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Evaluate to improve: useful approaches to student evaluation

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Evaluate to improve: useful approaches to student evaluation

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Many teachers in higher education use feedback from students to evaluate their teaching, but only some use these evaluations to improve their teaching. One important factor that makes the difference is the teacher's approach to their evaluations. In this article, we identify some useful approaches for improving teaching. We conducted focus groups with award-winning university teachers who use student evaluations to improve their teaching, and we identified how they approach their evaluation data. We found that these teachers take a reflective approach, aiming for constant improvement, and see their evaluation data as formative feedback, useful for improving learning outcomes for their students. We summarise this as the improvement approach, and we offer it for other teachers to emulate. We argue that if teachers take this reflective, formative, student-centred approach, they can also use student evaluations to improve their teaching, and this approach should be fostered by institutions to encourage more teachers to use student evaluations to improve their teaching.

Keywords: student evaluations; student feedback; teacher perceptions; improving teaching; staff development; approaches to teaching

Introduction

It is common for university teachers to collect student evaluations, but only some use this evaluation data to change their teaching (e.g. Stein et al. 2012, 2013). What makes the difference between teachers complaining or smiling about the results but never considering them again, and teachers using the feedback to improve their teaching? As the literature in this area indicates, we do not yet have a clear or complete answer to why some teachers use evaluations to improve their teaching and some do not, and this needs more research (e.g. Marsh and Roche 1993; Penny and Coe 2004; Stein et al. 2012). In particular, we need more explicit research about how teachers can use evaluations to improve their teaching.

Our contribution is to employ the theoretical lens of 'approaches to student evaluations' to illuminate and elaborate the attitude teachers can take in order to use their evaluation data to improve their teaching. This research is situated within the broad tradition of examining approaches to or conceptions of teaching (e.g. Trigwell, Prosser, and Taylor 1994) and learning (e.g. Marton and Säljö 1997; Trigwell and Prosser 1991). In our article, we tend to use the term 'approach', but we sometimes use similar terms such as attitude, perception, perspective, stance, belief and conception.

Some recent studies have been conducted on teacher approaches to evaluations: Nasser and Fresko (2002) and Stein et al. (2013) wrote about perceptions of evaluations, Beran and Rokosh (2009) focus on teacher perspectives of evaluation,

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and Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart (2007) wrote about approaches to student feedback. These studies identify the approaches to evaluations that post-secondary teachers tend to hold. A common conclusion in all these studies was that teachers are generally positive about evaluations, but few used evaluations to improve their teaching.

To extend this line of research, in our study, we started with experienced teachers who used evaluation feedback to improve their teaching. We identified the attitudes these teachers had towards using evaluations, but not the frequency of different attitudes. In other words, in our study, we were trying to identify attitudes that post-secondary or tertiary teachers could adopt so that they can use evaluations to improve their teaching, and we make no claims about how common these attitudes are.

The question we address is: what attitude or approach do teachers take to their student evaluations so that they can use them for formative or developmental purposes, to improve their teaching rather than to give a final assessment of performance? To answer this question, we conducted focus groups with excellent teachers in order to identify their approach(es) to using evaluation data for improving their teaching. This research is part of a larger study in which we also investigated the teachers' skills, strategies and processes for using evaluation data to improve teaching practices.

What we already know about using evaluations to improve teaching

Teachers can and do use feedback from student evaluations to improve their teaching (Arthur 2009; Dresel and Rindermann 2011; Marsh 1987; Marsh and Roche 1993; Murray 1997; Stein et al. 2013). But we also know that evaluating teaching does not inevitably lead to improvements in teaching (Ballantyne, Borthwick, and Packer 2000; Kember, Leung, and Kwan 2002). University teachers do not consistently or systematically use evaluations for improvement purposes (Edström 2008; Smith 2008).

