The Formative Evaluation of Teaching in a Political Science Department

by

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Executive Summary.

Students have often expressed dissatisfaction with the summative evaluation process used at the end of each term. They are not convinced that their evaluations are taken seriously and that their comments lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching in future classes.

It has been suggested that a formative evaluation conducted early in the term would provide an opportunity for students to provide instructors with feedback on the quality of instruction in a course and to suggest how improvements could be made to enhance their achievement of the learning outcomes for the course.

This study examined the use of formative evaluations in a range of courses in the Department of Political Science. The courses ranged from first to fourth year and from large enrollment lecture courses to small enrollment seminars.

Students were asked to complete a formative evaluation instrument and the data gathered was shared with the instructors. The instructors could then respond to the students and, where appropriate, modify their teaching.

Towards the end of the course, focus groups were conducted with a range of students and a range of instructors to elicit their opinions on formative evaluation.

Students in their focus group were unanimous in their preference for formative over summative evaluation of teaching. Instructors were more equivocal but found formative evaluation of their teaching useful.

The major concern for students was over maintaining their anonymity when providing feedback. They also saw formative evaluation as an accountability issue for the institution. Faculty found that their students responded positively to the formative evaluation process which was seen as contributing to a good learning environment.

The Diagnostic Elements of Teaching instrument used by the University Teaching Services Peer Consultation program proved to be a suitable instrument for use in a formative evaluation process.
Introduction.

Summative evaluations of teaching are obtained at the end of each course. Results are not available to instructors until after grades are submitted. From a student’s perspective they never receive any direct feedback or benefit from giving an opinion on the instruction in their courses. Formative evaluation provides an alternative mechanism for students to provide feedback for instructors on the quality of their learning experience. When students provide opinions early in a session there is an opportunity for instructors to adjust their teaching to enhance the students’ learning. Subsequent administration of summative evaluations will likely produce more positive scores as a result of instructors responses to formative evaluations (1).

This pilot project explored how the administration of formative evaluations early in a term in one Department can enhance instruction in those courses volunteered for inclusion for the project. Opinions were sought from students and instructors on the success of the formative evaluation process. Generalizations are made as to how a formative evaluation process could be applied across campus. Recommendations are made on the types of faculty development support required to ensure that instructors have the opportunity to respond optimally to the formative feedback they receive.

The GFC Policy Manual on Teaching Evaluation (Section 111.3) (2) notes that evaluation serves two purposes: a. **Summative** - providing a basis for rewarding excellence, as well as the basis for withholding reward. b. **Formative** - providing helpful feedback to teachers by identifying teaching strengths and weaknesses and, in so doing, giving guidance for the improvement or refinement of teaching skills.

Current GFC policy requires that the instruction in all subjects in each term be evaluated using the Universal Student Rating of Instruction (USRI) toward the end of each term. Feedback is not available to instructors until after course grades are submitted. Over an instructor’s career, the repeated use of the USRI gives a formative evaluation of how an instructor’s teaching has evolved in a specific course. From the perspective of the students completing the USRI in a specific course, the evaluation is summative and gives the students no indication that their input has been acknowledged or acted upon.

To enhance the involvement of students and instructors in the improvement of teaching and learning in specific courses, this study complemented the summative use of the USRI with formative evaluation conducted at an earlier point in the term. The early feedback received by the instructors could then be used as the basis for mid to late term adjustments in teaching to enhance the learning environment of the responding cohorts of students. Formative evaluation is seen as a win-win strategy for students and instructors as the early adjustments in teaching will likely lead to higher USRI scores as a result of the enhanced learning environment provided. Students will see realized a direct and clear connection between their evaluation of teaching and their experiences in the classroom. The information also provides a basis for guiding instructors toward appropriate professional development activities.

The anticipated general outcomes of the project were that:

- Students would be more motivated to complete the formative evaluation process as there would be seen to be a direct benefit from their providing rich feedback for their instructors.
- Quality feedback early in a term would give instructors the opportunity of optimising the learning environment for the responding cohort of learners.
- Faculty development opportunities would be identified from the type of feedback received.
Methodology.

The formative evaluation instrument chosen was ‘Diagnostic Evaluation of Teaching’, developed by Dr. Tom Nelson at the U of A with funding from Alberta Education (now Alberta Learning). It has been used extensively by the University Teaching Services Peer Consultation program under the name ‘Diagnostic Elements of Teaching’ (DET) (Appendix 3). The instrument is available in a machine scoreable version and as an online WebCT survey. The instrument has proven to be very reliable in providing information for use as the basis for enhancing teaching.

Instructors were invited to opt into the study. In doing so they agreed to make class time available for the administration of the DET at a point in the term where the students could provide an objective judgment on the progress of the course. In the absence of the instructors, the data were collected by a person not involved with the courses to maintain the anonymity of the students providing the data. Students were also given a consent form along with the DET instrument. The consent form outlined the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation (Appendix 2).

Following the scoring of the DETs, the aggregate data was returned to the instructor arranged in a template to assist in the interpretation of the results (Appendix 4). The template grouped responses to the 35 items on the DET into seven categories relating to content, presentation, interaction with students, class management, information overload and related factors and an overall evaluation. In an accompanying letter, instructors were invited to discuss the results of their DETs with their peers in the project, the applicants or other volunteers (Appendix 5). They could then devise response strategies that they may or may not choose to discuss with their classes.

