Teaching and Course Evaluation Project: Working Group Report

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Teaching and Learning Centre: Chris Groeneboer
February 23, 2015

1. Preamble

The Teaching and Course Evaluation Project (TCEP) issued a report, a set of appendices, and a set of best practices, all of which have been endorsed by Senate (S.14-02). The Report includes the following statements:

*It is also recommended that a parallel process begin immediately to define key institution-wide policies and teaching and learning priorities for institution-wide questions (p. 3)*

*Conduct process from VPA Office to set clear evaluation goals, including clear general definitions of what constitutes effective teaching, and develop institution-wide evaluation questions that reflect these goals; it is recommended to ensure both education and evaluation expertise are involved in this process (p.15)*

Based on these recommendations, the VPA and SCUTL commissioned the TCEP working group in June 2014 whose Terms of Reference (ToR) and membership are appended at the end of this document. According to the ToR, the work of the group will take place in two phases:

Phase 1

1. Compile a list of attributes that characterize effective teaching in the different disciplines across the university. This list should be distributed to TPC chairs for consultation.
2. Develop a set of goals and teaching priorities for evaluation of instructors and courses that can be used across the institution. These goals and priorities should reflect questions and issues for which student evaluations can provide germane information, and should be distributed to TPC chairs for consultation.
3. Direct the development of a set of core questions that reflect the university’s definition of “effective teaching” and the goals and teaching priorities; these questions will be used on all instructor/course evaluations.

The group should report on these activities to the Senate Committee on University Teaching and Learning (SCUTL) September 2014.

Phase 2

1. Determine what SFU policies (including collective agreements) govern the evaluation of instructors and courses, and how these are currently implemented at the department/school/faculty level.
2. Evaluate current policies and practices against the document “Best Practices on Interpretation and Use of Evaluation Data”, submitted by SCUTL as part of the TCEP package to Senate in January 2014. Identify areas where SFU practices and policies require revision or additions.
3. The second phase will begin later (November 2014) with a report to SCUTL in May or July 2015.

We begin by situating the tasks for this phase of the Working Group within the overall structure of the online evaluation tool. As described in the TCEP report (page 13), questions will be confirmed for their psychometric validity and the instrument will be based on a flexible, multiple-level approach, as follows:
1. Core set of questions to be asked of students enrolled in all courses at SFU 
2. Faculty level question set 
3. School or Department level questions 
4. Questions selected and/or created by individual instructors.

The intent behind the distribution of TCEP reports is that:  
- Data from all levels of questions for a given course will be shared with the instructor of that course 
- No data which pertains to a specific individual instructor will be shared at the institution-wide (Vice-President, Academic) level 
- Faculties will have the flexibility to determine how data is shared at the Faculty, School and Department levels 
- Instructor level question data for a given instructor will only be shared with that specific individual instructor.

As noted in the TCEP report (page 7), to expedite implementation, questions may be drawn from a database of questions created and tested by the University of Toronto (U of T). Going forward, questions will be developed and tested at SFU for inclusion into the databank. It is understood that data from these questions will complement other means of gauging the quality of courses and instruction currently in development in individual Faculties and Departments (e.g. peer observations of teaching, teaching portfolios).

The core set of questions that this group has been tasked with should address characteristics of good course design and effective teaching that can be reasonably expected in any educational setting in the University, which students can reasonably be expected to present informed opinions about, and which can be reliably measured with a survey instrument. In the next section, we examine the characteristics of good course design and effective teaching.

### 2. Attributes and Characteristics of Effective Teaching

#### 2.1 Distinguishing between a “well-designed course” and “effective teaching”

The Working Group recognizes that there are two distinct components of a student’s experience in a course. On the one hand, there is the design of the course (objectives, content, materials, assessment, etc.), and on the other, the way in which the material is communicated, and the course is administered.

