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Title: Evaluation of student learning on undergraduate business and management undergraduate courses: Student feedback

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Abstract

Evaluation and evaluation methods are driven by the nature and aims of the activity being assessed. Changes to these factors are likely to require changes to evaluation methods. Business undergraduate courses are undergoing significant changes due to demands of industry (potential business graduate employers) and teaching innovations. These changes are occurring faster than evaluation methods are being developed, with the exception of student feedback. Student feedback has become one of the main ways of evaluating the student learning experience and the quality of delivery of business undergraduate courses. The process of collection and the mechanisms employed have tended to develop piecemeal over time. This paper reviews the research carried out into current feedback methods. The importance of the student role is identified. A case example of the methods used for first year students on the business and management degree course at City Business school is presented to illustrate some of the issues. Some ways to improve the feedback process are proposed.

Keywords: evaluation of student learning, student feedback methods, business skills

I introduction

The teaching methods and pedagogy on undergraduate courses in business and management are undergoing significant change. Business trends, developments in learning theory and information and communications technology (ICT), new ideas for pedogogy and now the Covid crisis are all helping to drive these changes. This is presenting a challenge for universities to establish the value of their courses and teaching methods. Student feedback, from staff to student and from student to staff, has become an important factor in the student learning experience and the evaluation of the quality of delivery of business undergraduate courses.

Dissatisfaction with the educational results of feedback has driven much research. A considerable literature has developed on the reasons for the core dissatisfaction expressed with respect to teacher feedback on coursework assignments. The formal student evaluation instruments now routinely applied to module, course and university have also been subjected to intense scrutiny generating an impressive range of criticisms.

This paper aims to assess current student feedback methods and propose ways to improve the value of this process for teachers and students. The next section establishes the scope of the challenge. Section 3 reviews the research literature on feedback methods – both teacher to student and student to staff. A case example of the effect on evaluation methods, of moving a first year module on the business management degree at City Business School is used to illustrate the practical issues

involved (section 4). Section 5 presents some ideas for changing feedback methods to better fit the developing requirements of business courses.

2 the challenge of evaluation on undergraduate business courses
Business School academic staff and professional managers have been extremely successful, in the last century, at developing business discipline theories and models that work well for a wide range of business activities. The traditional method of assessing student learning of these subject disciplines is through the use of written or aural examination. Despite the move to online teaching this approach is still the basis by which student's learning are assessed. It is based on questions or projects set by the teaching staff, to investigate knowledge acquisition and the ability of students to apply theory to standard well understood problem situations. The quality of this type of assessment depends in large part on the relevance and quality of the question set (Pereira et al, 2016).

2.1 The challenge of evaluation in changing times
The 21st century has brought major changes to some business sectors. These effects are beginning to alter the manager's job, making demands for new personal skills such as team management, managerial intuition and 'learnability' (Brown and Rich, 2020). In particular, managers are being faced with unique situations for which business theory is only a partial help (Martin and Golby-Smith, 2017). To meet this challenge, educationists have been developing new teaching approaches – the most significant of which features constructivist methods using student centred exercises (Goodyear, 2001; Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Laurillard, 2003). These can develop into major costly management projects requiring a high level of teaching staff time in their design and execution.

The combined effect of course and module redesign and teaching innovation has made evaluation of student learning more complex and difficult. There is no simple way to assess learning achievement from new educational methods even for the well understood requirements of knowledge acquisition and model use. But when the demand becomes that of effective application of theory in unique circumstances or the sophisticated development of personal skills evaluation becomes very costly in staff time. The student needs to be assessed on their in depth understanding of concepts and skills, which can probably only be dealt with on a one to one basis in a practical exercise.

