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Board 81: Utilizing Student Observers to Boost Teaching Effectiveness and Evaluation

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Abstract

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have traditionally been the primary method for assessing faculty teaching effectiveness in many academic institutions. However, their validity has recently been questioned. As an alternative/complementary approach, this study proposed using student observers to evaluate faculty teaching effectiveness within a STEM department at an R1 university and to provide faculty with timely feedback. Student observers include both graduate and undergraduate students who have received training in teaching observation skills. They attend classes to observe teaching practices and provide feedback on both the strengths and areas for improvement in the instructors' teaching. In this article, we will delve into the development, implementation, and challenges faced by the student observer initiative. The collected data shows highly positive feedback from both students and faculty regarding this process.

Introduction

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have long been a cornerstone of assessing faculty teaching effectiveness in higher education. There has been a plethora of research on SETs in literature dating back to the early 1900s [1], [2]. SETs data are often used for various purposes, such as improving teaching, informing curriculum development, rewarding or promoting faculty, and satisfying accreditation requirements. Different versions of SETs have been used by various higher education institutions as the major (if not the only) source of teaching evaluations (and for making decisions on promotion and tenure) since then.

Current SETs typically consist of online surveys, questionnaires, or rating scales administered at the end of a course, where students are asked to provide feedback on various aspects of their instructors' teaching on a Likert scale (1-5). The survey may also include a space for students to provide comments on the instructor and the course in general.

However, SETs also face many challenges and controversies, such as potential biases, grading leniency, validity and reliability issues, low response rates, and conflicting interpretations of results. Basow and Martin [3] discussed potential biases in SETs due to several factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, attractiveness, age, course difficulty, and expected grade. These biases can lead to unfair assessments and hinder the recognition of effective teaching methods.

Criticism regarding the misuse of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) has been ongoing since the 1990s. In 1997, McKeachie [4] along with Greenwald and Gillmore [5] cautioned against grading leniency that can affect the level of ratings. Fearing that lower ratings could negatively impact their careers, instructors might be inclined to grade more leniently, compromising academic rigor and standards. This, in turn, might provide an inaccurate picture of teaching quality.

More recent scholarly inquiries and discussions have brought to light several issues with the reliability and validity of SETs as the primary measure of teaching quality. There is mounting evidence that end-of-semester evaluations are biased and represent an imperfect measure of an instructor's performance. They may not accurately reflect the true quality of teaching, or at the very least, they are unfair [6], [7], [8].

Transitioning from traditional paper-based surveys to electronic ones in higher education, while cost-effective, presented certain drawbacks, particularly in terms of significantly reduced response rates, which led to skepticism about the validity and reliability of SETs [9], [10].

The limitations of SETs have led to continuous calls for a more comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to evaluating faculty teaching effectiveness [8]. In response to those calls, the use of student observers has been proposed as a complementary method for assessing teaching quality. Student observers are trained to use observation tools and rubrics that focus on specific aspects of teaching, such as learning objectives, instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement. Student observers attend classes to objectively assess teaching methods and provide constructive feedback to instructors in an informal and confidential manner.

Limiting student feedback/evaluation of teaching to just the end of the semester is an underutilization of this important resource (i.e., the students) for enhancing teaching and learning. The use of students as observers for college teaching brings a unique and valuable perspective to the evaluation process. This observation approach offers benefits for the student observers, instructors, and the overall teaching enhancement mission of institutions. One of the main benefits of student observer programs is that they provide instructors with an opportunity to receive constructive and formative feedback on their teaching from a different perspective than their peers or their students. By observing, recording, and possibly discussing these aspects with the instructors, student observers can provide authentic insights into the effectiveness of teaching methods and offer real-time, firsthand constructive feedback for improving teaching within the semester [11].