Although some teachers do not use evaluation data to improve their teaching because they do not understand how (Aleamoni 1999; Arthur 2009; Bamber and Anderson 2012; Dresel and Rindermann 2011; Marsh and Roche 1993; Smith 2008), the fundamental reason why teachers do not use evaluation data is their attitude or approach to the evaluation data. If teachers have negative perceptions of evaluation data, or if they lack the motivation to improve, then they will not think it possible or legitimate to use evaluation data to improve their teaching. As Smith (2008) noted, offering processes or strategies for using evaluation data will not encourage teachers to use evaluations to improve their teaching unless they were also motivated to improve their teaching. In this article, we focus on the approaches to evaluations that teachers might adopt.

One barrier to using evaluations for improvement and development is the common perception that student evaluations are inaccurate and a poor indication of teaching quality (Aleamoni 1999). If a teacher holds this attitude towards evaluations, then they are likely to see evaluations as useless for improving their teaching, and will be unlikely to use them.

However, it is a myth that student evaluations are useless for improving teaching. Aleamoni (1999) 'busted' 16 myths about student evaluations, including the perceptions that students are unable to accurately evaluate, that evaluations are merely a popularity contest and that easy courses get better evaluations.

He concludes that there is no substantial evidence to back any of the myths. Many other studies have also explored the validity and reliability of students' evaluations, and the majority view seems to be that evaluations are a credible and useful source of data that teachers can use to improve their practice (Ballantyne, Borthwick, and Packer 2000; Benton and Cashin 2012; Marsh 1987).

Another common perception that may block staff from using evaluations to improve their teaching is the belief that evaluation data are useful only for summative purposes, such as promotion applications, and not useful for developmental purposes (e.g. Stein et al. 2012). For example, if teachers believe evaluations are for judging their performance, they are unlikely to ask questions pertinent to development because they think that focusing on areas that need improvement may disadvantage them (Bamber and Anderson 2012; Edström 2008).

Teachers also do not use evaluation data to improve if they have no desire to develop their teaching (Edström 2008; Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart 2007). For example, if teachers perceive that they are good enough, there is no motivation for them to improve.

As well as identifying some attitudinal barriers, the literature also hints at some approaches that enable teachers to use evaluations to improve their teaching. For example, Nasser and Fresko (2002) conclude that using evaluations to improve teaching is a matter of willingness. McGowan and Graham (2009) found that academics who had improved their teaching tended to take a student-centred approach – they valued their students and wanted them to learn. Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart (2007, 151) also found that a student-centred approach was associated with using evaluations to improve teaching (as contrasted with an 'information transmission approach' or a 'focus on content and delivery' which blocked using evaluations to improve teaching). Other studies showed that, if teachers were given the opportunity to take a reflective approach where they could discuss their teaching, then they would be more effective in improving their teaching (Penny and Coe 2004). Our findings expand on these useful approaches to improving teaching. We clarify what it means to be 'willing' to use evaluations to improve your teaching, and we elaborate the requirements of a 'student-centred' and 'reflective' approach.

Method

Our aim in this article is to identify some of the approaches that excellent teachers advocate for using evaluations to improve their teaching. We do not seek to prove that these were common approaches, and we make no claims about how frequently these approaches are adopted.

We sought to recruit participants who were experienced, award-winning teachers from the University of Otago, a research-intensive university in New Zealand. We invited teachers from across the university who had won teaching awards, either student judged awards (Otago University Student Association) or university judged awards (Otago Teaching Excellence Awards). We thought that this group of participants would be most likely to use evaluation data to improve their teaching. We started with list of award-winning teachers from 2008 to 2013 inclusive, and sent out 45 invitations to participate in this research.

We invited participants to take part in reflective focus groups about how they improve their teaching. The discussion in the focus groups, we explained, would centre on how they and the other participants use evaluation data to inform and

modify their teaching practices. We explained that making their practice explicit would be of benefit to others, and would also give them a better, more explicit understanding of how to improve their own teaching. Although this was not an aim of our study, we had informal feedback from participants that the focus groups did help them to clarify how they improve their teaching, and enabled them to refine their practices. This result was anticipated because the study follows a process similar to reflective professional development (Bolton 2010).

