Viewing Online Instructor Evaluation via Multiple Vantages: the Evaluator, the Instructor, the Academic Department, the Administration, and the Student Perspective

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Abstract: The prospect of being observed while teaching can provoke anxiety even in the most experienced instructors; however, many institutions of higher learning annually observe all faculty members on the basis of content and andragogical approach. What value does the instructor evaluation process add to the institution? This paper provides some insight by offering vantages of online instructor evaluation from a variety of roles: the evaluator, the instructor/evalutee, the academic department, the university administration, and the student. Each role is deconstructed by experienced online evaluators. From the evaluator's perspective, the relationship between the evaluator and the person evaluated (evalutee) is discussed, and mentorship and evaluation are distinguished. From the instructor view, potential pitfalls are introduced. Student surveys are presented as a vehicle to gather data on the student perspective.

Introduction

Although all institutes of higher learning have a mandate to ensure their academic programs are of the highest quality, universities that offer programs and courses online face unique challenges. How do they ensure the quality of their online offerings? One way is through effective instructor evaluations, which are complicated endeavors. For instance, the prospect of evaluation may cause anxiety for the one being evaluated. It also forces the university to answer some tough questions concerning who does the evaluating and how that evaluation is done. This paper will look at how Park University, a leader in online education, evaluates its online instruction, as well as provide some perspectives on the challenges that have been encountered through the lenses of the evaluator, the instructor/evalutee, the academic department, the administration, and the student.

Views shared are based on personal experience as all authors are experienced online observers and instructors. All authors teach online, are course developers, and have evaluated online adjunct faculty for Park. Cumulative online teaching experience is over 30 years. J. Pegues has served as an online faculty evaluator in the past and is currently an online academic director. M. Eskey, T. Mason, and C. Taylor all are currently online

instructor evaluators and observe 90-100 instructors yearly via a formal evaluation process for Park. Perspectives that follow are drawn from the authors' professional experiences.

Background of Park University's Online Programs

Fifteen years ago Park University made the decision to offer online courses; it was one of the first accredited, not-for-profit institutions to take this step. Originally, these online course offerings were made available to assist the student with degree completion, and they are still used this way by many students. Over time these offerings grew, and now Park University offers over 300 courses with approximately 600 sections five times a year. Online enrollments currently stand at approximately 26,000. The University offers seven undergraduate online degrees as well as four graduate online degrees and is planning to expand this number. To support a program of this size, Park University developed an extensive system to train, mentor, evaluate and support online faculty. The component parts created by the university that aid in the success of this system include an instructor evaluation component, a mentoring program, and academic director positions.

Instructor Observation/Evaluation: Faculty Online Observation (FOO)

The FOO process, a vital component part of Park's online program, examines a two-week snap-shot of the online classroom. Classes are systematically observed and rated using a rubric based on best-practices and empirical research for quality online teaching. The FOO observes the instructor's facilitation skills, adherence to Park policies and procedures, and application of best online teaching practices. It does not judge the content of the course or the instructor's content knowledge.

Online instructors are selected for FOO observation as part of an annual requirement. Before their initial evaluation, instructors are: (1) trained in the aforementioned policies, procedures, and best-practices; (2) trained in the use of the university's supporting software; and (3) mentored during their first term by an experienced online instructor.

The determination of who will teach a course in the future is partially based on the rating an instructor receives on their FOO. An instructor will receive a rating of exceptional, meets expectations, or needs improvement. Receiving a needs improvement rating decreases the chances that instructor will be selected to teach another course. Therefore, the FOO rating is significant, although the academic department also has input into who may teach that is equal in weight to the FOO observation rating.

The Evaluator's Perspective

Many online instructors react with trepidation when notified that they will be observed. This type of reaction is understandable especially if one has received a negative observation in the past. Looking at the process through the lens of the evaluator can be a helpful way to get past these emotions of fear and frustration with the FOO process. First, value the evaluator's role in the university as it is important for accreditation. Second,

consider this experience as an opportunity for professional development and improvement (Weschke & Canipe, 2010). Third, a positive review could lead to the evaluated instructor's professional enrichment – a mentoring or course development position or a good reference for an academic position.