From the instructor's standpoint, student observers offer the benefits of peer evaluation while bringing a unique learner perspective that faculty may lack [12], [13]. Positioned as observers, students can provide valuable feedback on elements such as classroom climate, pacing, clarity, and engagement techniques [14]. Research suggests that observers' feedback enhances instructors' awareness of their teaching practices and introduces new methodologies for

implementation in the classroom [11], [12]. This process enables faculty members to continually enhance their instructional approaches.

From the student's standpoint, several investigations indicated that engaging in the process of objectively reviewing classes empowers student observers to develop their teaching skills and philosophies (11, 12, 15). Thus, this approach can significantly improve student teaching skills, especially if they are graduate students considering a career in teaching. Furthermore, the act of observation fosters general evaluative and analytical skills applicable across various disciplines [11].

At the broader institutional level, the student observer program can contribute to creating and sustaining a culture of teaching excellence. By involving students in the evaluation and enhancement of teaching, these programs signal that teaching is a valued and respected skill that can be developed and improved across disciplines and levels. Student observer programs also foster a collegial and collaborative environment among faculty members and students, where they can share and learn from each other's experiences and practices. This can enhance the quality and diversity of teaching across the institution and promote a student-centered approach to learning [15].

Additionally, student observer programs allow colleges and universities to conduct teaching evaluations and enhancements on a larger scale than relying solely on faculty peer reviews [11] or SETs. Student observers also promote teaching as a valued skill, beyond just research, that institutions can develop more holistically across disciplines [15]. This supports an overall culture of teaching excellence. With proper protocols, student observers can serve as invaluable partners in collectively enhancing university teaching.

There is also a potential additional benefit for STEM departments at US universities, particularly where the number of foreign students, especially at the graduate level, are relatively high. Foreign graduate students represent 21.9 percent of total graduate students in the US (equivalent to 1 in every 5 graduate enrollments in 2022) [16]. Therefore, inviting students from foreign backgrounds (as well as all demographic backgrounds) to participate in this study not only fosters a sense of belonging but also underscores the value of their voices in improving their education.

The objective of this study was to introduce this innovative complementary approach for evaluating faculty teaching effectiveness, using trained student observers as an additional source for teaching evaluation within a STEM department at an R1 university. By using student observers, we aim to provide more reliable, valid, and specific feedback to faculty members about their teaching performance and areas for improvement in a timely manner where some provided feedback can still be implemented.

The process

In this study (which is a part of an NSF grant), graduate and undergraduate students from the Electrical Engineering (EE) department at an R1 university were encouraged to volunteer to observe teaching and evaluate its effectiveness and provide written constructive feedback to instructors about areas of strength as well as areas for improvement. The student observer's process consisted of the following steps:

1. Recruitment of Student Observers: During Fall 2022 semester, the chair of the EE department sent an invitation to undergraduate students participating in the Professional Formation of Engineers (PFE) courses to become student observers. PFE Courses, a three-course sequence for undergraduate students at the EE department that includes sections on soft skills, were also part of the NSF grant. Interested students' names were collected via a Qualtrics survey. The initiative was marketed to students as a research opportunity. Starting Fall 2023 semester, the invitation was extended to all graduate students at the EE department as well. There was no compensation for students who participated in this process.

2. Pre-Program Survey: Before training the students on observation skills, a facilitator from the university's teaching and learning center requested students to complete a pre-assessment survey with the following questions (on a Likert scale with 5 levels):

  - I can recognize effective teaching when I see it.
  - I find that most Electrical Engineering instructors/professors teach well.
  - I know a lot about what it takes to make teaching effective.
  - How likely are you to someday be a teacher or professor?
  - What motivated you to volunteer for this program? What do you think will be some rewards or positive effects on you as a result of participation?

3. Recruitment of Observed Faculty: Initially, all faculty volunteers were members of the NSF research committee. Starting Fall 2023 semester, the program was opened to all faculty at the EE department (total of 25 faculty). No faculty opted out, which allowed more course options for students to choose from.

