

Refocusing on the Traditional and Effective Teaching Evaluation: Rational Thoughts About SETEs in Higher Education

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Some higher educational institutions often use a student evaluation of teaching effectiveness (SETE) as the only way to evaluate teaching. Unfortunately, this instrument often fails to serve as a tool for improving instruction. It often serves as a disincentive to introducing rigor. Studies have found that student feedback is not enough to be the basis for evaluating teaching. This paper performs a literature review of student evaluations to measure teaching effectiveness. Problems are highlighted, and suggestions are offered to improve SETEs and refocus teaching effectiveness on outcome-based academic standards.

Keywords: SETE, teaching interaction, teaching evaluation, performance assessment

INTRODUCTION

Student evaluation of teaching effectiveness (SETE) originated in the United States (Zhou, 2009). Experts who support SETE believe that students' evaluation of teachers' teaching is objective (Zhang, Ma, and Jiang, 2017). From students' perspective, the teaching effect can reflect classroom quality and be used as the primary method to evaluate teaching quality in universities and vocational colleges (Wang and Yu, 2016). However, some scholars believe that if SETE is used only and not combined with other evaluation bases, students will become the decision-maker of teachers' appointment, evaluation, promotion and salary increase (Uttl, White, & Gonzalez, 2017). Some scholars also argue that if teachers are evaluated by student satisfaction, students are directly empowered to assess teaching effectiveness. It would significantly negatively impact and lower teaching quality (Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2003).

Many universities and higher vocational schools regard students as consumers rather than products (Emery & Tian, 2002). As a result, SETE tends to reflect the popularity of teachers rather than the actual quality of teaching. SETE results are subject to many factors and do not depend entirely on teachers' teaching levels and effectiveness. A study conducted by Chang et al. found that students' "attitude toward teaching evaluation," "attitude toward learning," and "attitude toward the course" significantly affected the

data error of SETE (Dong, 2014). The author argues that the existing SETE-based teaching evaluation method can hardly improve the teaching level, so it is necessary to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the current SETE method and discuss them from the literature analysis and cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SETE was embraced by U.S. colleges and higher vocational education administrators as early as the 1960s and has been prevalent in U.S. higher education for more than 50 years because of its practicality, sophistication, and accessibility. However, SETE is not the only or the best way to assess the quality of teaching and learning. The author analyzes and concludes different dimensions of research cases regarding the reliability and validity of SETE.

Personal Traits and Popularity

Most educational researchers believe that SETE essentially has nothing to do with teaching. In some courses, the same materials and assessment methods are used, but different instructors teach them, and the assessment results of teaching effectiveness are not the same for each instructor. Several Chinese and foreign scholars have reached conclusions supportive of these ideas (Dooris, 1997; Xie & Zhang, 2019; Guan, 2012; Wu, 2013; Zhong, 2012; Aleamoni, 1987). Research findings indicate that teachers' performance significantly impacts SETE results but not student achievement (Feldman, 1978). At the time of SETE, students often base their evaluations on teachers' attributes (Abrami, Leventhal & Perry, 1982). Feldman noted a positive correlation between teacher personality and assessment results when evaluations are based on what students or colleagues know about the teachers (Feldman, 1978). Abrami et al. have suggested that schools should not decide teacher promotions and tenure based solely on SETE because teachers who are popular with students receive good SETE scores regardless of teaching ability. Thus, using SETE to assess teaching quality can be challenging academically (Abrami, Leventhal & Perry, 1982).

Student Achievement

Numerous studies have shown that student achievement is not related to actual evaluation results of teaching effectiveness. Cohen noted that the coefficient of variation in overall SETE results due to differences in student achievement was only 14.4% (Cohen, 1983). Dowell and Neal suggested that the correlation between student achievement and SETE results was only 3.9% (Dowell & Neal, 1982). In a broader study, Damron noted that SETE scores were not related to teachers' ability to improve student achievement. If the weight of classroom satisfaction on SETE results were increased, teachers would receive lower evaluation scores, potentially depriving teachers of opportunities for promotion, salary increase, or even succession (Damron, 1996).