It is not uncommon for instructors to be asked to teach courses that they have not designed, albeit with varying degrees of expected conformity to the received structure. Furthermore, in some instances, especially strong teaching may compensate for a course design that is somehow lacking. In other cases a course design may be strong, but the instructor may not do the most effective job of teaching it due to inexperience or a lack of time to prepare (e.g., a tenure-track faculty member who is covering a colleague on leave, or a sessional who is appointed just prior to the start of term). Thus, despite the fact that there is significant overlap between “design” and “teaching”, the Working Group recognizes the need to divide the institution-wide questions between those that provide information about the quality of a course design, and those that provide information about the quality of the instruction offered in that course at a particular time.

Information on the quality of course designs and the quality of instruction can serve quite distinct purposes. Information provided about the quality of course design can inform program planning and course renewal decisions, while information about quality of instruction can inform tenure and promotion decisions, decisions about which instructors are most suited to teach which courses, or decisions about how to most effectively support instructors as they develop expertise in offering a course.
2.2 Research on Teaching Attributes and Characteristics

An extensive literature review was undertaken and is summarized in Appendix III of the TCEP report: Report on Key Research Findings - Instrumentation. This report emphasizes that there is no universally accepted set of “effective teaching” characteristics that apply in all teaching situations. Effective teaching is a multidimensional and complex construct, which may vary from institution to institution, and from discipline to discipline (Rando, 2001; Cashin, 1990; Feldman, 1978). As such, in developing a list of priorities for good course design and effective teaching, the Working Group has consulted both the established research and the SFU community.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature contains numerous models of teaching effectiveness, each with its own set of important dimensions (see, for example: Ramsden (1992), Khandelwal (2009), Allin, Clarke, and Jopling (2009), Marsh (1987), and Feldman (1988), referenced in Appendix III of the TCEP report). Embedded in each model is a value statement about the purpose of higher education, whether it is to impart knowledge and skills, develop higher levels of cognition, improve personal skills, etc. Since the goals of higher education are multifaceted, defining effective teaching is subjective and often controversial. Nevertheless, there is substantive overlap in the dimensions identified by the various teaching effectiveness models.

Besides focusing on a diverse set of dimensions, teaching effectiveness models in Higher Education are constructed on two main premises: 1) effective teaching leads to high student achievement and 2) effective teaching leads to high student satisfaction. Therefore, some models are built with dimensions closely linked with student achievement (i.e. timely feedback), while others focus more on student satisfaction (i.e. instructor friendliness).

The important dimensions of teaching effectiveness identified in the literature tend to fall into four main categories:

- **Clear Concept Communication**, including strong, unambiguous presentations, high quality explanation, instructor’s knowledge of the subject, etc.
- **Supportive and Engaging Learning Environment**, including respect for students, availability and approachability, stimulation of intellectual excitement and critical thinking, etc.
- **Clear Academic Expectations**, including clarity in standards and assessment criteria, clear course objectives, etc.
- **Scaffolded Learning**, including effective and timely feedback, appropriate level of difficulty, effective and patient guidance, varied ways to teach content, well organized and well-structured teaching, students working collaboratively with both their peers and their instructors, etc.

Community Consultation

Research has found that students and instructors often value different dimensions of effective teaching. For example, Reid and Johnson (1999, referenced in Allin, Clarke, and Jopling (2009)) found that teachers placed a much higher value on the role research plays in enhancing teaching, and students placed a much higher value on the instructor’s interest in the subject. As such, the Working Group reviewed consultation results with faculty as well as students before crafting the teaching priorities. Community consultation included: focus groups with instructors, administrators and students; a survey of instructors; and a survey of undergraduate students.

