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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

Authors

Paper presenter:

Name: Maiken Bonnes

Position: research fellow / quality assurance officer

Organisation: University of Duisburg-Essen, Center for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE)

Country: Germany

E-mail address: maiken.bonnes@uni-due.de

Short bio: Dipl.-Kffr. Maiken Bonnes gained experiences in quality management processes both within universities and beyond. Recently, her key activity is the design and realization of faculty and course evaluations as a quality assurance officer at CHEDQE.

Co-author:

Name: Dr. Christian Ganseuer

Position: managing director of the Center for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE)

Organisation: University of Duisburg-Essen, Center for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE)

Country: Germany

E-mail address: christian.ganseuer@uni-due.de

Short bio: Dr. Christian Ganseuer is managing director of the Center for Higher Education Development and Quality Enhancement (CHEDQE) at University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) and is - in the context of this proposal - responsible for the quality assurance system of the UDE. As a peer evaluator he counselled and evaluated universities and their QA systems in Germany, Europe and South-East Asia.

Student co-author:

Name: Hauke Sanders

Position: student

Organisation: University of Duisburg-Essen

Country: Germany

E-mail address: hauke.sanders@web.de

Short bio: Hauke Sanders studies at University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) to become a teacher of mathematics and philosophy. As an elected student representative he is engaged in processes of module evaluations in teacher education.



Proposal

Title:

Dialog-based student feedback: formative approaches to evaluate academic teaching and as a crisis intervention+

Abstract:

Formative student feedback can be used to uncover problems early on and establish a collaborative learning as well as quality culture at universities. Beyond that the quality loops- approach of Internal Quality Assurance Systems most likely need to be stimulated by dialogue intensive tools instead of traditional student satisfaction surveys. Methods such as the *Teaching Analysis Poll (TAP)* and *course evaluation via student representatives* were practically approved and further developed in a two years project in two faculties of University of Duisburg-Essen.

These methods aim to benefit both the quality of student learning and the professional development of the teacher. While TAPs are conducted by an uninvolved moderator, the student representatives have to fulfil different roles, which can be conflicting. In fact, both approaches have strengths and weaknesses especially when they are used as a crisis intervention+when there are serious problems in class.

Text of paper:

1. Introduction

The discussion about the question, if quality culture in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) could be stimulated or not (Ehlers 2008, Harvey/Stensaker 2008) often reflects the precondition that a cultural change cannot be ordered by the universities leadership or by an external regulatory body. Cultural changes in an institution . if they are really possible . do start at the heart of an institution, in the faculties and study programmes. Taking the tailwind of a stronger focus on internal quality assurance systems in the last years the Higher Education Institutions do tend to lose the loops of their quality assurance tools, they tested and modified since the beginning of the first decade of this century across the European countries that joined the European Higher Education Area. The student's voice has a significant prominence in assessing and developing the educational quality, particularly in the study programmes. Closing the loops in the almost everywhere used student satisfaction survey sounds easy: staying in a direct dialogue with the students about the content, the teaching-learning environment or the methodical approach of the lectures. But it is not as easy as it seems.

From a practical point of view, this probably everywhere used tool is not the most effective one when it comes to the follow up-question as Leckey and Neill (2001) argued, when they point out: If students do not see any actions resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate (p. 25). Student satisfaction surveys are in that way a dangerous tool for student engagement policy as well as for quality enhancement. Institutions have to show very clear and transparent what happened with the students feedback. Not completing the feedback loop in a way that students see that there is no following up, courses poor response rates and a demotivation for quality assurance-questions in HEI. Powney and Hall (1998) observed the same problem, concluding that in institutions where staff is not concerned about students opinion, students carelessness towards the completion of feedback surveys is more obvious. Students are less motivated to take the time to complete questionnaires, if they feel that it is simply senseless to participate. Harvey (2003) is thinking in the same direction, concluding that students need to be convinced that change has occurred based on their feedback. Bennett and Nair (2010) point out that there is a need to provide more information to students about the purposes and the subsequent use of evaluations in the quality process. Describing these needs, practice often fails in achieving these goals.