Situational Factors and Effectiveness

Some researchers have proposed that situational factors can interfere with SETE (Damron, 1996), making the results, not representative (Cohen, 1983). Cashin noted that there is a sizeable disciplinary bias in SETE. Some surveys suggest that teachers in the arts and humanities consistently score higher on the SETE results, while teachers in business, mathematics, and engineering consistently score lower. In addition, differences between compulsory and optional courses and between senior and junior students may affect the evaluation results (Aleamoni, 1989). The amount and intensity of course assignments can also influence students' teacher evaluation. A faculty member at a university teaches an introductory course. Due to adopting a collectively developed syllabus, there is no coursework and only three multi-choice exams. As a result, students give the teacher high evaluations every year, with scores higher than the college average. The other two courses taught by the same teacher receive low evaluations from students because they have developed their syllabus and are assigned more coursework.

It should be noted that the teacher is the leading scholar of these two courses. The textbook used is also authored by the teacher, who is pretty familiar with the content of the course but has received poor evaluations simply because of the large amount of coursework. In one of these courses, the average student

evaluation score was 73. Still, the standard error was as high as 35, and we wondered what the validity of such a teaching evaluation was.

Assessors

The issue of assessors in SETE deserves attention. Assessors who are not familiar with the assessment system may be misled by useless data and draw conclusions that deviate from the facts. The evaluation of teaching effectiveness should focus on scientific statistics, and any sample of fewer than 30 respondents is a small sample, which requires a specific statistical method. An unscientific statistical approach may lead to three types of errors. Firstly, data processing is not scientific. Secondly, assessors confuse the critical difference factors and non-critical difference factors, and thirdly, assessors cannot reasonably explain the differences of respondents and cannot identify the sources of these differences. Therefore, college administrators should master scientific, statistical analysis theories and methods (Zhong, 2012).

Qualifications

Many researchers argue that students who are not equipped with critical thinking skills cannot assess teachers. Therefore, most researchers believe that SETE can be a teaching evaluation. Still, the teaching effectiveness can only be set to the extent that the student is qualified (Wu, 2004). It has also been proposed that assessors receive appropriate training before evaluation (Aleamoni, 1989). Conversations between assessors are generally protected by defamation suits, a fundamental civil right (Cascio and Bernardin, 1981). If the assessors are not qualified but still assess others, the assessors can sue the assessors for defamation (Chen, 2012).

CASE ANALYSIS

The literature review revealed that administrators' practice of using SETE as the sole basis for making decisions about faculty promotions and salary increases had been widely resented and opposed by the faculty. The following is an analysis from teachers' and students' perspectives, illustrating how to rationalize this approach.

Case 1. What Is Excellent Teaching?

A professor at a university in the United States had a SETE average of 4.25 (out of 5) in the first semester, 4.23 in the second semester, and 4.21 in the third semester. The professor constantly reflected on his teaching and made improvements over the past three semesters, but his SETE scores were always below average. The professor was recognized as an outstanding faculty member, with excellent performance on all aspects of the performance evaluation. However, based on his SETE score, he was not awarded the Excellence in Teaching Award. The award was granted to another professor who had a high SETE score but performed poorly on the performance evaluation. This phenomenon was brought to the president's attention, who became aware that the SETE system was flawed (Emery, Kramer & Tian, 2003).

It is also worth noting that the professor's scores are all above 4.0. In this regard, the authors questioned how to achieve "good" if a score higher than 4.0 out of 5 is considered not good. If other factors are not considered, how should SETE scores be measured? If these so-called "other factors" are more influential than SETE, why is the SETE method used to assess teaching and learning?