Toward the end of the term, a group of students enrolled in the courses surveyed were invited to participate in a semi-structured focus group to discuss their thoughts about the formative evaluation process. After the end of term, a focus group was conducted with participating instructors to elicit their thoughts on the process.

Focus group sessions were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed with the use of ATLAS-ti qualitative data analysis software. This allowed issues and themes to be identified in the transcribed focus group conversations.

The DET data collected is owned by the participating instructors. It was only available to the investigators for use in this research and in scholarly communications in aggregate form that would not allow the identity of the participants to become known. Participating instructors were told that they may choose to share the data collected with their Chairs for Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) purposes but there was no implicit or explicit requirement to do so.

The qualitative data from the focus groups form the basis for the evaluation of the project. Did the participating students and instructors think that the quality of teaching and learning had improved through their courses? To what extent would they attribute that improvement to the formative evaluation process? What were their personal thoughts on the process?

The instructors were also asked to identify their professional development needs as a result of their experience in the project. The investigators also reflected on the focus group data, the professional development needs of instructors, and the opportunities for expanding the use of formative evaluation to other Departments and Faculties.

The deliverables from the project include this overall project report which includes recommendations on how formative evaluation might be applied more generally in the
improvement of teaching and learning. Recommendations on meeting identified professional
development needs of instructors are also made. The project findings will be shared with the U
of A community through a web version of the final report and oral presentations offered
through UTS. The findings will also be shared in oral and written form with off campus
constituencies. A presentation on the study has already been made at the 2002 Annual General
Meeting of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) at McMaster
University.

Ethical approval for the project was obtained through the combined Faculties of Arts and
Science Ethics Review Committee (Appendix 1).
Results.

1. Focus Groups.

The ATLAS-ti software facilitated the extraction of themes and issues in the transcribed conversations. The transcriptions are include as appendices (Students – Appendix 7, Instructors – Appendix 8).

a. Student Data.

The following themes and issues were identified in the student focus group.

- **Prior Experience:**
The student focus group opened with the question: “Have you ever had experience with this formative method before, have any classes ever used it?”

Some had no experience, others had in full year and single term courses in Political Science, English, French and Earth and Atmospheric Science.

- **Student Reaction:**
The second question asked was: "What did you think of the formative evaluation process?"

One student responded with: “I think it’s valuable, definitely.” While others were more qualified in their support: “I think it kind of depends on the circumstances.” Where the qualification depended on the quality of the feedback received from the professor after the administration of the DET. Another student said: “It’s particularly a useful tool when you don’t necessarily feel comfortable about going to that prof and speaking about some of these problems.”

- **Accountability:**
Students saw formative evaluation as assisting with accountability for teaching. There were several dimensions to this. On one level, students were concerned that their instructor would take the DET data and make appropriate changes in their course delivery. "I was just thinking that if a professor chose not to do anything with it in terms of sharing information with the class, but there was a problem, I would be a little bit frustrated if we did that and everybody identified and problem and then nothing happened because it's the professor's choice. I don't know. I think that, maybe if the chair of the department could at least see them, to know that this particular class has a big problem with this, I think that would be helpful.”

On another level it involved the administration and their ability to gather data on teaching performance. One asked: “Is the professor the only person who sees the evaluation?” There was a concern that this might not be enough: “You can fill out as many forms as you want, but if only, literally, one person sees it?”

Students expressed a deep concern over how all teaching evaluation information was used by the institution. The investigators reviewed how the summative USRI evaluation data was used in annual Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) hearings. Students wanted reassurance that their comments were read and that the administrative evaluation was not based solely on numerical data from the evaluation instrument.

Students were particularly concerned over what they saw as the conflicting interests between teaching and research for their instructors. “I had one class last semester, to sit in it and realize, this professor has to teach a course but he really doesn't want to be here, he really
doesn't care if we learn it and I just really don't understand how the hiring process, or how the job description, or anything is set up, but I think that it's pretty obvious that some professors are not teachers. They're researchers. Even if it would be possible to say, 'This person, they're a brilliant economist, but it's really not fair to inflict them on students anymore. Let's just pay them to do research.'

One described how this conflict spilled over into one class. “From what I understand, correct me if I'm wrong, there's a lot of pressure for profs to be publishing articles and doing that sort of thing. Some of them you can tell, which ones would rather be ?. They're the ones, the first day of class, that say, 'Don't bother showing up to class. It's all in the textbook. Show up for the exam.' I'm going, 'Okay, why am I paying you?'”

Respondents wanted to know that there were consequences for poor evaluations. “I think if there was a series of bad evaluations or something, what I would actually like to know, are there professor workshops? Is it an ongoing series of workshops? Incorporate new teaching strategies - this is how some of the most successful professors at Chicago have done it. Bring them in, talk to the department, this is how we implement our things.” The issue of the professional development of faculty in their teaching role was the subject of considerable discussion. “Are there professor workshops? Is it an ongoing series of workshops?” The tone was that such workshops were seen as remedial. “Make it mandatory.” “Don’t make the really bad professors teach.” Faculty development was also encouraged in responding to the DET data: “I was going to say, a way of accountability would be requiring them either to meet with you (the investigators) or somebody or else to respond to it with some goals for change.”