When an online instructor views the evaluation process through the perspective of the evaluator, the online instructor can better anticipate how to make a good impression and what the university is seeking from the process. This experience can benefit the university's overall quality of instruction and act as a valuable learning opportunity for everyone observed because the evaluator can share best practices at an individualized level. Also, the evaluated instructor will receive feedback from an unbiased source and personalized attention from a representative of the university. Longstanding problems of the university and of the evalutee can be identified and corrected.

First Impressions

Creating a good first impression is paramount for both the evaluator and the evalutee. When the evaluator sends notice about the evaluation, the evalutee should respond within 48 hours and in a positive manner. The evaluator knows that many evalutees will have questions about the process and may have written introductory materials to answer some of these questions. The evalutee should review the material provided and be specific when asking a question as the evaluator will likely have multiple observations occurring at the same time.

The Evaluator—Evalutee Relationship

How can the evaluator-evalutee relationship best be defined? The evaluator represents the university and assesses the evalutee's performance in the classroom. As such, the evaluator needs to be mindful of the proper tone when critiquing evalutee work and avoid harsh comments. Evaluators must also apply standards equally, without bias to everyone. Evaluators should not observe friends, and friendships with potential evalutees should not be encouraged. Caution should also be used in observing close co-workers.

Is an evaluator also a mentor? According to Mandernach, Donnelli, Dailey, & Schulte (2005), the line between mentoring and evaluating was blurred in an earlier version of the Park evaluation process. They reported that new instructors viewed the observation process as "collaborative" and saw the observer as a mentor. In contrast, more seasoned instructors seemed to view the observations as an intrusion instead of as an opportunity to improve. Experienced instructors were also sometimes suspicious of the evaluators' credentials. The authors themselves referred to the observers as "mentor[s]-evaluator[s]", indicating that the institution had combined the two into a hybrid form of observer.

Taking a hybrid approach to evaluation raises many questions. Can observing and mentoring be combined or should the roles be separate? Does mentoring and observing instructors at the same time create a conflict of interest? This author posits that the evaluator should not be a friend or a mentor to the evalutee and that mentoring and

evaluating should be separate to maintain professional distance.

Another relationship difficulty may arise from the evaluator's or evalutee's experience with past evaluations. Do these past reviews play a role in current observations? Not on paper, but a negative review can create a lasting memory. For previously observed instructors, projecting prior negative experiences into the evaluator-evalutee relationship can be damaging. Both the evaluator and the evalutee should avoid venting about previous bad experiences. They also should not reference previous years' observations. As a cautionary note, even if one is reviewed by the same person annually, the standards and forms may change significantly from year to year. The evalutee should review all literature and assume at the beginning that this will be a new process.

Ending Well

Communication is key during the evaluation process from the initial contact to signing the review at the end. Even if the observation ends with a poor review; an evalutee should still value the role of the evaluator in the institution and take the time to sign the review. If a negative review is received, the evalutee should carefully prepare a response because mistakes may happen during the observation process. An appeal of a negative decision should first go to the evaluator for reconsideration. If the appeal by the evaluator is denied, the evalutee has the option to request reconsideration from the evaluator's supervisor.

The Evalutee's Perspective

From the evalutee's (instructor's) view, observations can cause anxiety and a lot of questions. Evalutees should not be afraid to ask questions that may not be addressed in the introductory material provided by the evaluator. This author posits that evalutees often assume incorrectly that certain standards do not apply to them because their course is unique in one way or another (i.e. they are teaching small classes or their courses are more grading intensive compared to others). Clarifying these issues ahead of time would be preferable to a possible negative review resulting from unasked questions. This author, in addition, posits that evalutees often assume that the evaluator is able to view everything in the course. This is not always the case. For example, evaluators are sometimes unable to see past or future material or unable to view emails between students and instructors.