Case 2. Differences in Scores of Different Classes Taught by the Same Professor

A professor at Anhui University of Finance and Economics took up the teaching task of 4 classes in one semester, and his SETE score in one class was 94.33 (100 out of 100), which ranked 6th in the university, while his score in another class was 62.5, which was the lowest score in the university. In other words, the same professor is considered by one type to be one of the best teachers in the university, while students in another class think him to be one of the worst teachers in the university. Assuming that SETE is an indicator of the actual situation, the scores of the same professor should be very close. The above data

indicate that such a significant contrast calls into questions about the objectivity and validity of SETE (Dong, 2014).

Case 3. Differences From the Control Group

A professor at a U.S. university who was not yet tenured received 4.10 and 4.24 in the two classes he taught in the fall semester. In the following spring semester, he led the same course at the same university and scored 4.04 and 4.33 in the two classes. The average score for the entire university was 3.99 in the fall semester and 4.31 in the spring semester. The professor's scores differed little between the two semesters when compared longitudinally. However, compared to the school average, his teaching performance was worse in the spring semester than in the fall semester. Could it be attributed to the improved quality of teaching throughout the university during the spring semester? The answer is no. To some extent, these differences depend on the composition of the faculty participating in SETE. In the fall semester, all faculty members are required to take SETE, whereas, in the spring semester, only non-tenure-track professors and teaching assistants are required to take SETE (Emery, Kramer & Tian, 2003).

Many researchers believe that teaching assistants are often more "likely" to meet student expectations and, therefore, are more likely to receive high scores. In addition, because SETE has a significant impact on faculty careers, non-tenure-track professors tend to make more effort to gain favor with students and thus earn higher scores. Both of these factors contribute to higher SETE scores for the entire university. Since SETE scores have little impact on their teaching careers, tenure-track professors are not required to please their students to get higher student evaluations. Therefore, the overall average score decreases when tenure-track professors are also involved in the SETE process. This phenomenon is quite common in U.S. colleges and universities. In this way, does it mean that tenure-track and experienced professors are considered inferior teachers (Feldman, 1986)?

Case 4. Score Differences and Teachers' Teaching Styles

The researcher from Nanjing Communications Institute of Technology analyzed the correlation between the personality traits of the interviewed teachers and the SETE results based on the research and interviews with full-time teachers in several higher vocational colleges and universities and developed a comparison table of teachers' teaching style indicators. It can be seen that the SETE scores are relatively low for teachers who are more demanding in terms of student attendance and classroom discipline and high for teachers who are not. The SETE scores are lower for teachers who are more rigorous and formal in their classroom style or appearance and more elevated for teachers who are not, as shown in the following Table 1 (Schmelkin, Spencer & Gellman, 1997).

TABLE 1
COMPARISON TABLE OF TEACHING STYLE INDICATORS FOR TEACHERS WITH SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN SETE SCORES

	Attendance and classroom discipline	Examination standards and requirements	Classroom communication and break-time interaction	Extracurricular communication and life interactions	Classroom style/teaching manner and appearance	Teaching and research/teaching preferences
Faculty group with lower SETE scores	Be strict in attendance. Teacher and student are like father and son, and the teacher should criticize the student if they make some mistakes deserving criticism.	Teachers should not leave students unattended and should not lower their standards to cater to them, or else the quality of graduates is bound to decline.	Teachers maintain the dignity of the teacher, maintain the psychological distance between the teacher and the student, and hold “orthodox” values	Teachers rarely communicate with students outside of class and do not communicate with them on matters other than academic work.	The teachers are strict and severe and dress traditionally or with slight variation.	The teachers prefer academic research, are willing to teach cutting-edge educational theories, and are meticulous in deriving formulas.
Faculty group with higher SETE scores	Teachers are not necessarily rigorous; teachers and students are like friends, and teachers should be tolerant when they should be tolerant of students	Teachers should “teach students according to their abilities” so that students’ performance can be reasonably distributed and as many “good students” as possible can emerge.	Teachers and students are friends; teachers can comment on fashion or criticize current affairs and communicate with students without distance.	Teachers want students to talk to them, even if it is not related to their studies	The teachers are relaxed, lively (female) / humorous (male), and dressed in fashionable and neat styles.	The teachers are skilled in a case study or scenario-based teaching and enjoy writing school-based textbooks, reference books or teaching casebooks.