The investigators explained the developmental nature of formative evaluation and how the data gathered would not automatically be shared by the instructor receiving the feedback. Students were concerned that there be some mechanism of recognizing where formative evaluation had been implemented. “I think it’s a good idea to incorporate a question on that year-end evaluation that says, 'Was there a response to the midterm evaluation?' If a prof gets a bad response on that midterm evaluation, and hasn’t changed anything by the end of the year, he’s got to be held accountable for that, to whatever degree each department deals with it, that’s a different thing.”

A second student went further. “I think, honestly, a related question to always go along with that, is, 'Did the professor change anything?’ A second question would be, 'Did they need to to?’ I have a couple of professors, I didn't want them to change anything. I perfectly loved the format and all the different ways that they're going about it and everything like this. But, 'Did they need to change?' I think, is a very applicable question to the one before, 'Did they change?’ Or, 'Did they change for the benefit?' I really think just in simple... for me, it’s job description. It's, 'What is your job?' Maybe part of the job is incorporating student evaluations at the midterm, into what they’re doing, formally acknowledging that they looked at it, and taking it back to the class. Maybe that’s something that actually has to be done.”

A third said: “I would just say, some sort of acknowledgement is important because otherwise it just gets filed away, ‘Oh, I'll look at it when I have time’. And yet, for the teachers that are keen and that are good teachers, they’re going to look at it and are going to change. The ones that think that they’re doing fine and don't really care what anybody thinks, they’re just going to file it.”

- Receiving Feedback from Instructors:
Respondents were particularly concerned about how feedback on the DET data was dealt with. They reported that instructor responses ranged from no comments to detailed discussion on why, for example, only 90% of the class agreed with an item. Students wanted the feedback
and one observed: “I really think that should be an important part of the evaluation process for them. If we’re going to do the evaluations, they should at least take the time and effort to not only go over it, but maybe go over it with us in class. Maybe there was an overwhelming consent or agreement on either a really good job or a really poor job on certain aspects. We really had no idea at all, whereas in the class where I did get the feedback, it was really helpful.” One student spoke of a “professor who took 15 minutes out of a 50 minute class to actually go through it, I just felt better that she actually cared.” There was some concern about the feedback being used appropriately as in: “I know that, traditionally, university professors sit up there and talk, but we like to mix it up a bit.”

There were suggestions on how feedback could be solicited and one suggestion was to involve course teaching assistants (TAs) to provide verbal feedback from parts of a larger class.

There was some concern with how instructors responded to feedback, one instructor was described as making changes in a class after receiving the DET results and then in the second class “it was back to the same old thing, but I was impressed with the change. I don’t know, maybe it’s just the prof; he’s set in his ways and that’s understandable.”

• **Student Anonymity:**
Concerns about how feedback on the DET was received by the instructor were closely tied to concerns about the anonymity of the process to ensure the security of students. For example: “I think anonymity is important and I expect that many of my professors could recognize my handwriting or my style of writing.” One student said: “I don’t like the idea of the professors talking about their results in class, after. If a professor comes in and says they didn’t get a very good response on this question, the people that obviously have a problem with it may not be willing to speak out in class. That sort of singles them out, you know.” Concerns were summarized by the opinion “I don’t see how that’s going to be effective. I wouldn’t speak up in class and say, ‘I have this problem.’ I didn’t like that.” Many preferred that an in-class discussion on the DET results not be held. “If you can go beyond just your simple ‘I agree or disagree’, and respond in written form on the back with maybe some constructive criticism, then I feel that would be enough.” There was less concern if a post-DET discussion was lead by a course TA rather than the instructor, even if the instructor were the TA’s supervisor.

Student concerns over anonymity increased as class size decreased.

• **The DET Instrument:**
Respondents had many comments about the DET instrument itself. “The actual questions, the ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’, where they were quite vague. They were just kind of out there.” “Not even having a range of numbers to do (a five point Likert scale), like the end of course ones (USRI), I don’t think that you get as good an idea.” Students thought that more explicit instructions needed to be given about writing comments on the back of the survey instrument. That was preferred to post-test in-class discussions.

• **Suggested Improvements:**
Students were invited to suggest improvements to the formative evaluation process and instrument. Ideas included: “more written responses”, “instead of doing it at Christmas, do it late October (in a full year course)”, “encouraging the prof to take some time to go over it”, questions on the “volume of required reading”, “questions about how you’re managing the class (in relation to required pre-class reading)”, “questions about the text”. Students also wanted more specific reading assignments and specific learning objectives for each of their classes.
In relation to the timing of the formative evaluation a typical opinion was: "Three weeks at the most. Yes, by midterm you're going to know for sure and you're going to know what changes need to be made."