The question why student satisfaction surveys are often not stimulating follow-ups has to do with the multidimensionality of that tool on the one hand and with the error-proneness of such surveys that Nair and Shah (2011) point out in a positive way as 15 factors for success you have to ensure.

Overviewing different targets of student satisfaction surveys most of them tend to strengthen:

- a) the direct feedback from the students to the teacher;
- b) the link of student satisfaction towards awarding processes;
- c) the link of student satisfaction towards the budgeting-process;
- d) the feedback about service structure;
- e) a self-assessment on workload, learning outcomes, learning attitudes or the learning process.

The problem of the most surveys: There are too many dimensions, the surveys try to capture, but this overloads the functionality of the survey. Considering the actual practice, multidimensionality and error-proneness of student satisfaction surveys, it should be a very hard run to get them into an organisational culture as Schein (1985) defines as *'[a] pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.'* (p. 9). Facing the question of how to stimulate a quality culture in a HEI, student satisfaction surveys do not seem to be the best tool to show new organisational members that it has worked well enough to be considered as valid. Contrasting common institutional experiences with student satisfaction surveys, Schein's description and the quality assurance seem more or less contradictory.

Alternatively formative, feedback-oriented approaches for evaluation could be a chance to break up the looplessness and to strengthen the students' commitments for evaluation processes. Important references are Snooks, Neeley and Williamson (2004), who described the tradition and developments of formative midterm evaluations at American HEI as well as Cowan and George (1999) who saw the drive for curriculum development processes through formative evaluations.

The authors conceptualized a two years project, coordinated by a central unit for quality assurance together with two departments (educational studies and social sciences) in their institution, that examined different methods of formative approaches in evaluating students' satisfaction. This article reflects the experiences with different tools, putting the focus on the closing the loop approach and the students' role in the processes. It also poses the question, which challenges can occur, when serious problems are discovered in class.

2. Formative approaches to evaluate academic teaching

2.1 Teaching Analysis Poll (TAP)

The Teaching Analysis Poll (TAP) is a qualitative mid-term evaluation method that provides lecturers with detailed and activity-oriented feedback. It is well established at universities in North America. In Germany, many universities expand their evaluation portfolio with new formative techniques such as the TAP. In contrast to student satisfaction surveys at the end of the semester, the lecturer can effectively involve students in the feedback loop. Feedback obtained from a TAP can be used to enhance classroom interactions, student learning, and teaching strategies. TAPs thus contribute significantly to the establishment of a collaborative learning environment (Frank et al., 2011).

2.1.1 Process

TAPs are conducted by a TAP consultant, who is necessarily not a member of the faculty. Therefore, the anonymity of the students is preserved. The TAP consultant belongs e. g. from a university's central service unit for quality management or university didactics and is trained in moderation techniques.

The TAP consists of the following three steps:

Preparation

As the TAP is a standardized and structured technique, the preparation does not take too much time: The lecturer and the TAP consultant discuss the problematic issues of the course in a brief meeting and appoint the day of the TAP (in the middle of the semester).



In class: The procedure of the TAP

The lecturer ends the course approximately 30 minutes earlier, introduces the TAP consultant and leaves the class. Then the TAP consultant gives seven minutes to each group composed of six students in order to answer the following questions:

1. What helps you the most to learn in this class?
2. What impedes your learning?
3. How can improvements be made?

One student in each group writes down the answers that the group members agree upon.

After the groupwork, the TAP consultant collects and discusses the answers with the entire group, verifies ambiguities and polls the agreements to every answer. The result is a collection of the (different) opinions and perceptions of the course. The TAP consultant asks the students to propose a manageable solution for each problem. Finally, the TAP consultant thanks the students and reiterates that the lecturer will receive the summary of the TAP results. The students are invited to reflect on the results with the lecturer during the next meeting in class.

