asked to complete the paper forms and mail them to the central administrative office, which they often neglected to do. In addition, there was no institutional mechanism for collecting midterm feedback from online students. Now, for the first time, EON not only meets the end-of-course needs of online students and instructors, it provides the means to collect midterm data in a centralized system.

Brief Description of the EON System. The EON system allows instructors to create student feedback forms that are part of a university-wide system. It permits students to securely log in and complete these forms, using their unique UIUC identification and password. Using the EON system, instructors develop evaluation forms, students complete these forms, and instructors receive the results. With instructors' permission, administrators may also view the results. EON was designed as a "smart system" in that it sends reminders to appropriate users at appropriate times. For example, the Division of Measurement and Evaluation notifies instructors when it is time to create and release midterm evaluation forms, and students are initially notified and later reminded to fill out the forms. Finally, instructors are notified when the evaluation results are available online.

Instructors can choose both forced-choice and open-ended items from the existing EON item bank for their midterm evaluation forms. The item bank currently contains about two hundred questions that were either borrowed from the ICES item bank or developed with input from various EON stakeholders. Instructors can also write their own open-ended items for inclusion on their midterm evaluations.

Midterm evaluations are available to students during a two-week period. Results of the students' responses are summarized and made available to faculty immediately after the two-week period ends. This immediate access of results contributes to the success of the EON system.

Expanding Usage of the EON System. The first EON system pilot began in the summer 2001 term. Eleven instructors—mostly from the Online Graduate Library and Information Science program—participated in the first EON pilot; however, none used the midterm component. Since that first pilot, usage of the EON system has steadily increased, as has the use of EON's midterm evaluation component. In summer 2001, eleven courses used EON; in fall 2001, thirty-four; in spring 2002, thirty-nine; in summer 2002, seventeen; and in fall 2002, thirty-eight. The midterm component was used only in fall 2001 ($n = 5$), spring 2002 ($n = 3$), and fall 2002

($n = 10$). Note that summer terms offer fewer courses, and consequently EON summer usage is lower than during fall or spring.

Designing the Study Research questions for this study were developed through the collaboration of the EON faculty advisory group and other colleagues. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how and why instructors use the midterm evaluation component and their general perceptions of the midterm component. The following questions guided the data collection efforts:

What are the instructors' perceptions of the various features and components of the EON midterm evaluation system?

Do instructors perceive differences in the way they developed the questions and used the results because the collection occurred online? Are there any perceived differences in the manner or type of responses given to these questions by the students?

What issues should be considered with an evolving online midterm evaluation system?

Defining the Participants and Developing the Questionnaire. Defining the participants was the easiest part of this study; participants were instructors who had used the midterm component of the EON system. Once the participants were identified, the interview protocol was developed. The protocol was based on the three general research questions given above and on the literature review. Then, approval was sought and granted from the university's Institutional Research Board.

During September 2002, the thirty-eight instructors using the EON system for their fall 2002 courses were contacted and asked if they planned to use EON to collect midterm student feedback. Those who responded affirmatively were invited to participate in the study. In addition, instructors who had used the EON midterm component in previous semesters were invited to participate in the study. From this pool, fourteen instructors were able and willing to be interviewed.

Conducting the Interviews and Summarizing the Responses. Participants were sent the interview questions a week in advance of the interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted face to face; however, three were conducted by telephone. The interviews averaged about an hour in length.

After the interviews were completed, each was summarized and categorized. The interview protocol provided a systematic approach to looking at the responses and considering them in light of both the research questions and the findings from the literature review.

Results

The interview results are reported below.

What are the instructors' perceptions of the various features and components of the EON mid-term evaluation system? To answer this question, instructors were asked for their perceptions about ease of use and problems that they experienced themselves or that their students reported to them. Two of the instructors reported that some of their students had trouble accessing the system to complete the midterm evaluation. This occurred because these students did not know their unique identification number or password required to access the system. This is a significant and recurring problem for UIUC online students in certain programs because they are given course-specific identifiers but do not realize that they also need to use their university identification number and password to access the system. This problem suggests the need for possible future training on the use of EON for both students and instructors.

All of the interviewees thought the system was at least fairly easy to maneuver and that its features were user friendly. Some users made suggestions to increase EON's usefulness. For example, one instructor indicated that he would like electronic notification when the evaluation forms had been sent to the students. This request was easily filled; the feature was simply added to the EON system.