2.2 The student learning experience
Moreover over this same period of time another aspect of an undergraduate degree course has come to be seen as of great importance – that of the student learning experience (Kandika Howson and Buckley, 2017). How supportive is the environment within which business undergraduate students are taught? For some years, student cohorts have been growing in numbers, and in many cases come from an increasing diversity of cultures. This presents a challenge for teaching and university staff in their efforts to produce an effective learning environment. The quality of the student learning experience depends not only on teaching approach and quality of course design but also on the effectiveness of the administrative processes and the personal support services available such as counselling, finding accommodation etc. The personal experience of students - their perceptions of learning at a university, has come to be seen as important information on the success of the course delivery. Feedback from students has emerged as a major way to assess how well a course is working and being received.

3 literature review on student feedback and course evaluation

This section reviews the results of research on the provision of feedback in higher education – both from staff to student and from student to staff. Student feedback is a term usually associated with the feedback given by the teaching staff to students on their work. There is general agreement on the value and importance of good feedback for student learning (Robinson et al, 2013) and this has been a feature of teaching in higher education since the early years of the twentieth century. As feedback from students became accepted in the twenty first century as an important source of information on teaching and course quality, one of the early results of student surveys was the depth of dissatisfaction with current practice in the provision of student feedback (National Student Survey 2005-2020; Molloy et al, 2020).

3.1 Student feedback - staff to student

Provision of high quality feedback to the large number of students (that are now a routine feature of undergraduate classes), is a challenge that has been taken up by many academics.   An extensive literature has grown up around research into the factors that influence first year satisfaction with feedback (Robinson, Pope and Holyoak, 2013). A recurring refrain from students is the lack of specific detail on how to improve their work. Communication is a two way process so the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on the quality of the teachers comments but also on what the student understands from this (Khanna and Goyal, 2016; Robinson et al, 2013) and their emotional response (Ryan and Henderson, 2018). Much of the research, based on surveys of students, suggest that a major barrier is with the mismatch in expectations between teacher and student (Molloy et al, 2020).

Various ideas for dealing with these criticisms seek to involve students more actively in the feedback process. These include the provision of an essay feedback checklist at the same time as the assignment is set (EFC) (Mansour, 2015), an emphasis on feedback dialogue between teachers and students (Nicol, 2010; Crimmins G et al, 2016) and the use of peer review (McCarty et al 2020). For Molloy et al (2020) it is the student's skill in utilising feedback that is critical to getting value from the feedback process. They call this skill feedback literacy – the 'student's ability to understand, utilise and benefit from feedback processes' (Molloy et al, 2021, p528). Ideally feedback is shifted to a central position in the learning process as part of a module design, making students into a more active participant in the process of learning. Their study sought to create a Student feedback Literacy Framework by identifying the capabilities needed by students to attain feedback literacy. The results of their analysis of a large data base of student descriptions of successful use of feedback produced a somewhat unwieldy set of 33 characteristics - organised into 7 categories. This comprehensive review of what students do when working actively with feedback shows the complexity of this skill.

3.2 Staff feedback – student to staff

The twenty first century has seen an increasing pressure on Universities, from government and higher education agencies, to justify their activities as teaching institutions and business organisations. A major concern is how effective their teaching is in supporting student learning. Student satisfaction has become the accepted measure of course teaching success (Hadad et al, 2020; Richardson, 2005).

Student opinion surveys have evolved over the late 1990s and are now standard in some form for modules, courses and universities. The standard approach to obtaining undergraduate student evaluations of teaching effectiveness is a survey of each cohort of students asking a series of questions about the module or course, to which students have a range of 5 (or more) choices with Likert scores from very poor(1) to excellent (5). This formal instrument offers a practical way to obtain feedback from the entire student group in a systematic way. The responses can be aggregated up to give an overall score for the module or degree course as required. The score can be compared with those of previous years or other modules or even other institutions (Richardson, 2005). According to Richardson (2005) an extensive amount of research into the main scales now available have established their reliability and validity (Chen and Hoshower, 2003) but there are some authors who dispute this (Hadad et al, 2020). However Richardson (2005) cautions that in house evaluation instruments may not have been subjected to the same level of rigour. Research methods applied to critically assessing the various measures used almost all use a similar technique of obtaining the opinion of student and staff through surveys.

