

Guide to qualitative methods of evaluating teaching

27 November 2018

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Introduction: the purpose and functions of qualitative evaluation methods

This guide describes a number of qualitative methods of teaching evaluation which can be used in addition to standard digital evaluations to evaluate teaching. The guide is in line with and is an appendix to the Teaching Evaluations chapter of VU Amsterdam's Manual for Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning. The Manual provides the policy framework for this guide and gives the necessary points of departure for how evaluation results should be used. This guide is therefore not a policy document and is not prescriptive in nature; quite the contrary, it seeks to steer lecturers, students, programme committees, directors of studies and others involved in teaching towards a meaningful use of qualitative methods of evaluation.

The aim of all qualitative methods of evaluation is to improve teaching standards. The methods discussed offer degree programmes and individual teachers the opportunity to receive feedback on exactly those aspects of teaching that the programme or teacher wants to know more about. For example, the methods make it possible to ask highly relevant questions geared towards specific educational components (e.g. the effect of a new teaching method or form of assessment), to ask more far-reaching questions about the background to experiences and positions, and to catalogue opportunities for improvement in collaboration with the discussion partners. In addition, the methods can often be used *during* the teaching period: the results can be used immediately to make adjustments to the course where necessary, to provide extra support with regard to elements that have turned out to pose difficulties, or to explain more effectively why a particular approach has been taken. A positive side effect of regular discussions and peer review is that they can contribute to the cohesion, the learning and working climate, and the culture of quality within the degree programme.

The methods relate to different levels (e.g. course or programme level), different moments (during or after teaching) and different partners in the educational process (students, teachers, programme

committees, alumni). The table below provides an overview of this, including an indication of the desired feedback for each of the evaluation methods mentioned. Each of the methods will then be discussed in greater detail.

	Method of evaluation	Level	Timing of evaluation	Those involved	Feedback
1	Quick summary of strengths and suggestions	Lecture / course	During the course (within one or more lectures)	Teachers, students	Discussion with students or feedback to students using the feedback form
2	Panel discussion	Course / larger unit of study (semester, year, curriculum)	During or after a course / after a semester, year or the entire curriculum	(Student) member of the programme committee, students (possibly: alumni)	Passing on findings to all relevant teachers and students
3	Peer observation and feedback	Lecture / course	During the course (within one or more lectures)	Lecturers	Feedback to teacher through feedback form or assessment tool
4	Peer review	Lecture / course	Any time	Lecturers	Peer review is confidential: the lecturer in question is free to determine whether and how he/she shares the findings

1. Quick summary of strengths and suggestions

There are several ways to collect feedback from students about the teaching they receive halfway through or at the end of a course. Use can be made of digital resources such as [Mentimeter](#), [Kahoot](#) and [GoSoapBox](#), the Post-it Method or paper forms.

By way of illustration:

- [Mentimeter example](#)

Various Law programmes evaluate teaching using Mentimeter, an online tool. This tool gives teachers the opportunity to ask students about specific aspects of a course or lecture.

Students get access to the teacher's questions by entering a code at www.menti.com. The lecturer can then present the questions they have formulated to the students – both closed and open questions are possible. The students respond using their mobile phone: the anonymised answers are immediately visible on screen and the teacher can give a reaction to the student's findings, either directly or at a later date. The results can also be printed out.

- Example of Post-it Method

A quick way of collecting feedback from students, halfway through or at the end of a course, is the Post-it Method. Students answer two questions on Post-its with two different colours: *What should stay the same about this course?* and *What could be better?* An advantage of this method is that everyone has the same opportunity to give input, and the quieter students are also included. This method also enables you to receive valuable input on other topics, for example by asking students to identify the elements they find most difficult and the areas they would like more explanation on or practice in.

A lecturer from the Faculty of Science interprets the outcome of a Post-it inventory with her students, by clustering them in a group process. This works well with groups of up to about 25 students, and can contribute to the sense of ownership among the students and enhance their capacity to reflect.

A teacher of Human Movement Sciences asks his students to think in his absence about different aspects of their educational experience, in particular course content, teacher performance and class performance. The students then present the findings on the board and discuss them with the lecturers. Finally, a photo of the Post-its is taken: a simple and effective way of reporting.

- Example of printed forms

Utrecht University presents various tools on [its website](#) (in Dutch) that enable teachers to ask for feedback from their students in a relatively accessible way. The website often makes student feedback formats available. A good English-language source for printed forms is [this page](#) from the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University.

