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New Paradigm in Classroom Assessment: The Externally Trained (ET) Observer Model

Oscar T McKnight, Ashland University
Ronald Paugh, Ashland University
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Oscar McKnight, Ashland University
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ABSTRACT

Traditional classroom assessment techniques are fraught with weaknesses and inherent contradictions. The proposed paradigm in classroom assessment -- the Externally Trained (ET) - Observer Model -- is not a traditional classroom assessment model. It is a quality control measure which ultimately benefits both students and instructor.

INTRODUCTION

Assessing the effectiveness of classroom instruction is a top priority in academia, given the plethora of research. Cashin (1995) reported no less than 1,500 citations pertaining to student evaluations, not including multiple types of instruments used or interactions between methods. Hence, given the scope of professional attention, the issue of assessing classroom effectiveness appears warranted. However, Hill and Herche (2001) cautioned that the methods employed may be "woefully inadequate". Cashin (1995) stressed that the six areas most commonly investigated -- organization; communication; interaction; workload; grading; and self-rated learning -- have several limitations. Moreover, students are often ill-informed as to how these evaluations will be used.

Course assessment, for all practical purposes, is conceptually linked with the faculty evaluation process. Yet, one would have a difficult time arguing that any "paper and pencil" or "fill-in-the-blank" survey can significantly improve the quality of classroom instruction. Finkelstein (1995) strengthened this position when suggesting that without skilled consultants, instruments alone will not lead to improved classroom instruction. At best, Clayson (1999) argued that a researcher will find most course evaluations and their results to be contradictory. For example, Finkelstein (1995) noted that the National Education Association (NEA) reported that evaluation instruments are positively related to academic achievement; but, Cohen (1987) suggested that student ratings do not measure instructional effectiveness nor do they measure intellectual achievement of students. More confusing are the Goldman (1985) findings, where approximately 70 percent of students indicated that the grade "they thought" they would get, influenced the level at which they rated their professors.

Given the contradictions inherent to the process of assessing classroom effectiveness, it is little wonder that many educators question the ability of students to adequately evaluate faculty (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000). However, this "lack of faith sentiment" has not diminished the zeal that college and university administrators continue to bring to the process of assessing classroom effectiveness. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching reported that approximately 98 percent of the universities sampled used student evaluations of classroom instruction (Magnier, 1997). Comm and Mathaiel (1998), in their research of Business schools, reported that 99.3 percent actively participated in student classroom course evaluations. As Simpson and Siguaw (2000) pointed out, these assessment efforts affect both the institution and their faculty; and for the most part, were initiated by outside parties, specifically state governments entrusted to measure institutional outcomes and ensure accountability.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) affirmed the Commission on Higher Education's Standards for Accreditation when they acclaimed that it was necessary for an institution of higher education to document the extent to which it meets their educational goals and objectives. They stated further
that it is, and will be inescapable for an institution of higher education not to evaluate classroom effectiveness. This outlook may appear onerous, yet as Balridge (1983) pointed out, an objective evaluation process is the first step in developing a long-term strategic plan; and an institution's strategic plan is invariably value-driven (Bryson, 1988). These values are articulated in the university mission statement. And if the mission statement involves the education of the student's academic, personal or social "well-being", then documenting assessment efforts becomes paramount.

Keeping a record of the institution's "assessment efforts" is the key function for an external accreditation agency or watch group. There are no clear criterion levels an institution must achieve, nor are there any indicators of "good" or "bad" instruction. Often, institutions themselves establish validity standards. One can only assume that the principal goal of university officials is to improve the quality of instruction. However, when it comes to "paper and pencil" or Likert scale student assessments, Trout (1997) noted that the most effective way for lowering academic standards is the numerical evaluation. Moreover, Trout concluded with three points: 1) that most faculty believe the student evaluations of teaching lead to lower educational standards; 2) student evaluations serve as a tool for revenge; and 3) the entire student evaluation of teaching model becomes over relied on by administrators. Marsh and Roche (1997) documented similar concerns and included the validity of assessment instruments. In the end, the authors concluded that researchers should recognize the multidimensionality of teaching and evaluation.

The authors of this paper agree with the concept of multidimensionality in teaching and assessment. Hence, what follows is a course assessment model that focuses on student and faculty development rather than instructor rating. The model is called ET-Observer. ET is an acronym for Externally Trained Observer is the process of interviewing the classroom members, combined with observing what is and what is not being stated. The goal is not to numerically evaluate the instructor, but rather to report observations and conversations with the students in the class. From the onset, we assume that the proposed model would be used in conjunction with existing evaluation systems. The objective is not to replace any working or practical process already established, nor is the process intended for every classroom. Rather, the goal is to increase student self-understanding of course relevance and to provide the faculty with useful feedback. For as Desai, Damewood and Jones (2001) suggested, student input into the educational process is encouraged and expected in most systems. Moreover, faculty generally want to respond to student concerns. By design, the purpose of the ET - Observer Model is to facilitate the educational experience for both the student and the faculty member. Overall, the process is non-threatening and is designed to enhance quality improvement initiatives frequently associated with outcomes-based measurements.