For the UK the best known measure is The National Student Survey (NSS), which was introduced in 2005 (Curtiss, 2005) as part of the quality assurance framework applied to all UK universities. This survey is given to all final year undergraduate students and is focused on their satisfaction with the course as a whole in terms of quality of teaching and course design (details in appendix 1). Despite extensive criticisms (Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2017) this measure continues to dominate the UK university scene. The results are published each year (National Student Survey 2020) and have a significant impact on the university performance measures published in various league tables every year. Hence a major application of this set of results is to provide information to students on the quality of degree courses and universities on offer in the UK. But that one instrument could be used successfully across many different academic subjects, institutions and several years of study is problematic (Yorke, 2016). The questions must of necessity be phrased in general terms.

The criticisms of this and other measures revolve mainly about the uses to which they are put – as a diagnostic tool for teachers to identify areas for improvements in course delivery, as measures of teacher performance for course directors and administrators and in the provision of information for students on which to make decisions with respect to course and module choices.

Most student evaluation forms are not well designed for identifying ways to improve teaching quality and/or course design. Most scales, including the NSS, ask generic questions that tell us of problems with some aspects of the course (Richardson, 2005). Hence these are broad tools that tell teachers how effective (or ineffective) they have been in the eyes of their students, but offer too little detail to pinpoint what can be done to solve the problem (Chen and Hoshower, 2003; Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2017). Satisfaction is a complex concept (Richardson, 2005) and it is far from clear that it is a desirable outcome of teaching – discomfort can signal the greater learning achievement. Student engagement in the learning process is coming to be accepted as important and perhaps more relevant as a gauge of student learning (Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2017; York, 2014). Various new approaches to the design of formal survey instruments focusing on student engagement seem to offer alternatives that may prove more appropriate (Yorke, 2016; Kandiko Howson and Buckley, 2017; Hadad et al, 2020). There can be a mismatch between student and teacher's perception of what aspects are important (Hadad et al, 2020). Students may struggle to answer questions on issues that for them are not very important while unable to give feedback on issues they do consider significant because the survey does not include them.

Student evaluations of modules are now routinely used as a measure of teacher performance for course directors and administrators in their promotion and recruitment decisions (Richardson, 2005;

Chen and Hoshower, 2003; Hadad et al, 2020). But research into student behaviour leaves concerns as to how realistic this approach is in establishing teacher competence or module quality. Research over many years has shown evidence of bias in student ratings due to a teacher's personal characteristics irrelevant to teaching quality (Hadad et al, 2020) and to non comprehension of what the questions are aiming for. Moreover in many surveys, a significant proportion of a cohort will fail to respond. The purpose of surveys is to investigate the experience of all students. What are we to make of non-responders (Richardson, 2005)? Research shows that responders differ from non-responders and this will introduce a further bias in the results.

Formal students evaluation instruments are practical, can be administered and the results analysed within the current framework of course teaching relatively easily but appear to be of limited value. Nonetheless the continuing work on developing measures to meet the perceived weaknesses of existing instruments seems to offer some positive directions.

3.3 Implications of the research
Most feedback seems to be basically structured to be one way from giver to receiver (Molloy et al, 2020), with teachers determining the form in which the feedback is provided (student feedback) or collected, analysed and acted upon (student evaluations). The main original purpose of providing hard (usually numerical) measures shines through current practice. This can distract student's attention away from the substance of the feedback itself. Even within these implicit aims there seem to be a number of problems with the current methods - in particular the mismatch between students and teachers expectations. In addition the stated purpose of feedback is shifting in favour of providing support for student learning, in response to the changes being made to subject disciplines and pedagogic methods. This requires students to play a bigger role in the whole process - as collaborators in the design, interpreters and feedback providers.