There was some skepticism about formative evaluation and some hope: "I'm not sure how you make profs willing to give these evaluations. They've got to want to and even if they do give them, it doesn't mean they're going to look at them. I think the only, as far as students themselves go, there's not too much you can, maybe as a class you can ask." The same student noted that in one of his classes: "He (the instructor) has assigned at the beginning of the class, two student reps for students to express their opinions through. I think that's a good idea." Another student in the same class said: "This is the class where he changed for a day and then he went back, but we can talk to that person. The people who volunteered for student reps are the type of people who speak up in class and say, 'We think this is bad', and have done so numerous times."

- **Summative versus Formative Evaluation:**

When discussing the USRI summative evaluation results that are posted on a university website, one respondent noted that: "you can't read into them very much."

On the summative USRI, one person said: "I've never seen a professor get really bad marks, where sometimes I thought, 'What were we complaining about all year?' I think part of it is, because I did one today where I was just like, 'Oh, let's get out of here' and I didn't care." Another noted: "The class I had last year, we had major problems with the prof. I gave her a bad evaluation. When I went to look at it, just to see, was I on target. There were two people who gave her 'strongly disagree' on everything and I know who the other person was because they were sitting beside me. I couldn't believe that people hadn't.., I know that people had a problem with the class so they didn't do it. I didn't think it was because, toward the end of the year, everybody loved her. I think it was because we were lazy and we wanted to get out of there. We didn't care because we knew we weren't going to take a class from her again, so why bother. I think that this is so important, because I would put way more effort into that midterm evaluation, to make sure that I told them exactly what I thought."

There was a degree of cynicism about the validity of the posted data from the summative evaluations from previous offerings of the courses. "I also think they're better because you hit evaluations in the middle of the year, you're going to get most of the class there. Looking at those evaluations on that website, gives you the number of students in the class and the number that wrote the evaluation and it's low."

One noted: "I think that would be a very valuable question to add onto the year-end exam, if you are going to implement these midterm evaluations. That would almost be the driving point of the entire evaluation, is, 'At the end of the year, was there any difference?' Even when we're reading in the Gateway (the student newspaper), when they were talking about these midterm evaluations, 'Do you feel that evaluations make any difference', and the overwhelming answer was 'No'. I have to say I put way more effort into doing the midterm evaluation. I spent way more time thinking about what to say than the year-end because, I mean, it's a bad time of year anyway."

The general preference for formative evaluation was captured by: "I think the midterm evaluations are a lot better. When I write that evaluation, I want to do it for my benefit. It sounds selfish, but the next class that that prof teaches, the same class, I don't care what they do."
When the group were asked if they would trade the end of the term USRI mandatory summative evaluation for an early-in-the-term formative instrument like the DET, the group immediately and unanimously said they would.

b. Faculty Data.

The following themes and issues were identified in the instructor focus group.

- **Prior Experience:**
The faculty focus group opened with the question: “Have you ever had experience with this formative method before, have any classes ever used it?”

None of the group had any prior experience with formative evaluation.

- **Faculty Reaction:**
As a follow up, participants were asked: “What did you think of the process – the submitting of the midterm evaluation form to the students, its rapid turnaround and the content being given back to you in the format it came back?”

One respondent liked the ‘forced choice’ aspect of the instrument’s questions: “I liked forcing them to decide whether they agree or disagree with something, as opposed to this sort of mealy-mouthed 9 to 5 point scale, about where are you on that. They either agree with what you’re doing, or they disagree and I liked that aspect of it.” For another, a positive aspect was that “at least it told me what I was doing right. That was useful. Those were things that I no longer had to really worry about.”

An instructor found it “especially useful in a larger class,” while another said: “I didn’t get a favourable response from my students. They were more indifferent to it, the ones who commented on it. It may be though, because it was a 400 level course, that I chose to use it in there. There were 50 students in the course, and we meet weekly, have seminars. So, there’s a fair amount of interaction as we go along. That may have been why they seemed to be less enthusiastic, shall we say, about the process.”

One conclusion was that: “Anything that makes teaching (be) seen as more important at the university, I’m in favour of. This seems to have potential for doing that.” One person agreed observing: “It was useful because it sends the right message to the students about teaching. I thought it was useful as well for that reason. You could go back to them and talk to them about the questionnaire so you get additional feedback in that respect. The idea of it being midterm as opposed to the end of the class, I think is good, because again, it goes to the point of, is this something you can use in that particular class, as opposed to either using it or not at the end of the year.” Although he added that the process created a “perception that we cared about it.” (In the student group, accountability was a major issue. These are some of the few faculty comments relating to that.)

- **Responding to Feedback from Students:**
The faculty reported that they dealt with the issue of providing feedback to the students on their responses to the DET data in various ways.

“I found talking to them about it after useful, in terms of, if I identified certain percentages and said, ‘Okay, you feel this way about the use of technology in the classroom. Well, what do you think about it? Elaborate on that. What do you mean when ‘x’ percentage say this? What do you have in mind? Where’s it being used, either well or badly in other classes?’”
"What I found, in terms of talking to them about this, the outcome of the questionnaire, I felt really awkward about doing what X did, except with the technology. We had a conversation about that. But, for those who disagreed that classes are stimulating, I'm not going to put them on the spot in this large class and say, 'Okay, why not?' I'm not going to ask my students why they didn't find the classes stimulating. I did invite them all to tell me what they thought I could do better, and I never received any responses."