From the 45 email invitations we sent, 15 teachers agreed to participate. Our sample included representatives from the sciences, humanities, commerce and medical sciences, who occupied a range of positions including senior lecturers, associate professors, professors and teaching-only staff. We correctly assumed that the award-wining teachers we recruited would use student evaluations to improve their teaching, and that if they did not they would not agree to participate. We also included responses from a pilot focus group, consisting of the two authors as researcher-participants and one other teacher. All three of the participants in the pilot focus group are experienced teachers and academic developers, and the first author is an award-winning teacher. This gave a total of 18 participants.

We conducted seven focus groups in September and October of 2013. The focus groups were all roughly two hours long, semi-structured and ranged in size from three to six participants. Both researchers participated in all of the focus groups as researcher-participants. A secondary data source, which we used to triangulate the focus group data, was the published reflections of the first author about how he uses evaluations to improve his teaching (Golding 2012).

In the focus groups, we employed an open-questioning technique, directed at uncovering how participants use evaluation data to inform their teaching practices. We started by asking participants how they improve their teaching on the basis of evaluations, and then asked follow-up questions to elaborate and refine participant responses, but we did not determine the precise nature of these 'elaboration' questions in advance. We asked questions about the participants' approaches, processes and strategies.

The following are the questions that we asked most frequently across the different focus groups:

- What overall attitudes do you need to use evaluation data to improve teaching?
- How do you get evaluation data?
- What do you need to find out about? What questions do you ask? How do you decide?
- How do you interpret or analyse the evaluations?
- How do you decide what to do on the basis of the evaluations?
- How do you decide what changes to make on the basis of the evaluations?
- How do you plan your teaching with evaluation in mind?

These questions emerged as the most important questions for illuminating how teachers improve on the basis of evaluations. The answers participants gave to each of these questions allowed us to understand how they approached using their evaluation data to improve their teaching.

We found that participants described a range of approaches and attitudes towards using evaluation data to improve teaching. Although our participants indicated that

their approach was usually to seek a variety of forms of student evaluation information – for example, informal conversations with students, feedback from class representatives and student assessments – in this article, we focus on their approaches to using student feedback from surveys.

How did we identify approaches and attitudes from what the teachers said in the focus groups? First, we picked out what they suggested when we explicitly asked them about their attitudes and approaches to using evaluations. The teachers also used the words 'attitude' and 'approach' or synonyms to indicate when they were talking about a broad way of thinking about evaluations rather than a specific process or technique. We used these indicator phrases and words to identify the teacher's attitudes and approaches – for example, 'I think about evaluations as …', 'I see this as …' or 'My approach is …'.

We acknowledge that there may be a difference between the attitudes the teachers stated they used (their espoused attitudes), and attitudes that might be identified by direct observation of teaching (see Kane, Sandretto, and Heath 2002 for more on this distinction). However, we do not think this is an important drawback of our study. We were able to identify possible attitudes to evaluations from the espoused-attitudes that the teachers advocated, and from their examples of employing these attitudes in practice, and we make no claims about how frequently these attitudes are adopted in practice.

We analysed the suggested attitudes and approaches into common categories, using a general inductive approach (Thomas 2006). Our analysis began as we were recording results during the focus groups. We let the categories emerge from the first focus groups, rather than looking for the categories suggested in the literature. We started to categorise various suggestions together when either several members in a focus group were saying the same thing, or they reinforced a suggestion made in a previous focus group. Then, we used these categories to organise the suggestions in later focus groups.

After all the focus groups were completed, we came back to the semi-analysed data, and searched for both broader and more precise categories. Through an iterative process of proposing a category and organising what participants said according to these categories, we ended with the final list we now present.

Results and discussion: attitudes to using evaluations to improve teaching

We found that our participants had a particular attitude to their evaluation data, which we call an improvement attitude. This attitude included an overarching approach, perspective, orientation or way of looking at evaluation data, which we break into interrelated, overlapping, smaller categories for ease of discussion. Specifically, the teachers took a reflective approach to evaluations, viewed the evaluation data as formative information, useful for improving student learning outcomes, and they approached the evaluations with a sense that they could improve. We elaborate the various facets of this attitude and link it with related literature.

Reflective approach

The teachers who used evaluation data for improving their teaching took a reflective approach to their teaching. They regularly asked themselves 'How can I improve?' and they deliberately sought evaluation data to help in answering this question.