Case 5. Students' Use of the Right to Evaluate Teaching at a University

A random sample of 350 students at a university was surveyed on how students evaluate their teachers. The results showed that 68% of the students said they considered their teachers based on how much they liked them. In other words, 68% of the students valued the teacher's personality more than the basic teaching skills or effectiveness. At the same time, 47% of the students surveyed admitted a disciplinary bias when evaluating their teachers. A student who prefers music to physical education is likely to give a higher rating to the music teacher and a lower rating to the physical education teacher (See Table 2).

TABLE 2
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF TEACHERS

Question	Item	Number of respondents	Percentage
I do not attach much importance to the final course evaluation, and I do not think it has much influence on the teachers	I agree, I strongly agree	181	51.7%
	I don't know	83	23.7%
	I can't entirely agree. I strongly disagree	82	23.4%
The mechanism of student evaluation of teachers weakens the authority of teachers	I agree, I strongly agree	179	51.1%
	I don't know	104	29.7%
	I can't entirely agree. I strongly disagree	62	17.7%

*Only valid data were selected.

To ensure the rigor and accuracy of the study, a questionnaire on the credit system and teacher evaluation was distributed to the students to explore the relationship between course evaluation and teachers and students in a quantitative way. We found that teacher evaluation did not seem to have the desired effect based on the in-depth interviews. As shown in Table 2, more than half (51.7%) of the students thought that course evaluation had little impact on the teachers, while only 23.4% disagreed with this statement. Thus, it can be seen that most students do not think that course evaluation has much impact on teachers, so students can hardly take assessment courses seriously. Therefore, students may give teachers positive or negative comments, discouraging teachers' motivation and weakening the teacher-student relationship.

In addition, more than half (51.1%) of the students were more optimistic about the statement that "The mechanism of student evaluation of teachers weakens the authority of teachers," and only 17.7% of the students disagreed with this statement. This result is highly consistent with our interviews with some teachers. It indicates that most students believe that student assessment of teachers' courses could affect teachers' sense of authority. It can be inferred from both teachers and students that teachers' power has been weakened due to the SETE mechanism, which is far from the value of "a one-day teacher is a lifelong father" in traditional Chinese culture. It has a significant negative impact on the teacher-student relationship in colleges and universities.

At the same time, in-depth interviews also showed that 74% of students would change their teacher's opinion, thus changing their evaluation score. They get some unique benefits from the teacher outside of teaching. A teacher who treats students to chocolate increases student favorability, resulting in higher scores on student evaluations, which is highly consistent with Professor Emery's findings (Emery & Tian, 2002). In addition, it is interesting to note that 52% of the students did not evaluate the teaching based on the teacher's actual performance but gave the teacher a full 5 out of 5. There were two reasons for this group of students to score. One is that they think the teachers work very hard and should be recognized and appreciated; the other is that they believe it is convenient to achieve all 5s and complete the SETE task quickly.

DISCUSSIONS

Many scholars believe that the SETE method has more disadvantages than advantages: (1) SETE tends to train mediocre people and discourages people from taking risks. (2) The SETE method focuses on short-term performance and lacks a long-term perspective, ignoring critical factors that are not easily measured. (3) This method focuses on individuals and is not conducive to teamwork. (4) This method is based on detection, not aimed at prevention. (5) The method is unfair, and the assessment is highly subjective. (6) This system does not distinguish between endogenous factors of individual differences and exogenous factors that are not under human control (Huang and Qi, 2014; Trout, 2000; McGregor, 1972; Meyer, Kay and French, 1965).