4-Pedagogy Training of Student Observers: Volunteering students were enrolled in a learning module on teaching and learning best practices on the Canvas learning management system, covering topics such as backward design and assessment, observation practices, and giving constructive feedback. All handouts and training materials were provided within that Canvas module. The students were required to attend a one-hour training session on how to observe and evaluate teaching effectiveness and how to provide constructive feedback to faculty members. The training session was offered multiple times on different dates and times to accommodate as many students as possible. These training sessions were offered via MS Teams. At the end of each training session, participating students were allowed to select the classes they would like to observe. Assigning students at the end of the training session was necessary to maintain

momentum and reduce the communication needed for later assignments. Students were advised to sign up for classes they were not part of during that semester [13]. Students were also advised to arrange with instructors before visiting their classes to make sure the class they are visiting that day is appropriate for observation (for example there is no exam, or guest speaker that day). No data was collected on the observers' experience with the courses/topics they signed up to observe.

5. Observation and Evaluation: Student observers signed up on a Google sheet to select a class (or two) to observe and complete a standardized evaluation form, which assessed various aspects of the instructor's teaching effectiveness (See appendix 1), such as clarity of instruction, engagement with students, and responsiveness to student questions. In addition to the evaluation form, students were required to provide a feedback report (no more than a page long) to faculty with areas of strength, ideas for consideration, and positive closing remarks (See appendix 2).

6. Submitting Reports: Student observers were requested to complete both the observation form and the feedback report as soon as possible after the class visit. Student observers were given options for the submission of their reports. They could email the reports to the facilitator, email the reports directly to the observed faculty, or contact the observed faculty and set up a meeting to go over the reports with them.

7. Post-Completion Survey: The questions in the pre-survey were reused for students, except for the last one. Instead, they were asked this: "How has being part of this project helped you personally?" Faculty also gave feedback before the semester ended (only in Fall 2023; when a higher number of faculty were involved) on how the student observer's feedback was on target and how helpful the process was, using a Qualtrics survey.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 presents the number of recruited students who completed their observations, the number of faculty observed, and the total observations during Fall 2022, Spring 2023, and Fall 2023 semesters.

The number of recruited students rose from 9 students in Fall 2022 to 32 students in Fall 2023. This increase was attributed to earlier outreach to students before midterms and the inclusion of graduate students alongside undergraduates in the final two semesters, indicating improved success in participant recruitment over time. Additionally, the percentage of students completing pedagogy training rose from 56% in Fall 2022 to 90% in Spring 2023 before decreasing slightly to 75% in Fall 2023. The rise in training completion rates can be attributed to offering multiple sessions at various dates and times. However, the decline in Fall 2023 may be linked to the larger number of students recruited that semester (32 students) and the challenge of accommodating their variable schedules despite offering pedagogy training sessions multiple times.

Student completion rates also demonstrated an upward trend over time. In Fall 2022, 80% of students who attended pedagogy training completed their observations and submitted reports. This figure increased to 100% in both Spring 2023 and Fall 2023.

The number of observed faculty members grew significantly from 2 in Fall 2022 to 14 in Fall 2023, reflecting the expansion of the study across more courses and faculty members. By Fall 2023, all faculty members in the department were invited, facilitating greater participation.

Total observations increased with each semester, corresponding to the growth in observed faculty members and student completion numbers. It is noteworthy that some students observed more than one faculty member, and some faculty members were observed by more than one student.

Most students, especially undergraduates, chose to submit observation and feedback reports either to the facilitator or directly to the faculty member. One graduate student conducted a feedback meeting with the faculty member. For the one-on-one meetings, it was recommended that the student observer refrain from sending the reports to the faculty member until after the meeting to prevent the faculty member from focusing solely on areas of improvement noted in the report.

In general, this data demonstrates promising growth in recruitment, retention, faculty participation, the number of observations, and completion rate over time. The substantial increase in Fall 2023 numbers suggests a significant expansion of the project. As the study progresses, it will be important to monitor retention rates to ensure quality data collection from an adequate number of students. Additionally, expanding to more faculty/courses also requires ensuring proper training and calibration of observers.