2. Panel discussions

In various degree programmes, panel discussions are held during and/or after the teaching periods, for example with a fixed group of year representatives or with (student) members of the programme committee.

An evaluation at course level might include questions such as: which parts of the course are instructive and which are less so? Why is that? Which components do the students struggle with and what are the reasons for this? What can teachers do to make the subject more instructive and/or interesting? How does this course fit in with the rest of the programme? What can the teachers do to make the cohesion with the rest of the course clearer or stronger? How do students experience specific parts of the course (especially newly developed components)? How can these components be further strengthened?

Qualitative evaluation using panel discussions can also be an immensely valuable resource for larger educational units – e.g. a year, a learning pathway or the curriculum as a whole. Students and possibly also alumni and other parties involved can be consulted separately. Sample questions for the different groups can be found in the [Curriculum questionnaire](#).

Another option is mixed panels, in which the various partners in the educational process think collectively about objectives and vision, pathways, gaps and coherence in the programme. In

order to generate and cluster as much input as possible, other forms of discussion can also be used, such as the [World Café](#).

Possible questions for an evaluation at programme level are: how is the cohesion within the programme experienced? What structure do students, teachers and alumni identify? Which programme components do you experience as obstacles, and why? Which components do students, lecturers and alumni find particularly instructive or relevant? Is there sufficient clarity on what is expected of students in the various phases of the programme? How does the programme follow on from various preparatory programmes? How are students helped to make the transition to higher education and how could that be improved? How does the programme prepare students for possible follow-up programmes or to participate in society and the job market?

Keep the following in mind:

1. *Set the objectives of the discussion in advance.* The purpose of the discussion can be general (e.g. obtaining a picture of the programme's strengths, stumbling blocks and points for improvement) or specific (how effective are the new assignments)? It is important to set the objectives clearly in advance and communicate them to the participants before the discussion.
2. *Provide a discussion guide.* Make a list of topics or questions (open or otherwise) that you want to raise in any case.
3. *Choose a neutral moderator.* Students are often more open if the discussion is moderated by member of the programme committee, who may be a fellow student, than they would be with the course coordinator or the Director of Studies. If necessary, the coordinator can be present for part of the discussion.
4. *Treat participants in the discussion as partners in improving the programme* Ensure that the participants don't simply complain: ask follow-up questions about the causes of any complaints or problems, invite the students to come up with suggestions and keep in mind that the focus is not satisfaction in itself, but learning.
5. *Ask a participant to note strengths and suggestions.* It is difficult to lead a discussion and make good notes at the same time, so let someone else take the minutes.

By way of illustration:

On the Philosophy programme, panel discussions are organized by student members of the programme committee. These student members choose students for the panel and propose questions. The questions and the set-up are discussed at a meeting of the programme committee. During the panel discussion, at which no lecturers are present, a limited number of questions are discussed (e.g. which parts of the programme work well and which work less well?). Students on the programme committee, possibly in combination with a committee member who is a lecturer, discuss the results of the panel discussions with the programme coordinator(s). A concise report of the panel discussions is sent to the head of the department, the Director of Studies and the portfolio holder for teaching.

A combination of evaluation by questionnaire and by (panel) discussion takes place at a number of Science programmes, where the cohort representatives have an important role in evaluating teaching. Using a form, the cohort representatives ask the students of the relevant year about their

opinion of a course, after which they evaluate internally to reach a recommendation. A delegation of cohort representatives enters into a dialogue with the course coordinator(s), discussing the various visions and how the course can be improved, if necessary.

VU Amsterdam also has more informal channels for communicating with students about teaching. For example, the Faculty of Law organizes 'soda sessions' where lecturers enter into an informal discussion with students about teaching. Teachers decide which students they invite. At the Faculty of Social Sciences, degree programmes regularly organize pub quizzes, where the questions asked concern not only knowledge from the programme in question, but also the students' own educational experiences.

3. Peer observation and feedback

By attending one or more lectures, teaching staff can give valuable feedback on each other's lectures and courses. For a healthy follow-up discussion, it helps if the observer (in consultation with the colleague being observed) notes a few key points in advance, on this general [feedback form](#), for example. For specific points of focus during the observation, the University Teaching Qualification provides a useful [instrument](#). Utrecht University also has a [peer feedback form](#).