The follow up: Closing the feedback-loop

During the follow-up meeting, the TAP consultant gives the summary of the TAP results to the lecturer. The TAP consultant clarifies, which answers represent the opinion of the majority, which answers are individual opinions and offers suggestions for responding.

Finally and ideally during the next meeting in class, the lecturer starts a dialogue with the students referring to the TAP results

2.1.2 Experiences

Within the project mentioned in the introduction, the involved students, lecturers and QM experts discussed their practical experiences with different student-centered feedback methods. The experiences they made with the TAP are summarized subsequently.

From students' perspective

The TAP involves various advantages, which other evaluation methods do not offer. First there is the students' feeling of being significant for the evaluation instead of being just another cross in another standardized questionnaire. Everybody is welcome to bring forward anything he or she believes to be relevant. Furthermore most students do not feel comfortable with addressing their criticism directly to the lecturer.

TAP makes it possible for students to express their opinion explicitly, yet to a certain amount still anonymously. It is the TAP consultant's task to serve as a neutral person between the students and the lecturer. Thus, students can utter every kind of criticism, especially of the kind that concerns the lecturer, without fearing consequences. After the TAP consultant has informed the lecturer of students' reactions, there are still half of the meetings to come, which is another advantage of TAP. The lecturer can adjust the remaining meetings to the individual needs of his students. In contrast to most other methods of evaluation here the students immediately benefit.

In some cases exactly this fact, however, causes problems. In the meetings after TAP students might not observe any changes which they would have expected according to their criticism. Then the atmosphere in the meetings can deteriorate. Students might develop negative associations with evaluation in general and especially with TAP. This should, of course, be avoided.

From lecturers' perspective

Lecturer at the University of Duisburg-Essen, who adopted a TAP reported that they received very helpful feedback and valuable recommendations to improve the learning environment. The students gave hints, that did not entail far-reaching changes but they recommended e.g. to provide the learning materials before the beginning of the seminar instead of afterwards, to use bigger font sizes in presentations etc. These little changes enhanced the convenience of both, lecturer and students. Still, in some cases the lecturer had the chance to clarify misunderstandings.

Furthermore, this method can be implemented with low effort for the lecturer. But the success depends essentially on the follow up. Small changes might be done easily. But when serious problems are uncovered, the lecturer needs more than a few minutes to start a dialogue with the students to find a solution.



2.2 Course evaluation via student representatives (CESR)

Inspired by the concept of course evaluations at Chalmers Tekniska Högskola (2014) the course evaluation via student representatives (CESR) was developed and practically approved in a two years project at University of Duisburg-Essen. Just as the TAP, the CESR shall promote a dialogue between the lecturer and the students on how teaching can be developed and improved rather than the assessment of quality. Regarding the focus of interest, CESR is versatile. For example, the lecturer could concentrate on the learning environment, the substantive compatibility of modules etc. But in contrast to the TAP this method is much more time-consuming.

2.2.1 Process

The key persons of the CESR, the student representatives, have a significant influence on the success of this measure. 2 - 5 representatives are elected by the students during the first meeting in class after the lecturer has explained the objectives and steps of this feedback method.

The feedback meetings

During the semester, they meet the lecturer three times in so-called feedback meetings to discuss contents, study climate and possible problems. Questions such as those below are discussed:

- Does the course fulfill the expectations of the students?
- How is the study climate and work load?
- Are there any wanted changes for the course?

This list can be extended to include questions that meet the specific interests of the lecturer, e. g. Are the learning contents of the course connected with the objectives of the study program?+etc.

As the representatives serve as an interface between the course participants and the lecturer it is necessary that there are free spaces in the course, where the students can discuss in absence of the lecturer. The representatives can use moderation techniques etc. to collect the course participants' feedback.

The third feedback meeting (final meeting) takes place before the last meeting in class. The representatives and the lecturer reflect on the course of the semester. They discuss whether the objectives of the course are fulfilled, how the lecturer dealt with problems and which changes for the following course round appear necessary.