4 Case example - the first year module on Critical Skills at City Business School
This section covers the impact on student evaluation of the move online of one core module - Critical Skills - within the first year of an undergraduate Business Management degree. This module forms an integral part of the first academic term of the course. It aims to develop students' understanding of 'what is going on in any given situation through the use of reasoning, the evaluation of evidence and self-reflection on their own thinking processes' (Critical Thinking in Business handbook, 2018). Placing this module at the start was a fundamental design choice for the course as a whole with the intention that students would apply the skills and approaches that they had learned within the module at later stages. Therefore an effective measure of the module's success as a component of the course as a whole would be the students' collective ability to function as critical thinkers at later stages of their studies.

4.1 The Critical Skills Module
The Critical Skills module was developed around a Problem Based Learning approach. Students are organised into small teaching and learning groups (maximum size 16) for most of its taught elements. Each group is assigned a group tutor for the term. With a cohort of 600 students, this meant coordinating a large course team involving many tutors. The module is taught through ten weekly student group sessions designed around one business case study. The tutorial sessions were structured by the faculty design team, who developed the case material and the questions on the case for discussion and decision. The case used for all the 10 sessions was designed specifically for this module. It was based on Hailo, a taxi app launched in London in 2012 which then went through several highs and lows over the next few years. The case closely mirrored what happened in the early years but added a few wrinkles to the basic story to fit the needs of the course. Every week, the student group was confronted with a problem that Hailo also had to face, for which there was no

clear answer. Each week's problem expanded their knowledge of the company and its senior executives.

The actual functioning of the tutorial was managed by the group's assigned tutor and the student group, with the students responsible for leading and recording the session taking the lead. There were three student roles: The discussion leader, the secretary – who is a note taker, and discussion participants. Every student member of the group was allocated the leader role for one session together with a partner and the secretary role for another session.

The move online in response to the Covid-19 pandemic introduced both problems and opportunities. Despite initial concerns among the course team that the Problem Based Learning approach could be difficult to move online, in practice the sort of group activities that were essential to this did in fact work well with a dispersed cohort of students and reliance on electronic meetings. In a videoconferencing environment every students could easily be identified by name. The group size of 16 was in line with the maximum size for which a highly participative online session was comfortable for everybody concerned. As a guiding principle the course team worked on the basis that the learning outcomes for the complete course, and the modules within it, should remain unchanged compared to those which were in place pre-Covid and the learning processes themselves should be adjusted to deliver these as effectively as possible. Moreover the small-group based teaching structure meant that scalability could be achieved but only by increasing or decreasing the number of separate seminars to be included. Moving the seminars online in response to Covid-19 removed one significant practical constraint to increasing the number of seminars, which is the amount of physical teaching space needed.

4.2 Feedback to students on assessments in the module
Assessed coursework for the Critical Skills module comprised four components: two were continuous throughout the ten weeks in which students participated. One of these was a series of simple online tests which set out to gauge students' grasp of the key concepts underlying the module material. The marks and correct answers to these were visible to students as soon as they had taken them. The other component of continuous assessment was based around tutors' assessment of individual levels of participation. To facilitate this in the online environment, students were expected to submit individual notes to indicate that they had prepared appropriately and were ready to participate. Feedback on participation principally took the form of verbal discussions with tutors, but a simple 'traffic-light' system where individual participation was noted as being red (unacceptable), yellow (marginal) or green (good) provided a simple indication to students of how they were coping.

The other two components each entailed assessment of a single activity. Every student in the cohort had to lead a discussion at one point during the term, and their leadership was marked by and detailed feedback provided by the tutor. At the end of the module there was a written open-book exam within which students were asked to apply concepts that they had learned to a case. Students received generic, but not individual, feedback on this exam.

Students who failed the participation or discussion leadership components were required to take an additional oral exam instead. This was deliberately pitched so that it would never be seen as an easy option.

It is notable that all assignment marking and feedback to students (apart from the exam) was carried out by the tutors. Students could ask for further explanation or query the results directly with their tutor either in the tutorial sessions or by individual video link.