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1 scaffolding in learning, as defined in The Glossary of Education Reform (http://edglossary.org/scaffolding/), “refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding … supportive strategies are incrementally removed when they are no longer needed.”
Faculty/Instructors

A survey of SFU faculty and instructors asked which aspects of teaching they thought needed to be included on an evaluation in order for it to be a representative assessment of their teaching (Appendix VIII of the TCEP report: Results from Survey of Faculty and Instructors - Teaching and Course Evaluation Process, pp 5-7). Among respondents, the top choices were:

- Organization of teaching and course material (82%)
- Clarity of presentation (81%)
- Appropriate assessment and feedback (78%)
- Stimulation of critical thinking (78%)

Some additional dimensions of teaching were selected as most important by specific subgroups of faculty/instructors:

- Expertise in subject matter (selected by 95% of respondents from the Faculty of Health Sciences)
- Communication of clear goals and expectations (82%, Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology)
- Ability to stimulate student interest (81%, Faculty of Science)

Eleven focus groups were held across 6 faculties and 3 important stakeholder groups within the SFU community (Appendix IX of the TCEP report: Focus Group Key Findings Summary), and 10 of these focus groups were for faculty/instructors and administrators. Focus group participants raised many concerns, ranging from the use of teaching evaluation data to how and when the instrument should be delivered. Although the instructor/administrator focus groups primarily discussed the evaluation process, some additional points on teaching dimensions were raised:

- Specific personality characteristics should not be included as effective teaching priorities.
- When creating teaching priorities that will be used to guide questions on the teaching evaluations, it is important to ensure that students are only asked to evaluate attributes they have enough information and perspective to assess.

Students

In an SFU undergraduate student survey\(^2\), students were presented with a list of instructor attributes and asked to indicate which two are the most important. From the list provided, the top choices among respondents were:

- Clearly communicate course concepts (59%)
- Connect all course components (38%)

In a focus group, students were asked what factors impact the scores they give on teaching evaluations. Apart from the attributes identified above from the student survey, issues discussed by participants included:

- Instructor attitude
- Instructor knowledge of and interest in the subject
- Course delivery
- Effective use of media and technology
- Helpful feedback

Summary of Research

Common themes emerged from the literature review on effective teaching and the community consultations. For example, faculty and students agree with the literature that effective teaching involves the ability to clearly communicate course concepts. This theme and others will be summarized in the section below, SFU Teaching Priorities.

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The one unique theme that emerged from SFU’s community consultations, but was not a reoccurring dimension in the literature, was the effective use of media and technology in the classroom. Although this is an important dimension, it will not be reflected in SFU’s global teaching priorities because it cannot be applied, within reasonable expectations, across all courses and teaching units. However, this attribute should be appropriately incorporated in the multiple-level framework (i.e. faculty or department-level priorities).

3. SFU Teaching Priorities
Given these considerations, the Working Group proposes the following attributes be set as priorities to be captured in the core SFU-wide questions.

Teaching Quality
1. Clear communication of course concepts
2. Creating a respectful learning environment
3. Fostering critical thinking
4. Clear communication of assessment criteria

Course Design
5. Materials that help students meet course objectives
6. Educational activities (assignments, group work, labs, discussions, lectures, etc.) that stimulate student engagement
7. Alignment between course components (lectures, labs, tutorials, online forums, etc.)
8. Assessments that allow students to demonstrate their understanding of course content

These attributes are supported by the literature on teaching effectiveness, and align with the priorities identified by SFU faculty/instructors and students (see Table 1 for details). One important attribute that has been omitted is “useful feedback”. As with the “effective use of media and technology”, this attribute is not applicable to all course sections (in many courses, feedback is provided by a teaching assistant rather than the instructor.) However, this attribute is important in contexts where it is applicable, and therefore should be incorporated in the faculty, department, or instructor-level priorities, where appropriate.
**Table 1: Teaching Priorities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Quality</th>
<th>Literature Review Themes</th>
<th>Community Consultation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear Concept Communication</td>
<td>Supportive &amp; Engaging Learning Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching Quality</strong></td>
<td>Faculty Survey ¹</td>
<td>Students Focus Group ²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Clear communication of course concepts</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Creating a respectful learning environment</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fostering critical thinking</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Clear communication of assessment criteria</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Course Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Literature Review Themes</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear Concept Communication</td>
<td>Supportive &amp; Engaging Learning Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Assessments that allow students to demonstrate their understanding of course content</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Materials that help students meet course objectives</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
1. All Teaching Priorities align with the two specific points brought up by the Faculty Focus Group:
   - Specific personality characteristics should not be included as effective teaching priorities.
   - When creating teaching priorities that will be used to guide questions on the teaching evaluations, it is important to ensure that students are only asked to evaluate attributes they have enough information and perspective to assess.