This attitude is central to being a reflective practitioner (Schön 1983), though this is not the way the participants in this study described themselves. Participants described this reflective approach to evaluation data simply as 'curiosity': 'We really want to know… to find out what's going on'. Alternatively, they described it as 'being on the lookout for ways to improve student learning'.

Always room for improvement

For some teachers, the reflective approach led them to see teaching as an ongoing process of development. So, no matter how good or bad their evaluation results, there is always room for improvement, and the evaluation data enables them to improve. Many of the participants described their urge to constant improvement as 'tinkering', or 'experimentation'. They thought of evaluations as an iterative process, where they teach, evaluate and improve, then teach, evaluate and improve, and so on. The process the teachers described was very like the structured process of reflection involved in action research (McNiff 1988), although this was not a term participants used.

Having the approach of constant improvement means not being too precious about how you have done things before, and being willing to change, to take some risks and do things differently. This is where the tinkering and experimentation of the reflective approach was apparent. For example, many of the teachers reported that they were always trialling new things in their teaching, and always evaluating how they had improved. One particular model of 'tinkering' was a benchmarking approach where the teacher kept track of their normal evaluation scores, so they could trial something new and judge the success or failure of the innovation based on any changes in the evaluations.

A teacher with the attitude of 'always room for improvement' had their attention on how to improve, not on whether they had 'good enough' evaluation results. This enabled them to use any evaluation results to improve their teaching. On the other hand, when teachers decided that their evaluations were good enough they stopped using the evaluation information to improve their teaching. Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart (2007) noted a similar block to using evaluations to improve teaching: teachers who thought they were already good teachers were not motivated to improve their practice.

That the excellent teachers in our study always see room for improvement, always take the attitude of constant improvement, is consistent with the predictions of theories of expertise. According to Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) theory, an experienced (but not expert) practitioner attempts to get good enough, and then does not invest any more mental energy in improvement. On the other hand, an expert engages in a process of progressive inquiry or reflective problem solving where they continually invest mental energy in improvement. They constantly challenge themselves, reinvesting mental resources in tougher and more complex problems, which leads them to develop expertise rather than merely experience. Our participants were expert in this sense.

The attitude of constant improvement seems at odds with a typical institutional system of using evaluation results only to identify and fix 'problems' in teaching (such as the examples in Smith 2008). This 'fix-it' system leads to what Edström (2008) called the 'fire-alarm' approach to evaluations, where teachers use evaluations simply to identify areas of their teaching that need attention. However, the

problem with the fire alarm approach is that teachers only use evaluations to improve their teaching when they 'have problems'. This sort of institutional process may actually discourage the constant improvement approach, and so limit how teachers use evaluations to improve teaching.

View the data as formative feedback

When they took a reflective approach, participants viewed their evaluation results as formative 'feedback', data they could use, rather than a judgement of them and their teaching. Someone who takes this approach asks: 'How can I develop and improve my teaching?' rather than 'How good is my teaching?' or 'Am I good enough?'

By taking a formative approach, participants may have been able to mitigate the 'emotional rawness' sometimes associated with receiving feedback (Arthur 2009; Stein et al. 2013). The participants had less of an emotional reaction to their evaluations when they treated the evaluations merely as useful information, not a final verdict about them and their teaching.

No excuses

The participants explained that to use evaluation data to improve their teaching, they had to be willing to take the feedback rather than trying to explain it away, ignore it or blame it on the students, course or circumstances. This was a consequence of their formative, developmental approach to evaluations. Some of the respondents described the approach of 'no excuses' simply as seeing the feedback as 'valuable', something to be 'taken seriously', 'given due consideration' and so not to be 'ignored or written off'. As one participant put it, 'I'm right and 1300 students are wrong? I don't think so'.