**METHODOLOGY**

The ET - Observer Model assumes that a faculty member will request an observer for both the students' and his or her own personal and professional growth. To a certain extent, this process is not intended as a standard department or college evaluation model, but rather a quality control measure for the benefit of all parties directly involved, specifically, the students and the instructor.

Generally speaking, the ET - Observer Model consists of six distinct phases. In the first phase, an externally trained - observer is selected from outside the department or college to visit and discuss, with the class, specific course issues. The focus of the discussion is not on instruction but rather the course itself. It is recommended that a pre-meeting with the requesting faculty member take place to establish a list of specific questions of concern; that is, if key target questions appear warranted. However, from experience, this meeting appears to be optional given the natural flow of student interviews in discussion. Phases two through five include - orientation; transition; development; and consolidation. In phase six, a private meeting between the faculty member and observer takes place. Phases two through six will be discussed more fully below.
Externally Trained - Observer

The selection of an externally trained observer is a critical component of the ET - Observer Model. The intent is to select an internal professional with non-faculty status to be the externally trained observer. This will complement the use of peer evaluations historically associated with the traditional faculty development process. However, if an external observer is not available, intuitive reflection suggests that a professional (i.e., faculty member) outside the department is preferable to one within it. A skip-level option (Dean or Adjunct) improves response validity. Yet, in the end, every attempt should be made to secure an externally trained observer. A faculty member is, after all, a faculty member, and a Dean or Chair is often viewed as a close personal colleague. The ET - Observer Model pre-supposes the primacy of student perception. If students view the process as "useless", all information gained may be of limited value. Therefore, the choice of an independent outside party to act as the Externally Trained - Observer is of vital importance.

A faculty member has several options, for there are many professionally trained interviewers and counselors within a university setting. For example, many universities have Directors, Coordinators or Vice Presidents of: Admission, Business, Retention, First-Year Experience, Student Affairs, Public Relations or Marketing. All would make excellent observers. Most of these professionals have years of experience in academia, earned graduate credentials, and have been trained in interviewing, advising, or counseling within their discipline. More importantly, students are likely to view all the aforementioned professionals as less biased than a faculty member or instructor facilitating a course evaluation. Remember, this process is intended to be non-threatening for both the student and the faculty member.

Role of the Faculty

Once an Externally Trained - Observer has been selected, the next step is to introduce the course evaluation process in the syllabus and class discussion. The students are informed that an outside "observer" will meet with the class at some predetermined time. It should be stressed that this is a group interview or discussion, and has been personally scheduled by the faculty member, not department administrators. The goal is to improve overall course quality. We have found that using the simple phrase "interview" or "discussion" compared with "focus group" or "evaluator" builds group trust and is less likely to produce rote responses. The faculty member should encourage the students to be open and honest, stressing that the interviewer will keep all personal information anonymous. The goal is not to associate any one person with specific information but to glean information and insights that will improve the overall quality of the course.

Role of the Externally Trained - Observer

This is an active six-phase process. In the orientation phase, the observer must reassure the class that the discussion period has been scheduled at the instructor’s request. The purpose is clarified – to improve the course by either modifying or sustaining course content. This phase also includes an introduction by the interviewer that includes credentials, background and personal role in the evaluation process. In the transition phase, the observer must minimize classroom anxiety by giving examples, using humor or paradox to reduce potential barriers to communication. In the development phase, issues are openly discussed and sought. Again, the goal is course improvement and/or personal or professional development. No attempt to “sugar coat” either the course or faculty member is made. In the consolidation phase, the classroom experience is reviewed and corrected by consensus, and the personal responsibilities (e.g., faculty or student) involved with life-long learning can be stressed. The Externally Trained - Observer role is now complete. What follows is phase six, a personal discussion and review with the involved faculty member.

Interview Process

Since the ET - Observer Model is interdisciplinary, each observer can use an evaluation or interview process unique to their discipline. For example, a Business VP may use a SWOT analysis, detailing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with a course; a Marketing Director may employ a segmentation approach; an Admission Counselor may lead a focus group; a Personal Counselor could apply a systems approach. The important point is that the process can be tailored to fit the unique circumstances or characteristics of the class. Each observer can use props, create surveys, receive samples or hear positive and negative comments, all directly related to the course experience.
Faculty Advantages

The use of the ET-Observer Model offers many advantages listed in Table 1. However, one of the most salient advantages involves student perception. If students view the process as sufficiently different from the typical "fill-in-the-blank" methods common to university systems and departments, then the resulting comments (data) will likely have more direct impact on course development. In addition, because of the interdisciplinary approach, the potential for developing a true community of learners exists. Another advantage highlights the difference between the traditional end-of-the-semester (or quarter) course evaluation, and the early or mid-semester interview. With early input, a faculty member can change the course direction, focus, assignments and/or content, if warranted.