**References**
2. Focus Group Results: Focus group held in October 2012 with SFU students.
4. Development of a Set of Core Institution-wide Questions

From the beginning of the TCEP endeavour, SCUTL recognized that not all attributes of good course design and effective teaching can be reliably assessed through student questionnaires. In order to be germane to the construction of the core questions, the core institution-wide questions should have the following qualities:

1. Reflect the teaching priorities identified in Section 3
2. Represent the perspective of a student’s educational experience
3. Apply, within reasonable expectations, across the University
4. Lend themselves to meaningful analysis

As a result of the last item, the Working Group strongly believes that, initially, there should not be any open-ended questions at the Institution level, because the resources and expertise to analyze open-ended responses exist uniquely at the Faculty and Department levels (i.e. within TPCs). It is recommended, however, that an additional pilot be conducted to determine the potential value of including open-ended questions at the institution-wide level in conjunction with the use of an effective qualitative data analytical tool. At the same time, we encourage Faculties/School and/or Departments/Programs to include at least one open-ended question in their question selection. An open-ended question would provide students with an opportunity to express a comment they feel strongly about but that they may not be able to directly address elsewhere in the survey.

The Working Group recommends that a core set of candidate institution-wide questions be developed to match the teaching priorities identified in Section 3. We recommend that the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) and Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) collaborate on identifying and/or creating questions that would be effective in matching the above goals and priorities, to ensure that both education and evaluation expertise are involved in the process. Accordingly, the Working Group will recommend a subset of these questions for adoption. Additionally, we recommend that the TLC and IRP work together to test any appropriate questions currently in the question bank compiled by U of T. It is expected that SFU test results will be similar; however, further testing will either confirm that assumption and/or identify any differences in the student and faculty populations that may impact the questions.

5. Questions at the Faculty and Department level

From the outset, the TCEP project recognized that individual Faculties and Departments have unique values and expertise with respect to what they teach and how it is most appropriately taught. These may be based in the disciplines and subject-matter taught, the unique culture of teaching within each unit, or the unique strengths of a cohort of instructors. The new course evaluation system will provide the opportunity for each Faculty, School and Department to select or create questions that reflect its unique values and strengths. The new evaluation system will provide a bank of questions to choose from. Faculties/Schools/Departments may choose to write their own new survey questions. The Teaching and Learning Centre and Institutional Research and Planning will be on hand to provide support to ensure that the questions provide reliable data. Faculties, Schools and Departments are also encouraged to formulate open-ended questions. It is expected that as they transition to the new course evaluation system, Faculties, Schools and Departments will engage in broad-based consultation efforts to ensure that the questions they choose to ask about the quality of courses and instruction will reflect the common values and concerns of instructors and students.

6. Transitioning to the New Course Evaluation System

Transitioning to the new Teaching and Course Evaluation system will require adaptation on the part of students, instructors, academic units, and TPCs. In some cases, the new system will represent an academic unit’s first experience with online course evaluation forms. Within TPCs, given that the questions posed by the new instrument are different from those used in the past, it will be necessary to “re-norm” expectations for course and teaching quality. Old data and new data will not be comparable. However, the new data will also support renewed conversations about what students and faculty in each unit value in teaching and learning at SFU.
7. Interpreting Evaluation Results

As part of the implementation process, Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) will be developing a model of the factors affecting student evaluations of teaching and courses. For example, if evaluations are generally lower for instructors of large classes, class size would be a relevant attribute of the course to take into consideration when interpreting evaluation results. This process could identify possible factors that influence evaluation results, to help inform interpretation of these results.

The intent is to:
1. Provide a set of data that describes the context in which the teaching was embedded
2. Assist with providing evaluation feedback to the relevant stakeholder, e.g., when the course designer is not the instructor.