To use the evaluations as formative data to improve their teaching, the participants focused on how they could use the data to improve, rather than paying attention to how they could explain the data away. For example, if my students say my class is boring, then I can use the feedback to improve if I take a formative approach and ask myself, 'How can I enable the students to see the class as exciting and engaging?' but not if I instead focus on reasons to ignore the feedback, 'Well, they just said that because it's a compulsory class, because they missed too many classes, and because they don't know what's good for them'. Nor can I improve if I focus on challenging the validity and reliability of the feedback, such as: 'The feedback just reflects the fact that hard topics get worse feedback, or it reflects the fact that students don't know the difference between good teaching and a good performance'.

When teachers took a formative approach, their attention was on how to use the data to inform ways of improving, rather than on finding excuses for their evaluation results. This did not mean the teachers could not find reasons to explain their results; it only meant that this was not an important consideration for them. Nor does the 'no excuses' approach imply that teachers think that the evaluation data are perfectly valid and reliable; it only implies that they think it can be used to inform improvement. Knowing why the evaluation results might not have been as good as you would like was only important if this explanation could be used to improve. For example, you might know that you had a tough time personally that year, or that it was a compulsory class that students struggled with, but this is only relevant if it suggested means for improvement.

Rather than explaining away student ratings or feedback, the teachers taking a formative approach used the evaluation results to judge the extent to which their students had 'got' their teaching, and thus what they might do to improve. If students give less than perfect ratings or negative feedback, this indicates that *something* is not working for them and so there is room for improvement. Thus, the teachers can use the evaluation results for improvement purposes even if what their students say is strictly inaccurate, or if they make poor judgements of teaching quality and what is needed to foster learning. As one participant put it, the point was to try to 'understand the student perspective so you can understand what they mean by their feedback and why they said it (rather than just writing it off as "it's just them')': the teachers 'read between the lines' to figure out a way to improve the learning for their students.

The excellent teachers discussed in Bain (2004) took a similar approach: their job was to reach all their students. So, if they get less than perfect evaluation ratings or negative student comments, this told them that they had failed to reach all their students, and they needed to do something different. For example, imagine students give a low-evaluation rating and make comments such as 'the teacher asks so many questions it seems like they don't have the answers', or 'the notes don't summarise the important points to remember for the exams'. If a teacher takes an excuse approach they would stop there: 'Oh well, my students don't understand or appreciate my attempts to foster independent thinking and that's why my results are as they are'. A teacher taking the 'no excuses' approach would take the ratings and comments as an indication that their teaching is not completely successful for their students, and so they would try new methods of helping their students to understand why the course is as it is, and to show them the value of their approach for fostering independent thinking. After they had tried these methods, they would evaluate again to see if things had improved.

Self-efficacy, confidence and ability to improve

The teacher-participants used evaluations to improve their teaching when they took the attitude that they were able to improve, rather than feeling helpless, the victims of factors over which they have no control ('It's because it's a compulsory course; high school doesn't give adequate preparation for the students; I'm not an exciting, funny lecturer'). When teachers adopt the improvement attitude, they thought they could improve their teaching, they could make a difference for student learning and they could improve their evaluations, rather than these all being unchangeable. This attitude is sometimes called self-efficacy (e.g. Bandura 1993).

Teachers are better able to take an attitude of self-efficacy if they know they have useful strategies and processes for making improvements. This is explored in more depth in our follow-up article on the processes and strategies that teachers employed to use evaluations to improve their teaching.

Some of the teachers in this study also indicated that confidence was crucial to self-efficacy about improving. If they were not confident about their teaching, they were unlikely to adopt the improvement attitude. In particular, they argued that they were only confident enough to take the improvement approach once they had several years of experience as a teacher. Only when they were confident that they were a good enough teacher could they make the improvement attitude their central concern.

This points to a complex relationship between the attitudes 'Am I good enough?' and 'How can I improve?' Perhaps, novice teachers have to first adopt the 'Am I good enough?' attitude before they can concentrate on 'How can I improve?' On the other hand, teachers who are unsure they are good enough would benefit most from taking an improvement approach. We will not attempt to untangle this knot here: further research is needed to investigate how novice teachers can and do develop the improvement attitude.

Student-centred approach

As well as a reflective, formative approach to the evaluation data, participants were able to use evaluation data to improve their teaching when they took a student-centred approach. They approached the evaluation data as a tool for improving student learning.