"I never made another reference to it in class."

"I took about two weeks because I didn't know what to say to them. I didn't know whether I was comfortable asking them questions. I really struggled. I think I e-mailed someone and, 'What do I do with this? What do I say to them?'" She added: "So, I finally went in and I was honest. I said, 'I got this score on this and this score on that. I would welcome anything you have to say.'"

There was considerable discussion on how to provide feedback relating to specific items that were highlighted in the DET data. One class had focused on the promptness with which assignments were marked and returned. The instructor said: "I put on my outline how quickly they can expect to get things back. That seems to satisfy them."

Another class was concerned about knowing what material was important and the instructor said: "'Look, I know you don’t know what all is important, but that’s the whole idea. That’s why you’ve got to take note and that’s what you’re going to have to figure out.' But, at least it gave me the chance to say that."

A respondent voiced a concern about how resistance could build up in the instructors to participation in the formative evaluation process: "I wonder what would happen if, say this were administered and you got a really ghastly evaluation; there were serious things wrong. Having conducted the midterm evaluation, whether the students would have different expectations for the second part of the class and if those weren’t met, even if the instructor explained, 'I'm doing this because. and I'm sorry about this, but blah, blah, blah...', so if their expectations weren’t met, what kind of effect this would have. I'm not explaining this very well, but whether this would create a sense among them that, if there are problems, that they would and could be fixed. Now, some instructors may have a teaching style such that some of the problems students identified could not or would not be fixed. That may be so problematic for those instructors they would decide, ‘No, I’m not going to do this because every year I get the same kinds of responses and look where it leads me. Students are even harder on me at the end.’"

**Student Anonymity:**

In one class, one student had reacted in a particularly negative way to the formative evaluation being administered. The instructor reported that she: "had one student come up to me in a rage afterwards. It might even be one who wrote a long diatribe saying this was so unconscionable. He must have got the wrong impression about the privacy or something. He was absolutely in a rage that we would find this out before the end of the year." And "that I could take retaliation on them, or something like that."

"I did tell him he didn't need to worry and then he flew off the handle, so maybe he would’ve been just been calm about it before, but he was flushed." Another participant in the focus group pointed out: "He didn’t have to do it. They were told they, I told them, ‘You don’t have to fill this out. This is absolutely optional.’"

The first person then noted: “No, I think it was the whole idea of it. I don't think he was worried I would retaliate on him. He thought the whole idea of this was unconscionable because, 'You
never know', he said. 'There were some professors who would just turn on the class after they got one of these back,' or something to that effect."

That exchange led one participant to ask the investigators: "I was just wondering, did you get any of that kind of response, that the students are concerned that the prof might come in and just be a hardass afterwards or start giving harder grades or easier grades or something like that? Did the students, in your groups with them, did they have a worry that this could impact the second half of the class in a bad way?"

- **The DET Instrument:**
  The instructors focused on the administration of the instrument rather than on the instrument itself. One said: "I appreciated the fact that I was given some discretion in terms of the timing of administration. That was good. I found that it was relatively quick, painless." Another said: "I thought, in terms of how it was administered and the quickness of the response and everything was quite commendable, in terms of giving me the sort of feedback you wanted soon, rather than sitting and waiting and giving the opportunity to integrate some of that into the class."

A student concern was reported over the timing of DET administration: "The administration of it was very well done, but my students didn't think it was really worth it. Part of that, because it's so late, it's too late anyway - they couldn't drop the course if this crystallized their idea of what they didn't like about it. It was way too late for that." This comment concerned a full year course and the instructor added: "It wouldn't have been very helpful in mid-October, in terms of the grading, because they wouldn't have received anything back. So, early January works for me. I think they need to do it after the midterm, which is December, so that's when I would do it." A faculty member teaching another full year course commented: "I think perhaps, yes, January, when they'd already seen their midterm mark, but mid-October, in my case, would be not good for a completely different reason and that is, we're still on the first book. So, they don't have an idea yet of what I'm doing in the course."

A concern was expressed about the time available for completion of the instrument: "they probably needed more than ten minutes. We did this ten minutes at the end of class and obviously, it wasn't enough time for it."

There was a discussion of administering the survey on-line as opposed to in-class. Concerns were expressed around the participation rate between those options and the fact that, on-line, the responses would not all be gathered at the same time.

- **Interpretation of Data:**
  Faculty were concerned about the interpretation of the data generated from the survey. What should be the balance between lecturing and posing questions to students? In responding to questions on these topics, what were students really saying? "That point goes to, we can interpret, we all interpret these things differently. Some percentages I might get on something, I might like because of what I want to do in the group, and some, 'My God. This is not going the way I wanted at all.'"

In responding to the data: "I don't think we should be catering to trying to get 100% because we do different things in our classes."

The layout of the report from the survey was said by one instructor to be "great."

At one point in the discussion, one of the investigators noted: "I think it's important to state the purpose of this instrument wasn't to try and radically change your teaching behaviours. What it
was trying to do, was allow you to fine tune what it is that you do with that particular cohort of students. The cohort will change every term you teach the course. You know that from your own experience. So, this isn’t deep in the sense of trying to get you to undergo radical change. It’s trying to match what works with the students with what you care to do.”