A set of factors are listed below for possible inclusion in the model. This set is not exhaustive, and is expected to change in future iterations of this exercise. The majority of this data is available in the Student Information System. Three main categories of data emerged: student demographics, classroom characteristics, and self-reported variables.

Student demographics include:
- Age
- Gender
- Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA)
- Faculty
- Year level
- International status
- Whether the student was required to take Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL; this variable acts as a proxy for English as an Additional Language status).

Classroom characteristics include:
- Instruction mode (i.e. in person, online)
- Campus
- Class time of day
- Class level (i.e. graduate versus undergraduate)
- Class size
- Class component (i.e. lecture, tutorial).

Self-reported variables include:
- Attendance rate
- Expected grade
- Whether the course is an elective or required
APPENDIX A

Terms of Reference: Working Group on Policies and Priorities for Evaluation of Instructors and Courses

The Teaching and Course Evaluation Project (TCEP) issued a report, a set of appendices, and a set of best practices, all of which have been endorsed by Senate. The Report includes the following statements:

It is also recommended that a parallel process begin immediately to define key institution-wide policies and teaching and learning priorities for institution-wide questions (p. 3)

Conduct process from VPA Office to set clear evaluation goals, including clear general definitions of what constitutes effective teaching, and develop institution-wide evaluation questions that reflect these goals; it is recommended to ensure both education and evaluation expertise are involved in this process (p.15)

Working group tasks

Phase 1.

1. Compile a list of attributes that characterize effective teaching in the different disciplines across the university. This list should be distributed to TPC chairs for consultation.
2. Develop a set of goals for evaluation of instructors and courses that can be used across the institution. These goals should reflect questions and issues for which student evaluations can provide germane information, and should be distributed to TPC chairs for consultation.
3. Develop a set of eight questions that reflect the university’s definition of “effective teaching” and the goals of evaluation; these questions will be used on all instructor/course evaluations.

The group should report on these activities to SCUTL no later than September 2014.

Phase 2.

1. Determine what SFU policies (including collective agreements) govern the evaluation of instructors and courses, and how these are currently implemented at the department/school/faculty level.
2. Evaluate current policies and practices against the document “Best Practices on Interpretation and Use of Evaluation Data”, submitted by SCUTL as part of the TCEP package to Senate in January 2014. Identify areas where SFU practices and policies require revision or additions.
3. Items 1 and 2 can be considered later (beginning in November 2014) with a report to SCUTL in May or July 2015:

Proposed working group composition (to be determined by SCUTL) and support people

Three faculty members (suggest at least one nominated by SFUFA, at least one from Education with appropriate expertise in evaluation, and at least one SCUTL member as chair)
One additional faculty member with experience in using teaching evaluations in assessment of performance (e.g. TPC chair, department chair)
One sessional instructor (nominated by TSSU)
One undergraduate student (SCUTL member?)
One graduate student (SCUTL member?)
One IRP representative
Project manager (from Teaching and Learning Centre)
Researcher (if required) – selected by project manager and funded by VPA.

Consultation

Because the teaching and course evaluation instrument will be used widely across the university, it is essential that consultation take place on any issues that are not already covered by the TCEP report and associated documents that went to Senate in January 2014. When consultations are required they should include instructors, academic administrators, employee groups, Academic Relations, Human Resources, and students. However, given the timeframe for this submission, it is recommended that at least the chairs of TPCs are consulted.
Governance and reporting
The working group will report to SCUTL. SCUTL will consult with VPA before submitting report to Senate for approval. Submission to Senate no later than October 2014.

APPENDIX B

TCEP Working Group Membership

Kevin O’ Neill, Education (co-chair)
Panayiotis A Pappas, FASS (co-chair)
Chris Groeneboer, TLC (project coordinator)
Lynne Quarmby, Science
Neil Abramson, SFUFA
John Nesbit, Education
Laura Forsythe, SFSS
Aynsley Pescitelli, GSS
Kiran Bisra, IRP