Table (1). Student observer program data over three semesters.

	Fall 2022	Spring 2023	Fall 2023
Number of students signed up for the program	9 (Undergrad.)	10 (4 Grad.+ 6 Undergrad.)	32 (11 Grad.+ 21 Undergrad.)
Number of students who completed the pedagogy training	5	10	24
Training completion rate	56%	100%	75%
Number of students who signed up to an observation	5	10	16
Number of students who completed observations and submitted reports	4	9	16
Program completion rate	80%	90%	100%
Number of observed faculty	2	3	14
Total number of observations	4	11	16

Student Feedback on The Program:

The pre-survey data for the statement "I know a lot about what it takes to make teaching effective" showed that 11 students (of a total of 21) somewhat agree with this statement, and only three students strongly agree. The remaining seven students were either neutral or disagreed. This finding implies that the majority of students did not have confidence in evaluating teaching. This data justifies making the kickoff pedagogy training a requirement and not allowing students to conduct observations without attending that training session.

The data collected from student post-completion surveys during the three semesters showed an increased ability to recognize effective teaching, highly positive responses towards the program, and willingness to conduct more observations in the future. The response rate to the post-completion survey was 1 of 4 (25%), 8 of 10 (80%), and 11 of 16 (69%) for Fall 2022, Spring 2023, and Fall 2023 semesters, respectively.

Many students expressed that they gained a valuable insight into teaching and a deeper understanding of specific pedagogical strategies and philosophies after the observation. This shows a positive sign of how they perceived the observation's influence on their knowledge of effective teaching strategies.

Several students expressed that they were increasingly inspired to pursue teaching careers themselves after participating in the observation process. The observational-skills training was an important component of the program to prepare the student observers.

Below are some of the identified themes from the student feedback survey:

- Greater appreciation for the work professors do to prepare and teach effectively.
- Insight into distinguishing effective vs. ineffective teaching techniques.
- Understanding of how to engage and benefit students as a teacher.
- Recognition of teaching as a skill to be developed over time.
- Continued appreciation for professor efforts and women professors specifically.
- Learning concrete teaching methods and approaches through training and observation.
- Gaining teaching experience to apply in their own future teaching roles.
- Motivation to pursue teaching careers.
- Applying objective observational skills learned through the program.

Faculty Feedback on The Program:

Post observation survey/feedback from faculty members was collected only during Fall 2023, where the number of participating faculty was the highest (total 14 compared to only 2 and 3 during the previous semesters). 57% of the observed faculty in that semester responded to the post observation/feedback survey.

Observed faculty shared that the students' feedback was very helpful, and they were able to implement it directly in their teaching when feedback was timely shared with them. The constructive feedback helped the faculty members identify areas for improvement and refine their teaching methods before the semester was over.

Generally, the faculty responses suggest a positive reception of the observation process, with a notable consensus on its usefulness and target accuracy of student observation and feedback. The faculty unanimously agreed that they would be willing to repeat this process in the next semester.

The predominant feedback is that the observation process was "very much on target," suggesting that it aligns well with the expectations and the teaching practices of the observed faculty. There were few instances of moderate or slight variations in feedback that could be areas for further exploration or improvement.

The themes from the observed faculty comments revolved around continuous improvement in teaching methods, the teacher's energy management, the importance of seeking feedback and encouraging student expression. Faculty realized that more feedback from students is necessary, indicating a commitment to understanding their perspectives and encouraging a participatory learning environment.

Challenges and Limitations

As with any research endeavor, the implementation of innovative methodologies comes with its own set of challenges and limitations. In this section, we outline the key hurdles encountered in utilizing trained student observers to assess teaching effectiveness. These challenges encompass attrition rates before and after training, the limited scope of feedback provided by students, and the issue of late submission of evaluation reports.