4.3 Student evaluation of the module

The use of constructivist teaching methods for the module led to a tension between the use of the university's standard evaluation template, designed for modules based principally around formal lectures and that of a more specialised feedback questionnaire designed for Problem Based Learning which focused all questions on the elements of the course delivery (Appendix 1). In the pre-Covid version of the module the distinction between these two feedback channels, both of which were superficially similar questionnaires for students to complete, could be clarified through informal conversations where the students were able to discuss with tutors how the questionnaires were to be used. Student feedback for and tutor review of the first year of the module (2018) led to two significant changes for the following year (2019) - a slight increase in the amount of lecture content to allow the key concepts to be framed more clearly and the introduction of an exam at the end of the students' first term. All assessment had been by coursework in the first year.

The move online for the third year of the module (2020) nevertheless introduced numerous challenges around evaluation of the module. Simple pressure on time meant that students were much less willing to complete questionnaires or to respond to other appeals for feedback. The student representatives, who provided an important parallel channel for communication between individual students and academic staff, remained visible but not to the same extent that they would be among a cohort who were physically attending university and able to discuss their concerns informally in person. Despite the provision of a simpler student evaluation form (appendix 2) response rates were disappointingly low (see appendix 3) – at 33% they were almost half the rate which could normally be expected from conventional module evaluation forms.

Moreover the responses highlighted that some limitations typically associated with module evaluation questionnaires were, if anything, more significant in this environment than would be the case pre-Covid. In a module with a large number of individuals acting as tutors (as was inevitable with this one given its use of a number of parallel seminars and therefore a teaching team of around ten lecturers and tutors each covering the same material with different students) it was difficult to separate out comments about individual staff members from those around the module as a whole. Sometimes with multiple questionnaires there was considerable duplication and even ambiguity among students as to exactly what the questionnaires refer to. For instance the questionnaires dedicated to the Critical Analysis module, because of this being a core module, often attracted both positive and negative remarks about the course as a whole. This could be read as a lack of assessment literacy (Molloy et al, 2020) among this group of students and a lack of a clear perception that their views could effectively shape the future of the course as a whole.

In practise, given the rapidity with which the course had been moved online and the uncertainty surrounding many students' access to the Internet, one of the best measures of engagement and success was simply the extent to which students did participate in online sessions and did produce coursework and other activities that were expected from them. In the event, the majority of students did manage to participate fully in the module. But according to the course team, the tail of students unable or unwilling to participate significantly, seemed larger than would normally be expected in a conventional environment.

The use of small-group teaching at the core of the module meant that the interactions between tutors and students from week to week provided a valuable channel for feedback on the module and on the course as a whole. The small group setting provided an environment where students were able to be honest and had built a measure of trust with the tutors which typically did not exist in other modules. When the students in the 'tail' were given the opportunity to talk about their learning with one of the module tutors they often related catastrophic failures of connection with

the university and an inability to engage at all. These students would not have been able to engage with any type of online questionnaire any more than they could engage with course materials during the teaching term.

In an online environment every interaction generates data. Within the Business School logs from the Virtual Learning environment (VLE) – moodle - were already used but principally only to identify when students had lost interest in the course entirely and become disengaged. The analytic data generated by the (VLE) could be used to help create a fuller and more accurate picture of what students are actually doing. Student engagement as expressed by their activity online could become the measure of effectiveness rather than that of satisfaction as collected in standard student evaluation forms. Using this in tandem with students' experiences as related to tutors, for example as to which resources online were most popular and which were used at particular stages in students' learning would offer a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the module.

5 Proposals for change in feedback methods
The process of feedback has tended to develop in a piecemeal fashion so that the total package for many degree courses can be wasteful in the effort required, due to lack of integration. Each module situation will differ demanding individual design. Redesign should aim for some greater degree of collaboration between teachers, institutional management and students with a formal documented process of staff/student committees charged with responsibility for agreeing feedback processes. This will involve some changes in the behaviour of all three groups. The purpose of any feedback activity and the expected roles of teacher and student needs to be clarified for each cohort of students. But the most fundamental change is the requirement for students to take a more active role. They can do this if their early period at university includes some time spent on developing appropriate skills.