The "What-ifs"

Life events such as a sick family member or other events beyond our control can interfere with even the best instructor's performance. How and when should this be considered in an observation? Instructors are expected to be flexible with students and also to draw and enforce boundaries. An evaluator's review of the instructor should adopt a similar posture. Unforeseen situations experienced by the online instructor should be given special consideration by the evaluator like that instructor does for a student; however, problems that the instructor could have foreseen and mitigated should not be given

special consideration. For example, if an instructor's computer crashes during the evaluator's observation process, the instructor should have a contingency plan in place to overcome this problem just as an instructor would expect a student to have a contingency plan in place if he forgets to bring his term paper to class the day it's due.

Another "what-if" centers around course design and text book quality. An instructor's struggle with poor course design or textbook choices could affect the quality of their teaching. As this would be the fault of the institution and beyond the instructor's ability to control, the evaluator should be notified and consideration given. Real-life examples of this could be: "I haven't received my textbook, and the course is half over" or "My course contains material from an outdated version of the textbook, and I cannot change it."

Student misconduct can also affect an instructor's overall performance. Sometimes multiple students cheat or plagiarize and this could cause extra time demands on the instructor. Due to this lack of time, the instructor could be unable to add the extra links to websites related to learning objectives, articles, or lecture content that would have improved the overall evaluation score. Also, students occasionally push boundaries or use improper language in class. In this author's experience, students will sometimes drink alcoholic beverages and then post inappropriately in online courses. The evalutee may want to advise the evaluator of the situation so that the evaluator knows that the evalutee noticed the improper language and is addressing the problem.

Who Does the Evaluating: The Administrator or Academic Department?

A simple search will turn up many references detailing how the evaluation of online courses should be conducted. For example, Rovai (2003) describes several types of course evaluation approaches including objective-oriented, management-oriented, consumer-oriented and expertise-oriented. However, what is missing is a discussion on *who* should be doing the evaluation. Should this evaluation be department/faculty driven? Or should the evaluation be done by a separate administrative branch of the university that has expertise in the processes and best practices of online education. This struggle between department/content evaluation versus administration/online process evaluation is a difficult one.

Often the department perspective focuses on the fact that they are the *content* experts, therefore, they know what should be contained in a quality online course. What makes this complicated is that often, department faculty are not well-versed in online administration and education and do not have the expertise to evaluate if a course is effectively being taught online. Department faculty may not believe that it is important to focus on online facilitation and presentation because they believe it's the content of the course that matters most. They may also fail to recognize that there is a marked difference between deliveries of content face-to-face versus online. In other words, just because an instructor is effective in the traditional classroom, does not guarantee they will be skilled in the virtual classroom. Finally, more traditionally based faculty, may feel that this new endeavor into the online world may threaten their traditionally held roles

(Beaudoin, 1990).

The counter argument is for evaluation by administrators who are trained in online best practices. They should be the ones that evaluate online course instruction because they have expertise in the delivery of content in the online format. From a larger university administrative perspective, it is more efficient to have the evaluation of all online courses housed in one section of the university, with oversight across disciplines. This ensures continuity and consistency in the evaluation process. Allowing individual departments to evaluate their own courses would lead to inconsistency and possible imbalances (i.e. one department is much better at the evaluation process, or one department is more stringent in their evaluations, etc…).

This push and pull between the *content* experts and the administrative online-facilitation-experts is not easily resolved and will likely be side-stepped in the near term by most universities over more pressing concerns, such as shrinking budgets. However, Park University, with a focus on what's best for the Park student, has settled on the administrator approach, though there is the occasional push by an academic department to take over the evaluation process.

Focusing on student preferences can help to resolve conflicts between the administration and academic departments. Both exist to serve students and to provide the opportunity for a quality educational experience for all. In the following section, what's best for the online student will be explored using data from a survey of online students and faculty.

Value to the Students: Measured Via an Online Student / Online Faculty Survey

Beyond the perspectives of the evaluator, instructor, academic department, and administrator, how does the evaluation process provide value to the students? Creating and enforcing standards to enforce best practices seems like an obvious way to create a better learning environment, but how can this be determined? What do students want? Do institutional standards for online facilitation mirror student preferences? One way to determine this is to measure student preferences in a survey of online students with online faculty surveyed to provide contrast. Policies at Park regarding facilitation of online classes and evaluation of online adjunct faculty are discussed and compared with survey results.