American scholars Milliman and McFadden conducted a study in which they found that 90% of GM employees considered themselves to be in the top 10% best employees in the company. In this regard, the two scholars asked these employees whether their motivation would be seriously undermined if managers did not evaluate their performance highly. It can be seen that the scientific evaluation of employee performance has a significant impact on the labor productivity of the company. Likewise, suppose employees are allowed to evaluate their supervisors backward. In that case, it can seriously affect supervisors' managerial motivation and, as a result, hurt the labor productivity of the company (Milliman & McFadden, 1997). Therefore, the scholar Deming strongly condemned these performance evaluation procedures (Deming, 1986). Human resource management scholars Porter and Lawler's expectancy model of motivation explain motivation models' importance. If employees disagree that "the harder they work, the greater the reward," they will not work as hard as they should and will lose their way (Porter & Lawler, 1968).

In our opinion, the evaluation of teaching has two primary purposes: to serve as a basis for reward and punishment, and the other serves as a reference for development. In the evaluation case for reward and punishment, the evaluation results are used as the basis for teachers' promotion and salary increase. In contrast, in the case of evaluation for development, the evaluation results are used as a reference and suggestion for teachers to improve their teaching and enhance their teaching skills. However, from our observation and research, in China's universities, rewards and punishments overwhelm development in practice, and teaching evaluation is more like a convenient means of administrative control. As a result, teachers who desire to receive feedback from students and improve their teaching seek alternative approaches.

We also believe that the most significant value of evaluating teaching is to provide a platform for teachers and students to communicate with each other. In implementing the evaluation system, school administrators must clarify that evaluation scores should be used only as a reference for teachers to improve their teaching. The evaluation scores should not be used as the basis for appraisal and promotion, at least not as the only or primary basis for review and advertisement. In short, business managers may symbolically provide employees with feedback on their work through performance appraisal methods to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. To a certain extent, performance appraisals are helpful for companies to make decisions related to employee management. The author believes that the primary purpose of the SETE for educational administrators is to provide information and feedback, but not to serve as a basis for making decisions about teachers' promotion. It should be the key to the sustainable development of teaching evaluation by refocusing on the essence of teaching in higher education and attaching importance to the practical effectiveness of education (Tan, 2014).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The SETE approach, which is widely used today, actually rewards teachers for making high SETE scores by catering to students, thereby lowering the expectations of students and thus diminishing the quality of teaching (Emery, Kramer, and Tian, 2003; Zhong, 2012; Feldman, 1986; Tan, 2014). The purpose of teaching evaluation is to help teachers improve their performance. Still, in practice, administrators use it to make decisions about the fate of teachers (Abrami, d'Apollonia & Cohen, 1990). Worse still, many

colleges and universities have adopted various means and regulations to get students involved in teaching evaluation. Some universities require students to evaluate their teachers before checking their final grades. Others need students to assess their teachers before they can take a course. Others require that it affect students' final grades if they do not evaluate their teachers. The author believes that performance evaluation is necessary for making decisions about individual teachers. SETE results should only be used as a reference factor and not as a determinant. In this regard, some recommendations for management are proposed:

- (1) The SETE method should be oriented to teaching performance rather than student satisfaction; simultaneously, the sources of the evaluation data should be broadened, and SETE results should not be used as the sole basis for measuring teaching quality.
- (2) Teachers should be evaluated against some criteria, not just a cross-sectional comparison between universities. Also, comparisons of course evaluations should be made between similar courses.
- (3) It should be ensured that the measures are feasible and that the data are statistically significant. If a student gives a grade below satisfactory, the student should be requested to write a comment to add credibility to the negative assessment.
- (4) Assessors and third-party monitors should be trained to ensure that the evaluation system is legitimate, adaptable, and diverse.
- (5) Graduates can be invited to evaluate their former teachers. When there is no longer a stake between teachers and students, and students are more mentally sophisticated due to their social experience, the evaluation will be more objective, fair and rational.

In short, we should all believe in the principle that the teachers are responsible for teaching and the students are accountable for their success. Likewise, we should encourage evaluation procedures that evaluate professors based on their teaching performance. Teaching is essentially an interpersonal interaction, and it cannot be separated from the students' perceptions of the teacher's characteristics. Therefore, teaching evaluation must be based on teaching performance, and any other factors are considered secondary and alternate.

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