Attrition Rate Before Training (Scheduling Issue):

One significant limitation of this study was the attrition rate among student observers before the pedagogy training sessions. Despite offering several training options, scheduling conflicts posed challenges for several students in attending the training session that was carefully designed to prepare them for evaluating teaching. Consequently, this limitation resulted in a smaller pool of trained student observers. For the future semesters, we may want to share the dates and times of the pedagogy sessions during the recruitment process to reduce this attrition rate as much as possible.

Attrition Rate After Training (Not signing up):

Furthermore, even after receiving training, some students may choose not to participate as observers, leading to post-training attrition. Factors such as lack of interest, competing commitments, or perceived insignificance of the evaluation process may contribute to students opting out. This attrition led to an additional reduction in the pool of student observers.

Limited Scope of Feedback Provided by Students:

Although students observed classes they were not attending during that semester, many students tended to provide fewer ideas for improvement compared to the feedback typically offered by faculty or instructional experts. This reluctance to offer criticism may stem from concerns about future interactions with faculty whose courses they may need to take.

Late Submission of Reports:

Late submission of reports by student observers presents a practical challenge in the feedback process. Despite repeated reminders, several students tended to send their reports 3-4 weeks after the observation, possibly due to a lack of incentives and other priorities. Late submission of evaluation reports can hinder the timely dissemination of feedback to faculty, thereby impeding their ability to reflect on and incorporate suggestions for improvement. Moreover, tardy reports may compromise the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation process, as timely feedback is essential for addressing instructional concerns promptly. Offering some incentives such as a certificate of completion has been considered to motivate students to complete the process.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study suggests an alternative/complementary approach to the traditional end-of-semester faculty evaluation by utilizing trained student observers to assess teaching effectiveness. Incorporating student observation into departmental teaching evaluation practices could lead to improved teaching effectiveness, thereby enhancing student learning outcomes. Involving students in the evaluation process would increase their engagement and investment in their own learning. Additionally, engaging graduate students can benefit them directly in their current and future teaching roles if they consider a career in teaching.

The constructive feedback provided by students to instructors, along with the positive reception from both students and faculty participants, highlights the potential of this initiative to enhance teaching quality in EE department and address challenges associated with traditional Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) method. As such, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on improving teaching evaluation methods and provides an innovative approach that can be adapted in various academic settings.

Further research and evaluation are needed to streamline this process and to determine the effectiveness and feasibility of this approach as an alternative or complementary to the current teaching evaluation system.

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Appendix 1: Observation Form

Observation Item	Comments
There are clear objectives of the class	
Mix of lecture/activities is appropriate for this class	
Content is explained at a level appropriate for this audience	
Topics are sequenced logically	
The right amount of content is delivered for the class period	
The pace of the class is appropriate	
Instructor assesses student learning during class	
Instructor speaks loudly and clearly enough	
Instructor projects enthusiasm and interest	
Instructor engages students' active thought processes beyond content explanation, such as challenging them to make predictions	
Students practice the material and apply it during class time	
Students interact with each other	
Students respond to the instructor (e.g., verbally, clickers, etc.)	
Students are on-task	
Students take notes, if appropriate for this class	

Appendix 2: Three Examples for Student Feedback Reports

Example 1

The best practices observed in during the Tuesday class period were:

- The lecture is explained thoroughly via PowerPoints, real life examples, and demonstrations that the students can relate the concepts to the daily lives to comprehend and put it to action when performing their hands-on project.
- The instructor voices in not flat or monotone and the excitement of the information is projected through each explanation and instructor will add in his personal life into examples to connect with the students.
- The instructor will move and communicate to/with the students inspiring a back-and-forth response when doing demonstrations and asking students what the outcomes of that followed could be.
- Students were seen actively and eagerly assisting one another with the previous week's assignments to make sure they each understood how the given circuit worked and if it was not functioning properly then they worked together to find the issue(s).