Table 1
Faculty Advantages
Use of the ET-Observer Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The ET-Observer Model results are viewed as ...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a means, not an end.</td>
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<tr>
<td>an experiment, the opportunity to test curriculum, processes and procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an opportunity for personal and professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fostering a &quot;sense of community&quot; among faculty, administration, and staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supporting program or department growth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>supplemental information to the Likert Scale evaluation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>promoting life-long learning improvement goal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>demonstrating faculty openness and concern for student development.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The ET-Observer Model assumes that the request of an observer is faculty driven, not mandated.

Student Advantages

The ET-Observer Model establishes the primacy of student development, be it as a person, customer, or professional. Encouraging students to exhibit an active and heard voice in classroom assessment will build and foster a learning community. Another benefit of this model is that it introduces "external professionals" to the classroom. Often students believe that only faculty members are responsible for the learning experience. Students typically downplay their own role and often are oblivious to the administration and staff functions. Table 2 identifies additional student advantages. Although not exhaustive, it does introduce a host of direct student advantages.

Advantages of the ET-Observer Model

The ET-Observer Model is flexible, allows for interdisciplinary participation, and promotes perceptual changes in the "evaluation" process. First, every classroom will recognize the "risk" associated with having an external observer in the classroom. This point alone typically results in increased student respect for the course instructor. The faculty member is perceived as wanting to improve the course, not by simply administering the standard end of the semester "fill-in-the-blank" evaluations. Table 3 highlights some additional advantages associated with the ET-Observer Model.
Table 2
Student Advantages
Use of the ET - Observer Model

The ET - Observer Model promotes and enhances ...

life-long learning.

an opportunity to network with university administration and staff.

a classroom catharsis.

an understanding of the purpose, meaning, and impact of faculty and course.

active and inclusive course development.

an understanding of the student's role and responsibilities in the learning process.

a detached understanding of the course experience.

an opportunity to compare consensus with self-assessment.

early understanding of what to expect from the course.

a redefinition of an administrator's or staff member's function.

Note. The ET - Observer Model is based on the assumption that the observer has volunteered to participate, and has not been assigned or mandated.

Table 3
Advantages
Use of the ET - Observer Model

The ET - Observer Model enhances ...

a "bias for action" classroom environment.

insights from the observation of body language.

the development and testing of hypotheses.

the use of props.

inferences drawn from class.

exploration of polarities.

a possible refocus of classroom priorities.

the introduction of multiple discussion formats.

Note. The ET - Observer Model assumes that observers are professionals within the university system and possess effective communication skills.
Limitations of the ET - Observer Model

All evaluation models have limitations, and the ET - Observer Model is no exception. Its initial hurdle is one of relationships. Often, faculty members have limited communication and interaction with professionals external to their department or college. In this case, the externally trained - observer is not only outside the department, but is a campus administrator or, staff member with historically restricted contact. Hence, approaching a potential candidate to be an externally trained - observer is often a new experience with built-in hesitation. Second, because of the disparity among professional and academic disciplines, the class interview process and results could be difficult to communicate. For example, if a "quantitative" instructor meets a "qualitative" observer, it is unclear what could occur in a professional dialogue. And finally, one of the biggest concerns may be a "quality control" issue with potential inconsistency among multiple observers. This would necessitate the establishment of a training program, to be incorporated into a "Faculty College" or some similar faculty training venue. In the end, model limitations must be weighed against benefits. Table 4 highlights potential limitations associated with the ET- Observer Model.

Table 4
Model Limitations
Use of the ET - Observer Model

The ET - Observer Model limitations include . . .
possible student skepticism.
theoretical bias and/or sensitivity of observer.
lack of qualified personnel.
limited generalizability of results, as Model is not a "stand-alone" assessment tool.
potential faculty resistance.

CONCLUSION

The importance of establishing an academic culture where life-long learning is encouraged and modeled is imperative for any university. The ET - Observer Model is one means available to faculty who wish to address both student and faculty development. It is a model between and among professionals designed to support a community of learning without the formal assessment structure. Yet, it supports what Desai, Damewood and Jones (2001) suggested when soliciting student input, specifically, that it is encouraged and expected in most university systems. It is implicitly assumed that faculty want to address student concerns in a positive manner while recognizing the multidimensionality of teaching and evaluation. The ability of an externally trained - observer to work in conjunction with other standard methods of assessment enhances and promotes a triangulation of techniques. In the end, what the ET - Observer Model needs is follow-up research validating the methodological pros and cons, as well as the results a researcher can expect to obtain. More specifically, an empirical study is needed to assess perceived improvements in student and instructor satisfaction, and more importantly, student learning.

REFERENCES