Several interviewees mentioned issues associated with EON's item bank. At the time of the study, there was no separate item bank specifically for midterm evaluation forms. All forms (both end-of-term and midterm) had the same item bank of questions. Some interviewees noted that the questions were phrased in the past tense; this was problematic for use on a midterm evaluation. In addition, the instructors wanted more flexibility to design their own forced-choice items for midterm evaluations. Although EON allows instructors to write open-ended items, the system currently has no mechanism for instructors to design their own forced-choice items. Because of psychometric concerns about individually authored, forced-choice items, the issue of offering this option is still under consideration.

Do instructors perceive differences in the way they developed the questions and used the results because the collection occurred online? Are there any perceived differences in the type of responses given by students? All of the interviewees had used traditional paper-pencil feedback forms and thus could compare their perceptions of the online system with its paper-pencil counterpart. Interviewees reported feeling somewhat freer to add items to the survey because of the ease of modifying the instrument online. For example, nine instructors said they added more items on the EON forms than they had in the past on paper-pencil midterm forms.

Sometimes adding items to student evaluation surveys raises concerns that more items will reduce the substantive nature of the students' responses (some instructors assume, for example, that students may get tired and hurry through the remaining questions). But EON evaluations begin with fewer items than traditional end-of-term forms. Because the

midterm survey initially has fewer items, increasing the number of items did not seem to have a negative effect on student responses.

Interviewees were also asked to comment about online versus paper-pencil response rates, but these comparisons were often like comparing apples and oranges. For example, some participants compared the response rate of online evaluations with that of paper-pencil midterm forms that were mailed to students in online classes. In these cases, EON had a higher response rate. Others compared EON with midterm paper-pencil forms administered to students in their on-campus classrooms. In these cases, the paper-pencil forms typically had a higher response rate.

When interviewees were asked about the number and intensity of negative student responses, results were mixed. Five interviewees said that EON responses were more negative. Four felt they were less negative, and the remainder noted no difference. In addition, the interviewees reported no problems with students' perceptions of confidentiality with regard to their online responses.

Eight of the fourteen interviewees reported that the online format lent itself to reading and summarizing responses more easily than did the paper-pencil format. The remainder were either unsure or had small enough classes that reading through handwritten comments had never been a problem.

What issues should be considered with an evolving online midterm evaluation system? For this question, interviewers asked instructors what support would be helpful and what suggestions they had to improve the EON midterm component. Responses regarding support fell into two categories: technical support and faculty development needs. Respondents who needed technical support wanted quick access to answers about technical questions for themselves and their students. In response, the Division of Measurement and Evaluation modified the EON Web site to include frequently asked questions and a more clearly identified path for technical support.

Several of the interviewees requested consultations on developing useful midterm feedback questions. They also wanted to more fully understand, and have a better context for, the student responses they receive. This is consistent with Seldin's (1999) finding that faculty development consultations are critical in helping instructors use feedback to improve their teaching. The division forwarded this information to the campus faculty development unit.

Summary and Conclusions

The EON system for collecting online student feedback is new at UIUC. With continued development and improvement of the new system come the promise of more flexibility and ease of access for both faculty and students. This study includes data from current and past users of EON's midterm feedback component. Fourteen faculty users were interviewed to provide information on three research questions.

In general, instructors reported that collecting midterm feedback online with the EON system was convenient. They requested more specific completion notifications for various steps in the process. In addition, they wanted access to items specifically designed for midterm evaluations. In comparing paper-pencil and online evaluation, instructors reported writing more questions and summarizing more quickly the student responses using the online system. They also reported that their students probably wrote more on their online evaluation forms than they did on paper-pencil forms. There was no consensus in regard to whether student responses submitted online were more or less negative than those submitted on paper-pencil forms.

The results of this study help validate the midterm component of EON. As the EON system is expanded and promoted, the division will highlight consultative services for item development and for the interpretation of results.

Implications for Future Research

As online midterm evaluation systems proliferate, the need to better understand technical support and faculty development will multiply. Although this study provides solid information about the needs of one campus, larger multi-institutional studies are clearly needed. Beyond the need for more generalizable studies lie specific areas of interest that also should be addressed by further research, including the design of effective evaluation items, timing for administering evaluations, and the use of survey results to improve teaching and learning. Furthermore, studies are needed on response rates for online midterm student feedback and on increasing the usefulness of results from these evaluations.

In addition, individual campuses must assess instructor and student accessibility to online resources. Although the World Wide Web Consortium has clear guidelines for accessibility compliance, thinking in terms of minimal standards is not enough. Access to information is a fundamental principle of higher education for all members of a learning community, and this accessibility must be extended to all the systems that are designed to collect course and instructor feedback online (Bar and Galuzzo, 1999). As technology gains an even greater foothold on college campuses, online evaluation systems such as EON will be further developed to better meet the needs of individuals and institutions of higher education.

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