In recognition of that, one suggestion was: “Then could it be said, when it’s administered, that these are not the same kinds of questions, necessarily, or the same questions as the survey that will be asked in the final evaluation? That the purpose of these questions is to, perhaps, help the rest of the class, as opposed to being the final evaluation of the teacher. That might be better for everyone to be clear on.”

• **Outcomes:**
Instructors were asked if: “the process made any difference in the chemistry of the class. Whether it loosened the class or made people more responsive or they had more sense of...? Anything like that?”

One person said: “Not in my case,” another “Not in mine either, but I think it was because it was conducted in February, and because I see them in seminar groups and that’s a more informal setting where we get to laugh and chat and stuff like that. So, they were all pretty comfortable with me, and each other, by that point.”

For one course the instructor said: “They should know what they can expect from you and, although I do believe they appreciate the consultation that goes on, I don’t think that it can really change dynamics in the room much.”

On a more personal level a respondent thought: “at least it told me what I was doing right. That was useful. Those were things that I no longer had to really worry about.” A colleague thought: “I wasn’t that happy with it. The things that it tested aren’t necessarily the things that I think are the most important in class.” As a bottom line one reflected: “It’s just in terms of whether it can have no effect on a class, I think it can, but in terms of whether it helped me, whether it necessarily gets the most important things about teaching out, I’m not so sure.”

There was a general agreement that the data from the item: ‘The physical space is conducive to learning’, should be submitted to the University.

• **Student Appreciation:**
Several participants mentioned the reactions of the students to the formative evaluation process.

“I found that the students appreciated it. I asked them the day after, whether they appreciated having such a thing. They said, indeed they did. It gave them the opportunity to provide their views as to how things might be going along.”

“I thought it was a good exercise and I think the students appreciated the opportunity. It gave the impression we cared. I think they liked that.”

“They had some problems with it but they were happy to have it conducted. They really want to give that kind of assessment, especially during a full year course.”

• **Pedagogy:**
The focus group with instructors raised issues that might be best grouped under the heading of pedagogy. There was extended discussion on the relationship between lecturing, discussion and
note taking. “Yes, you don’t want them taking down the response of every student who’s
discussing something. That would actually intimidate them from talking, if the students are
writing down all that kind of stuff, too. But, the question is whether it’s appropriate, I guess,
and not just...”

The following could be considered a response to student concerns about stated learning
outcomes in a course: "The question upon which the responses were the least to my
satisfaction, as it were, was the one about not telling them what is important and not
important. I’m not going to tell you what is important and what isn’t. It’s all important. But it
gave me a chance to tell them, ‘I feel your pain, but...’ So, it gave me a chance to explain,
‘Look, I know you don’t know what all is important, but that’s the whole idea. That’s why
you've got to take note and that’s what you’re going to have to figure out.’ But, at least it gave
me the chance to say that.”

• Suggested Improvements:
Changes were suggested in a variety of areas. There was a suggestion that the survey should
be administered at “the beginning of the class”, because if it is done at the end “the students
are in a rush to leave. They know that nothing’s going to happen after this, so they have a
tendency to complete the form in a perfunctory way.”

One instructor said: “Another bottom line was, you want it administered after the first exam.
That was the idea, which made sense, of course.”

Participants wanted to see more open ended responses encouraged. One asked: "is it possible
for the mechanics of like, getting this through the computer, to have an ‘if not, why not’ and
then have a blank line under each question?” An alternative was: “structure responses, like,
auxiliary questions, ‘Is the lecture stimulating?’ Well, ‘What would make them more
stimulating? Current events? Guest lecturers? Other material?’ They might have three or four
that you determine might be constructive to get some feedback on, in terms of what they want,
“going too fast, going too slow, more examples’, whatever.”

There was a general sense that the instrument was oriented too strongly toward a lecture
presentation. Many of the courses surveyed offered seminars. “There’s nothing on here about
seminars and that would be useful too, as an add-on. ‘Do you find seminars useful? Do you
attend seminars?’” Another person volunteered: “In the case of my course this year, it would
have been specific questions directed towards the seminars and the way they were conducted.”
A third said: “I would ask them if they find the seminars valuable, seminar material, what they
think of the TA’s because there’s no feedback here on the seminars.”

There was discussion on the survey item: ‘I feel I have to write down everything the instructor
says’. One instructor said: “Well, some students told me that they didn’t want to disagree with
that, because that would be perceived as negative, but they don’t feel they have to write down
everything I say, so they felt compelled to. But, they didn’t know how I’d interpret it, so there
was some consternation about that one.” This was also addressed by another person: “‘I felt I
had to write down everything the instructor said', came back as a criticism if they answered
‘yes'. I’m sorry, write your lectures so they have to. That's a stupid question, if we're getting
into the details
of this. Or, at least, presented that way, it's a stupid question. If you write your lectures well,
then they should be trying to take every word down. If you’re wasting all their time in class
and they only need to put down every tenth sentence you say, then you don’t. But, when we
got it as feedback afterwards, this was one of those things, ‘you might help them if you let
them know they only have to take ten percent or every fifth word or whatever, as though that's
the goal to aim at. I’m still working the other way. I’m still working that every word may make
a difference. I’m still working to make my lectures more structured, more perfect and not
easier and only every tenth sentence or when I say, ‘Now, write this down.’”