Their reflective, formative approach was focused on asking 'How well have my students learned?' rather than just 'How well have I taught?' The teachers saw the evaluation data not just as shining a light on themselves and what they have done, but as shining a light on their students: what benefits and blocks their learning? How well are they enabled and supported to learn? Have they learned what I want them to learn?

The teachers treated the evaluation data as a window on student learning, an indication of the extent to which students benefited from the course they taught, rather than as a judgement on flaws with themselves, their teaching or their students. They were then able to use this as formative information to help their students learn better. To illustrate, consider the example introduced earlier, when my students said that they found my lecture boring and irrelevant. If I take a student-centred approach to this evaluation feedback, I would not take this to be a judgement about myself, my teaching or even my students, but I would take it as indication that there is a barrier to their learning, and I ask: 'How can I change my teaching and my course so that they no longer find it boring?'

Commitment to student learning

This student-centred approach to evaluation data stems directly from a commitment to student learning. If you have such a commitment, then evaluation is an essential tool to enable you to find the best way to help students achieve their learning outcomes. This was similar to the student-centred approach identified by Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart (2007, 151), which led teachers to be interested in 'what was most and least useful for their [students'] learning'.

Participants in our study described the student-centred attitude as having respect for students and what they had to say. 'Respect for the student is essential: can't go in thinking "I'm the professor, I know best" or you will never question yourself, never improve on the basis of evaluations'. They acknowledged that they can learn from their students, and so they valued what students had to say in their evaluations, and they made sure they listened.

The participants sometimes put it more strongly than having respect for the students: they thought they had a *duty* to their students to improve their teaching. Their commitment to improving student learning was a responsibility to the students. They care for their students, and therefore are obliged to gather and use evaluation feedback to improve how they foster student learning:

- I owe it to them to constantly monitor what I do and improve it.
- This is part of the commitment we make as teachers. Improving student learning is one of our major values and we will… tweak lessons after every class.

Complex judgement about what will improve student learning

Although participants took a student-centred approach to using evaluation data, this did not mean they thought they had to do whatever the students suggested in their feedback. Instead, improvements were based on complex, reflective teacher judgements, where the feedback informed what the teacher would do, but did not directly determine it. The participants used the evaluation feedback to *judge* what changes would improve student learning. What students say they want and need must be considered, but it was still the teacher's judgement about how to improve, rather than mindlessly doing what they were told. When students suggested changes for teaching, the teachers did not simply decide to make the change or not, but instead engaged in a complex deliberative process to decide what they would actually do in response.

For example, one participant described a situation where their students asked for more videos and more breaks in class. In order to judge how to improve, this participant reflected on what would lead to good learning in this situation rather than wondering whether to simply give the students what they wanted. She judged that more videos and breaks would not improve learning, but neither would merely rejecting the request. So instead, the teacher explained to the students why she designed the course without videos and breaks, and explained how this would be useful for them. She explicitly explained that she wanted them to develop their attention span, and convinced them that having to pay attention in lectures could be a way of training their concentration. Consequently, students were less resistant to this method and the course went better. In this way, the teacher improved her teaching and student learning on the basis of a complex judgement about student feedback.

The complex approach described above might be contrasted with a more restricted student-centred approach which involves looking at evaluation feedback to find clear and direct instructions for change – suggestions to implement, or areas that must be improved – such as the request to cover less material in the lecture. This is the approach that seems to be taken by participants in both Stein et al. (2013) and Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart (2007). If teachers take this limited approach, then they will not make many changes based on evaluations, because evaluation feedback rarely includes clear messages about how to improve. As Stein et al. (2012) show, the limited approach to student evaluations also tends to be associated with making superficial changes: adding a slide to the PowerPoint, giving out different readings, etc. For more fundamental changes, the teacher has to use the evaluations as part of a deeper and more complex deliberation about their whole teaching approach.

Sometimes take this approach

The argument in this article is that teachers need to take an improvement attitude if they are to use evaluations to improve their teaching, but we are not claiming that teachers should always take an improvement approach. None of our participants took the improvement approach all the time. For example, many reported being initially

dismayed by their evaluation results and being unable to think about how they could improve. However, they later deliberately changed their perspective and took an improvement attitude so they could use the results to improve their teaching.

