SFU LEARNING EXPERIENCES
ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING

INTERPRETING COURSE EXPERIENCE SURVEY COMMENTS

The Course Experience Survey is a tool for collecting students' feedback and perspectives about their learning experience in a course. Provided care is taken to understand the nature of the data, many instructors find student comments to be valuable and useful . Nevertheless, instructors also sometimes find the comments difficult to work with as they can be contradictory or because a negative comment, even if it's an outlier, can have an outsized impact on how one perceives the students' feedback as a whole. This guide is about how to navigate the comments and find actionable feedback within them.

REFLECT: BEFORE OPENING YOUR REPORT

Reflect on the course and what feedback you think students may have. Consider such questions as:

➢ What do you think went well in the course?
➢ Where did students seem to struggle or be confused?
➢ What are some areas that you would like to improve?

REACT: FIRST READING

Read the report and allow yourself to have an emotional reaction –good or bad –in response to the feedback.

REVISIT

Return to your report and read it with a focus on understanding your students' perceptions and experiences in the course.

When reading student comments, look for:

➢ Trends or themes - note whether a topic comes up multiple times.
➢ Relationships between the comments and the numerical scores in your report – do the comments shed light on either high or low numerical scores on a given question?
➢ Gaps between your and your students' perceptions – carefully interpret students' perspectives in light of your own reflections.
➢ One approach may be to tag your comments with labels such as:
  • Positive (what students see are strengths of your course and your teaching)
  • Actionable/useful suggestions that you can address in a future iteration of the course
  • Unactionable suggestions. Some suggestions/concerns, while valid, cannot be fully addressed by you as the instructor (e.g. comments about class size). Consider passing these comments along to individuals who can use and act on the suggestions/concerns (e.g. unit chair, curriculum committee).

- Other (comments unrelated to teaching and learning, nonspecific)

Keep in mind that negative comments may capture more of your attention[1]. Care must be taken to ensure that rare, outlier views are not seen as representative[2].

RESPOND

Make decisions about what you will and will not change in your course and your teaching. Consider leaving notes where you will come across them when planning for a future iteration of the course.

CLOSE THE LOOP

Students leave comments knowing that they will not benefit themselves from any changes you make to the course. However, future students will likely appreciate knowing how you considered student feedback when making decisions about your course, and may feel encouraged to provide thoughtful, constructive feedback.

This document was adapted from a resource from the University of Georgia's Centre for Teaching and Learning: "Interpreting and Responding to Student Evaluations of Teaching," as well as Brown University's website on Interpreting Course Feedback.

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[1] Vaish A, Grossmann T, Woodward A. Not all emotions are created equal: the negativity bias in social-emotional development. Psychol Bull. 2008 May;134(3):383-403.
[2] Linse, A. R. 2017. Interpreting and Using Student Ratings Data: Guidance for Faculty Serving as Administrators and on Evaluation Committees. Studies in Educational Evaluation 54: 94–106.