One respondent thought it important to ask on a formative or summative evaluation: "I would
think midterm might be better, but I think all students should be asked whether they feel
restrained in class because of not being politically correct enough.

It was suggested that the quality of open ended responses would be enhanced if the
administrator of the survey would: “stress that they can say whatever they want, please take
the time to do so. It will only benefit them if they explain their answers, totally anonymous,
but any feedback they can give will be really useful.” That was expanded to include the idea
that: “I would actually announce a week before it’s happening that I would like them to think
about what kinds of things could be done, to take it very seriously.”

Several wanted to see a copy of the instrument to see how questions were laid out and
ordered.

- Summative versus Formative Evaluation:
Participants were asked: “You’ve now had experience with a formative evaluation and you’ve
been doing summative evaluations for some time. If you had to pick one or the other, which
would you prefer?”

For one person the two processes had the same effect: "They both scare the hell out of me.”

Another noted: "I guess I find the summative a little more helpful, only because there tends to
be a greater use of the open-ended. I find the structured questions pretty well useless in terms
of giving me the information. The open-ended questions on the summative evaluation, I find
extremely helpful. So, generally, I would say, if that became a more extensive part of
formative, it would probably be equally helpful. That’s why I would pick the summative as
more helpful.”

On being told that when the students were asked the same question they immediately and
unanimously chose formative, a participant said: "Really. Well, that gives them, if there are
problems, that gets them resolved before the end of the class. Whereas, the summative one,
you can say something out of the goodness of your heart that will improve the class for next
year, but…”

Another added: "I think I’d say a formative evaluation with an element like that incorporated
into it would be better. I like the idea of doing it partway through because it gives me a sense
of what I’m trying to do in the class and whether they think it’s working or not. It might be
questions, and I do get those sorts of disagreements, and then you have to decide whether
you’re right in doing it the way you’re doing it, or whether you’ve got to make changes. I think
it sends the right message to students.”

Some responses were rather more institutional in focus: "Anything that makes teaching (be)
seen as more important at the university, I’m in favour of. This (formative evaluation) seems
to have potential for doing that.” Another added: "It was useful because it sends the right
message to the students about teaching. I thought it was useful as well for that reason. You
could go back to them and talk to them about the questionnaire so you get additional feedback
in that respect. The idea of it being midterm as opposed to the end of the class, I think is
good, because again, it goes to the point of, is this something you can use in that particular
class, as opposed to either using it or not at the end of the year.”
2. DET Form Comments.

When students completed the DET instrument, they were invited to include, on the back of the instrument, additional comments on the teaching in the course. Those comments were transcribed, to maintain the anonymity of the students, and returned to the instructor along with the Grouped responses on the DETs. The collected transcribed student DET comments are provided in Appendix 6.

The data was analyzed using ATLAS-ti software. The students identified the following identify themes and issues:

- **Student Appreciation:**  
The majority of comments written directly on the back of the forms were related to the instructor and his/her performance. In some classes, no comments were added. Comments offered were either positive or negative with marked division within single classes, for example: “You are doing a good job teaching this class. You get really excited about the topics you are teaching and your excitement makes me want to learn it.” as opposed to: “This is, quite frankly, the worst class I have taken in my time at university. The instructor, although somewhat well informed, is in the habit of delivering lengthy and badly structured lectured on the minutia of political life rather than the base concepts for which we are responsible for.”

Overall, the faculty participants in the study were regarded as good or excellent instructors.

Often the appreciative comments were rather backhanded: “The material presented in this course is at times unclear but (Dr X) does a good job attempting to simplify things.” and “Not the instructors fault that the material isn’t interesting. This course is mandatory for our faculty so we aren’t necessarily interested to begin with. He obviously has a very large knowledge base.” or “The instructor tries to make the course interesting and applicable.”

- **Suggestions for Improvement:**  
Many of the students provided suggestions for improvements in the instruction they received in the classes where the evaluations were conducted.

Several comments from courses at a variety of program years wanted more explicit learning objectives.

One student noted there: “needs to be clearer on what examination will be on.” Another “It is hard to know what material we are going to be tested on.” Others said: “Teacher’s objectives are also very unclear and often confusing. It’s very hard to know what material is important.” and “I am often uncertain of where the lecture is directed, a quick outline at the beginning of class would be helpful.”

Feedback on submitted course work was a focus for others: “More feedback on work is needed.” and “Return marks from tests.”

Other remarks concerned classroom management with advice to: put the course notes onto the world wide web, vary the pace and position of lecture delivery in the classroom, require fewer readings, use fewer overheads and pause more after key concepts for note writing.

- **Classroom Environment:**  
Several students made comment on the physical space where classes were held with concerns expressed about: lack of windows and fresh air, limited number of desks for left-handed
students and low temperature. One specific class had been having technical difficulties with computer and projection equipment and students commented on that.