There were two sets of online survey data collected to explore the views and possible future direction of distance learning, not just at Park University, but in a higher education setting in general. Two separate online surveys were conducted: the first surveyed online adjunct instructors for Park University, and the second survey group consisted of online students at Park University that attended courses during the last two terms of the 2008 – 2009 academic year and the entire 2009 – 2010 academic year. The surveys took place in Survey Share, a web-based survey tool. The student survey was conducted from February 16 – March 17, 2010. The adjunct faculty survey was conducted from April 22 – May 8, 2010.

The first portion of Building Community in the Classroom addressed four questions. The students that considered the areas addressed in these questions as "very important" were compared with those of faculty that answered in the same manner. The areas addressed were unique adult learner problems, student Internet problems, student disabilities, and new online learner concerns. Only new learner concerns shared a "high importance" with both faculty (at 70 percent) and students (at 60 percent).

Sixty percent of students felt student disabilities were "very important compared to only fifty percent of faculty members. Six in 10 students felt student internet problems were very important, while only thirty percent of faculty placed this as very important. Finally, only slightly more than 40 percent of student and faculty placed the unique adult learner problems as "very important". This was a somewhat surprising response for both sides, given the large number and percentage of online learners that are adults with unique problems not often shared with traditional students such as a full-time job, family, unique outside activities, and the like.

The second portion of Building Community in the Classroom included an emphasis on timeliness of communication. Students and faculty were asked for the importance that they placed on instructor response to particular course items. These included:

Table 1: Building Community in the Classroom

E-Mails	Both felt this was very important. Nearly 80 percent of students and faculty felt e-mails were very important.
Grade book Comments	80 percent of students felt GCs were very important compared to only 40 percent of faculty.
Discussion Threads	Conversely, eight of 10 instructors felt this was very important compared to only five of 10 students.
Announcements	About 70 percent of students and faculty placed a high importance on the timeliness of announcements.

Additionally, both Course Introductions and the Instructor Office were not considered as highly important by either faculty or students. Five of 10 instructors compared to four of 10 students placed a high importance on course introductions. Ironically, the response in the Instructor Office is considered a critical item of observation by the Park University online adjunct faculty evaluation system.

At Park University, adjunct instructors are observed on how they conduct their online classroom and generally 24 – 48 hours is a requirement for instructor responses to students. Is value added to the student learning experience by enforcing this requirement? The following chart shows how important students viewed prompt

instructor response time in different areas of online facilitation.

Table 2: Importance of Instructor Response Time to Students

E-Mails	As noted, this is very important to students (nearly nine in 10) versus seven in 10 instructors feel this important. Note – for both sets of respondents this is significantly higher than the other areas in the survey in the category.
Instructor Office	Students place a high importance on online instructors responding in a timely manner (80 percent). Instructors responded that they do not place this as important as students (only 60 percent). A number of instructors have devised other methods of doing so, such as unit responding and using primarily e-mail responses.
Drop box / Grade book Comments	This is an area of concern. Grade book items are considered to be a critical item of observation; and 70 percent of students feel this is very important to receive timely comments from their instructors; but, only 40 percent of instructors consider that this is a "very important priority
Discussion Threads	Seven of 10 students feel this is important to receive a prompt instructor response and, it generally will not happen, as only four of 10 instructors consider this as being "Very Important"
Course Introductions	Six of 10 students feel this is important to receive a prompt instructor response; and, it generally will not happen, as only four of 10 instructors consider this as being "Very Important."

Conclusion

The importance of evaluating online courses is clear, but how can this be orchestrated fairly? Many perspectives need to be considered when determining how evaluation is conducted and how it is received. Quality evaluations involve the evaluator, the evalutee, the academic department, the administration, and the student. Evaluators can work with the university administration to make the evaluation process as strong as possible using current research to guide decision making. Finally, academic departments and university administration will continue to debate the merit of content versus online expert evaluation processes.

Park University's online evaluation process has gone through much iteration and continues to evolve. Has this eliminated student concerns and grade appeals? No, it has not; student concerns and grade appeals are still a part of online teaching. However, internal data does indicate that student concerns and grade appeals are much less numerous since the University embarked on an effective online faculty evaluation system.

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