By way of illustration:

In a number of degree programmes at VU Amsterdam, all lecturers are expected to observe one class a year taught by a colleague. A timetable is drawn up for this purpose at the start of the academic year.

4. Peer review

In peer review, colleagues do not identify points for improvement or provide solutions, but they help a fellow teacher analyse a specific problem and explore possible solutions. One such problem might be: the students in my seminar are so passive, and I can't seem to get them motivated. Or: attendance at my second-year lectures is dwindling by the week. Or: students always score surprisingly low on part x of the test.

There are several methods to help ensure that peer review participants explore the problem systematically and do not to immediately fall back on their own solutions ('What I always do...'). One of the best known and most basic is the incident method, which can be found in this [document](#) (in Dutch). See also [this page](#) of The Society for Education and Training.

Appendix 1: questionnaire for (interim) panel discussion

1. What is your overall impression of the course? What are the strengths? Are there specific aspects or problems that you would like to address?
2. What is the most important thing you have learnt on this course (to date)?
3. How does this course fit in with the structure and content of your programme?
4. Does the level of the course match your existing knowledge and educational background? How is the diversity of backgrounds among the students addressed? How might this be done even more effectively?
5. What do you think of the provision of information on this course? Do the syllabus and the Canvas environment provide enough clarity about content, course material, assignments, assessment? What do you think of the practical organization of the course?
6. What do you think of the structure of this course? And what about the structure of the individual classes?
7. What do you think of the material used (such as books or articles) on this course (difficult/easy, relevance clear, adequately addressed in class?)?
8. What do you think of the self-study assignments (are they relevant to the learning objectives; do they correspond well with class activities and content; are they spread sufficiently over the period?)?
9. What qualities do you appreciate in the teacher? What could the teacher do more of to help you learn?
10. Can you think of suggestions for improving the course as a whole?

Appendix 2: In-class evaluation form

1. What is your general impression of the course? Are there particular aspects/problems you'd like to address?
2. Is it clear to you how this course fits in with the structure and content of the study programme?
3. Did your background equip you for the level of this course? And was the diversity of students' backgrounds beneficial to the classes?
4. What about the information provided? Are the syllabus and the Blackboard page clear enough about the content, course material and assignments?
5. What is your impression of the structure of this course? And what about the structure of the individual classes?
6. What have you learned in this course?
7. What are your impressions of the material? (too much, too hard/easy? was the material dealt with productively in class?)
8. What about the assignments? (evenly spread over the semester? well connected to the material and lectures?)
9. Were the practicalities of the course (seminar groups, auditoriums, canvas access) well-organized and communicated clearly?
10. Which practices/qualities of the lecturer did you appreciate? What could be improved?
11. Can you come up with suggestions for improvements for the course as a whole?

Appendix 3: Curriculum questionnaire

For students/graduating students

1. What do you think about the connection between this programme and your prior education?
2. How are you experiencing the transition to higher education (or: to the Master's programme) and the level of support you receive from the programme?
3. What do you think of the design and structure of the programme?
4. What do you think of the programme's various teaching methods?
5. What do you think of the proportion of the number of contact hours to the amount of self-study?
6. What do you think of the quality of the lecturers (expertise, teaching skills, organizational skills)?
7. Which programme components do you experience as obstacles, and why? Which components do you find particularly instructive or relevant?
8. What do you think of the amount of emphasis the programme places on academic skills such as writing papers and giving oral presentations?
9. What do you think of tests and other forms of assessment in the programme? And what do you think about the lecturers' feedback on your presentations, assignments and papers?
10. What do you think of the academic guidance in the programme (mentorship/tutoring, academic advisors)?
11. What do you think of the logistical organization (scheduling, information provision, lecture rooms, digital learning environment, registration for courses and examinations)?
12. What do you think of the information provided about careers and the link to professional practice (work placement, guest lectures)?

Additional questions for graduating students

13. What do you think of thesis supervision and assessment?
14. Can you think of suggestions for improving the programme as a whole?

For alumni

1. What do you think of programme content (breadth, depth, theory versus practice, level of difficulty)?
2. What do you think of the academic skills you developed while on the programme?
3. What do you think of your lecturers' understanding of professional practice and their links to the professional field?
4. What do you think about the connection between this programme and professional practice or your next degree programme?
5. What do you think of your programme as a basis for the further development of your knowledge and skills (in your next degree programme or in professional practice)?