The suggestions given to improve class:

- Many students were early to class or even on time and focused during class. There were a small number of students that came in late and others who were of electronic devices during class doing non-class related work.
  - To improve this
    - Limit what and when electronic devices can be used during class time. If a computer, phone, or tablet is not needed at that time other than for notes it is not necessary for the devices to be out.
    - Give a time limit on how late a student can be such as if they are 15 minutes late, they cannot enter because they are causing a disruption to other students which is unnecessary.
- The modules that are posted online for the students is a great advantage for a large portion of the students who observed to not notate during lecture just follow along, but it was observed that a module was skipped and then gone back to or will go back to. This could confuse students not knowing which module to review at the end of day.
  - A way to improve this is only allowing access to the module reviewing that day and locking the one skipped and if only a section of one module is covered and the other module is covered in whole then an announcement can be made so, the students can refer to it.
  - The pace of the class is smooth, and the instructor will go back to repeat information to further explain if a student does not understand but as the instructor asks questions and students verbally respond the wait time for an answer can be too short.
    - It is recommended to wait at least 5 to 15 seconds. It will allow them to gather their thoughts and give a proper response.

Example 2

Dear Dr. xxx,

I hope this email finds you well. I recently had the opportunity to observe your lecture on xx/xx/xxxx and wanted to share some feedback and observations with you.

Your lecture displayed several strengths. The use of two projector screens and organized handwriting on the board ensured clear visibility, making the material easily accessible to all students. Your incorporation of real-life application examples to explain fundamental concepts effectively engages students and makes the material relatable. Students' active participation and interaction with you created a positive classroom atmosphere. Additionally, your practice of summarizing key points at the end of the lecture and providing an overview of upcoming topics was commendable.

However, there are a few areas that may benefit from some adjustments. Some students at the back of the room might have difficulty hearing you due to unclear vocal projection. It may be helpful to work on improving vocal clarity to ensure that all students can hear and understand the material. Additionally, you could consider diversifying your teaching techniques to accommodate different learning styles and emphasizing critical takeaways during your summaries. One other observation was your frequent use of the word "right" as a filler word during the lecture. While this did not significantly disrupt communication, reducing its usage could lead to even smoother delivery. Lastly, If your classes occasionally end early, it could also be an opportunity to engage students in Q&A sessions or additional discussions, further enriching the learning experience.

I want to express my appreciation for your dedication to creating an engaging and interactive classroom environment. With these minor adjustments, the learning experience could become even more enriching.

Thank you for considering these observations, and please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or would like to discuss any of the points further.

Best regards,

Example 3

Based on my observations, Dr. X gave us an excellent lecture on xxxxx. To begin with the observer report, I would like to point out some advantages of Dr. X's teaching performance.

Positive teaching performance:

+ The instructor can communicate with the students before the class and wait for the students who did not show up in the class.
+ The objectives of this class were very clear at the beginning of the course.
+ The instructor can always interact with the students and ask questions to engage the students in the lecture.
+ The pace of the lecture is good, which leaves enough time for the students to write the notes.
+ The instructor can always use his body language to attract the students' attention.

Suggestions for considerations:

It would be more beneficial to give more time for students to think and solve the questions by themselves. And the instructor could consider making the students discuss or collaborate solving some difficult questions together. For instance, the instructor can ask 2-3 students to group up, and to see which group is the fastest to come up with the correct answer. In addition, the instructor could also invite some students to share their solution to the questions before giving them the answer, which could be more beneficial to engage the students into the course, and also leave a deep impression for them to these questions.

In general, I found your teaching methods to be exceptionally impressive, and I am convinced that implementing these suggestions could further elevate the learning experience for your students. I want to express my gratitude for your unwavering dedication to teaching and your steadfast commitment to fostering a positive and captivating learning atmosphere. Your outstanding efforts are truly commendable, so please continue your excellent work!