In different situations, teachers may require different approaches to their evaluations. For example, when considering promotion you would take a summative, teacher-centred approach. You use the evaluation data to show that you are a good enough teacher, and you would look for reasons to explain away less than great data. If I were applying for promotion, for example, I might argue that the evaluation results from teaching my large, compulsory course do not directly reflect the quality of my teaching or my course. But these mitigating factors are a distraction when I want to develop my teaching, and they can easily become an excuse for why I cannot improve. So when my aim is to develop my teaching I change to the improvement attitude and only ask myself: 'Given this data, what can I do to improve the learning for my students?'

Conclusion

The previous literature on approaches to evaluations concluded that, although most teachers have a positive attitude, they rarely use evaluations to improve their teaching. Our research identifies and elaborates an approach – the improvement approach – that teachers can take in order to use evaluations to improve their teaching.

We identified several facets to the improvement approach. When teachers in our study wanted to improve their teaching they took a reflective, formative, student-centred approach to their evaluation data, and they used this to make complex judgements about how they could improve student learning. This should be contrasted with an unreflective approach that blocks using evaluations for improvement, where teachers think they are good enough, and where they see the evaluation feedback as a judgement about them, and something to be excused rather than improved.

The improvement attitude can be summarised by the background questions a teacher addresses; the fundamental questions they consider during their complex decision-making about what will improve learning outcomes for their students:

- To what extent have my students learned?
- What has benefitted or blocked their learning?
- To what extent have I fostered their learning?
- How can I improve learning outcomes for students?
- How can I provide a better learning experience?
- How can I improve my teaching?
- How can I use evaluation feedback to help me answer these questions?
- What further feedback do I need?

These questions should be contrasted with the questions a teacher with a 'summative attitude' might be concerned with: Am I good-enough as a teacher? How well have I taught? How can I explain away any negative evaluation data?

The main limitation of our study is that we can make no claim that the improvement approach is representative or common. Nevertheless, the improvement approach we identify is still an important contribution to the literature, because it elaborates the attitude that post-secondary or tertiary teachers could adopt so they can use evaluations to improve their teaching.

This article presents only part of our findings from our larger study about how experienced teachers use student evaluations to improve their teaching. A second article will report on the processes and strategies teachers can use to put their attitudes into practice. We will identify some of the processes and strategies experienced teachers use for interpreting evaluation feedback, for making judgements about how to improve and for judging how to implement these improvements.

Further research needs to investigate how we can encourage teachers to take an improvement approach to their evaluations data. This would need to link with other research on how to foster, develop or cultivate attitudes.

One focus for this future research might be on developing educational courses and resources that foster the improvement approach. For example, we need to design workshops that identify and outline the improvement approach as an important first step towards encouraging teachers to adopt this approach.

A second focus could be on refining the system of conducting, interpreting and using evaluations so that it provides support for teachers willing to use the data to improve their teaching. For example, as Stein et al.'s (2013) article suggests, a collaborative, reflective process of gathering, discussing and interpreting the evaluation data could foster the improvement approach. Perhaps, the best way to foster a reflective, formative attitude in teachers is to engage them in regular group reflection on improving teaching and learning.

A third related focus for future research might be institutional change and development, looking at how institutional practices, policies and incentives might encourage or discourage the improvement attitude. For example, in our institution, teachers must write a teaching self-evaluation document which includes a discussion of how they have improved their teaching: with some tweaking, this document could be useful for encouraging an improvement attitude.

Further research could also focus on assessing the effectiveness of the attitudes we identified. For example, we could assess the level of improvement in teaching when lecturers adopt the improvement attitude for a semester or a year (assuming we have solved the problem of how to design professional development that would encourage teachers to adopt this approach).

The improvement approach to using evaluations provides valuable guidance for how to improve teaching. We argue that if teachers adopt this approach, they will be better able to use their evaluations to improve their teaching. By fostering this approach, institutions, academic developers and staff working in evaluation centres will be able to encourage teachers to use the evaluation data they already collect.

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