Documentation and follow up

Minutes are written during all feedback meetings. At the end of the course, the representatives write the letter to the next year which includes representatives' statements towards the questions, which were discussed in the feedback meetings and recommendations for the further development and improvement of the course. This letter is handed out to the course participants and the lecturer to close the evaluation loop.

2.2.2 Experiences

From students' perspective

CESR includes students intensively into the process of evaluation. Students who show special interest or engagement have the opportunity to serve as representatives and can thus participate most actively. Being a representative means on the one hand gaining an insight into the attitudes of fellow students and on the other hand developing a better understanding for the perspective of lecturers. This establishes the possibility of broadening one's horizon, yet, it can also lead to inner conflicts. The latter is the case, because a representative is expected to pass on all student criticism, be it ever so harsh, to the lecturers. It can only be hoped that they know and live up to Sophocles' maxim Don't kill the messenger.

The letter to the next year finishes the evaluation. This written form makes sure that the results will actually be involved in the plans for coming courses. As the letter to the next year is available for all course participants, the process of evaluation remains transparent for everybody who is involved until its very end. By now most of the students will realize, that their criticism has in fact been of deep relevance.

Here one last problem might become obvious. In addition to the above mentioned inner conflict between representative and lecturer, there now arises another conflict between the representative and



his fellow students. Some of these might feel that their opinions are not adequately represented in the letter to the next yearq which might lead to resentments towards the representative. To prevent this, a public reading of a draft of the letter to the next yearq after the third meeting of the representatives in front of all students of the course could be helpful (if needed without the presence of the lecturer). Should students find faults or gaps in the letter to the next yearq they are asked to give their additions and alterations to the representatives in written form. Thus, the representatives have the chance of including those suggestions into the final version of the letter to the next yearq and thus are able to avoid the described conflict.

From lecturersqperspective

In contrast to the TAP, the CESR is more time-consuming. The coordination, preparation and reworking of the feedback meetings takes a lot of time. In addition, the election of the representatives, the free spaces in course and the discussion of the letter to the next yearq reduces the seminar time. Lecturers at UDE, who adopted a CESR reported that they received helpful feedback and recommendations, but the cost/benefit relationship was not satisfactory.

On the other hand the lecturers confront themselves continuously and detailed with questions regarding their teaching. They have the chance for a shift in perspective, which makes this very challenging, too. Therefore, this method could also be used as a didactic method e. g. within a teacher training course as the representatives get close insights in practical teaching at HEI.

In case of conflicts in class, the lecturer can use the feedback meetings to discuss solutions with the representatives without starting a debate in class. But regarding the inner conflict, which is mentioned above, the representatives should not act as mediator in disputes.

3. Conclusion

Provided that the lecturer is willing and has the time to reflect on oneq action, both feedback methods have huge potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in HEI, to foster the dialogue between the lecturers and the students and stimulate a quality culture in a HEI. These methods of formative evaluation offer students a possibility of participation to a degree which otherwise could hardly be achieved. Both methods provide insights in the perception of the teaching and learning situation and imply the chance for a shift in perspective.

Compared to student satisfaction surveys at the end of the semester, gathering student feedback at mid-term has the benefit of allowing the lecturer to hear the studentsq concerns while there is still time to make appropriate changes. At the same time this implies, that the lecturer has to respond to the studentsq feedback. Whenever suggestions for improvement will not be implemented, the lecturer should explain the reasons to encourage transparency und to keep the studentsq commitment.

Within the project (s .o.) the lecturers experienced, that the positive feedback prevailed. But when conflicts occur, it can be helpful to integrate a third party in the follow up. This person could be the TAP consultant or another uninvolved person, which has experiences with conflict management at HEI as for the student representatives it would be overburdening.

Finally we state, that the TAP and the CESR close the loopq (on course level) and benefit both the quality of student learning and the professional development of the teacher. But the question how the results of formative feedback methods can be integrated in the HEI quality management cycle is still prevalent.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Costs vs. efficiency of dialog-based, formative evaluation methods: Is the effort likely to pay off?
2. When serious conflicts occur: How can external moderators intervene without interfering the teaching-learning situation?