For student feedback – the assessment of their coursework assignments by teaching staff, Molloy et al (2020) point a way to improve this process. But their proposals depend on changing the behaviour of both teacher and student and on explicit agreement as to steps in the process. Feedback is an integral part of the course delivery and according to Molloy et al (2020) few teachers as yet embed the feedback provision into the course design and delivery. For example feedback given at several points of the course in time for student to learn about their weaknesses will offer the chance of applying this learning in later assignments. But students need early training on feedback literacy (Molloy et al (2020) in order to be able to make the most of the responses given them by staff.

Student module evaluations pose a more complex problem. Of the three purposes to which formal instruments are put – measuring course quality, measuring staff performance and the identification of ways to improve course delivery – no existing evaluation measure performs well. Involving students and staff in the design of several measures aligned to the various purposes, could be a way to reduce the mismatch in expectations and obtain more appropriate evaluation measures. . Chen and Hoshower, (2003) found that student's motivation to participate depends on the use to which the results will be put and their confidence that action will be taken in response to the results obtained. Hence the importance of publicising all steps in the process to obtain student buy-in and improve response rates. But again effective student involvement will put a high value on their acquisition of the appropriate skills such as for example judgement, peer management, self-understanding of personal characteristics such as integrity, energy, enthusiasms, ambition and

motivation. Hence these will need to be addressed at the same time as feedback literacy skills acquisition early in the first term of the first year.

6 Conclusion

Obtaining effective student evaluations of undergraduate modules offers great potential value for; improving our understanding of how students learn, supporting teaching staff in their efforts to improve module quality and enhancing the student learning experience. But the current methods appear to have limited success. The standard processes tend to be too general to offer much insight. Moreover most students are ill prepared for the roles they are expected to play.

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Appendix 1: Evaluation Form for Critical Skills Module (pre covid)

ques -tion No.	Question	Response				
		Definitely Agree	mostly Agree	neither agree or disagree	mostly disagree	Definitely disagree
Tutorial group help for learning						
1	My tutorial group has functioned well					
2	The tutorial group setting has encouraged me to take responsibility for my own preparation and learning					
3	The Tutorial Group has encouraged me to to engage in the discussions					
4	Working in a tutorial group setting with my fellow students has helped me to better understand the subject matter of this course					
5	Working in a tutorial group setting with my fellow students has made this course engaging					

tutor role						
6	The tutor was enthusiastic in supporting our group					
7	The tutor supported the discussion leader(s) whenever necessary					
8	The tutor ensured that we did not skip over important topics					
9	The tutor ensured that we give feedback to each other at the end of each tutorial					
the business Case						
10	The Haillo case was helpful to contextualize critical thinking skills in a business settin					
11	The Hailo case was interesting					
12	The supporting videos provided helpful, real-life reflections on the case					
The book on theory						
13	The Critical Thinking book was well explained					
14	The Critical Thinking book was at the right level of difficulty					

Appendix 2: Evaluation Form for Critical Skills Module (covid year 2020-21)

ques-tion	Question	Response				
	Who was your tutor					
		Definitely Agree	mostly Agree	neutral	mostly disagree	Definitely disagree
Teaching of this module						
1.1	The tutorial leader is good at explaining things and has helped me understand the module					
1.2	The tutorial leader's teaching on this module has been of a high standard					
My progress- assessment and feedback						
2.1	I have received helpful comments on my progress and/or work I have submitted					
2.2	Staff have been available to respond to my queries about the module and/or my work					

Delivery of this module						
3.1	The online resources provided for this module (eg pre-recprded videas, live sessions or uploads of relevant material to Moodle) were both helpful and easily accessible					
3.2	The balance of pre-recorded video content and live sessions was right for this module					
3.3	Overall I am satisfied with the quality of the module					
Your comments						
4.1	What are the best features of this module?					
4.2	How could this module be improved?					

Appendix 3: Response rates to module evaluations for Critical Analysis for the three years since the first delivery of the module

Year	Cohort size	Responses	Response rate
2018	379	95	25.07
2019	440	297	67.50
2020	615	203	33.01