- **The DET Instrument:**
  Numerous comments were received about the instrument itself. They were concentrated in one class where the instructor had indicated to the class that the study was experimental. The students may have thought it particularly appropriate to provide feedback on the instrument. Some students disliked the forced choice agree/disagree options and others thought a NA (not applicable) option was needed.

Some respondents questioned the length of the instrument and the wording of specific questions.

Extremes were found in different classes about the value of the formative evaluation process: "This is the most irrelevant course evaluation I have ever filled out. This is fabulous course and the instructor is excellent but this evaluation was silly." and "On another note, this evaluation is a lot more effective than the ones we did last year." The latter was presumably the USRI.

**3. Telephone Comments by Individual Faculty to an Investigator.**

Three faculty participants unable to attend the focus group were interviewed by one of the investigators. Notes on their comments are include as Appendix 9. The comments were also subjected to analysis using the ATLAS-ti software to identify themes and issues.

- **Faculty Appreciation:**
  All three of the faculty said the process had opened up interaction in the classroom and one went further saying: "I got some absolutely crucial feedback at the moment I needed it. It was a good class but there were some funny rumblings, but this put an end to the rumblings." Another noted: "it opens up the atmosphere ...Helps them feel a little more invested in the course. Whereas nothing is at stake for them in end of course evaluations ... they comment in a different spirit... this inspires them to voice their comments more constructively".

All three telephone interviewees indicated they preferred the mid-term formative to the end-of-term summative evaluation process.

One instructor related that: "Some written comments said `there's a bunch of us in the back of the room who are tired of all the attention you are giving to the boys in the front'. In a discussion of the evaluation, the instructor was able to indicate appreciation of the issue (carefully, without confronting it head-on) ... and this seemed to pull the other students into greater participation. 'And then we just had fun for the rest of the year.'"

There were some rather cynical comments along the lines of: "the actual data not much help but it was very worthwhile on account of the goodwill it generated among the students. There was also a good chemistry in the room among the students," and "Frankly, I think what is best about a mid-term (evaluation) is the goodwill it establishes, the students feel heard, as indeed they are, and this gives them a more positive sense about the course and the instructor overall. This, in turn, makes for a more positive learning environment, which makes for better teaching etc. So from this (snowball effect) point of view alone, I'm a strong proponent of such a mechanism."

Student support for the process can be appreciated by the fact that "One student who was away on the day of the evaluation wrote a letter to the chair, cc to the instructor, commenting
especially on the instructor's use of the mid-term evaluation, as a sign of the instructor's responsiveness.”

4. E-mail Comments by Individual Faculty to Department of Political Science Associate Chair. (NB These comments fall outside the ethics approval process. We did not indicate that Judy would be requesting such feedback.)

Four staff members participating in the study replied to Judy Garber, the Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies in the Department of Political Science, who had requested that participants provide her with their opinions on the formative evaluation process. One had taken part in a focus group, two had responded individually to telephone questions from an investigator and the fourth only responded by this route. Notes on these conversations as related by Dr. Garber to one of the investigators are provided in Appendix 9.

One of the group said: “It took very little time to administer, the questions are good, the results are shown in a clear manner, and can be very helpful as an "early warning system”, which I guess is the whole idea of it. I'll ask the class their thoughts on it, but given that they had a chance to evaluate early, I would think they would be all in favour of it. I certainly am.”

This group had several comment on how the instrument could be improved. Two members of this group had previous experience of using formative evaluation and their overall conclusions were: “It was useful, but no more so than the entirely informal mid-course evaluations I've done in the past.” And “It was useful, but no more so than the entirely informal mid-course evaluations I've done in the past.”


Discussion.

The students communicated a high level of cynicism about the current summative evaluation process using the Universal Student Rating of Instruction (USRI). They were reassured by the investigators that instructors and administrators did take the results of them seriously and the Faculty Evaluation Committee (FEC) process was reviewed for them to illustrate where the data would be of importance. Students were particularly concerned that their written comments were read so that the administrative evaluation was not simply based on the numerical data from the USRI. There were particularly concerned that there be consequences for instructors receiving poor evaluations.

The students had various levels of exposure to formative evaluation practices, mostly in other departments than Political Science, while the faculty in the focus group had none. Other individual faculty members reported using informal processes routinely.

Students were generally supportive of the formative process but had reservations based on how the data collected was used. They were very concerned that the data gathered by the instructor be reflected back to them and discussed.

The students saw formative evaluation as contributing to the accountability of the teaching and learning interaction. If an individual instructor did not respond in a constructive way to the feedback given, the students saw that as leading to frustration with the teaching and learning process. They also saw it as a failure of accountability on the part of the instructor. Formative evaluation is a developmental activity for instructors and a failure to deal with the findings from the survey instrument could convey to the learners that the instructor was not interested in developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enhance the learning environment.

Students did not seem to appreciate the developmental aspect of formative evaluation as there was a question about who saw the data gathered. The restriction of the availability of the data to the instructor of record could be considered as a lack of accountability by the Department or University for the quality of its instruction. It was explained to them that an instructor might choose to share the results of a mid-term evaluation with a Department Chairperson or FEC but it was not required.

This raises a question as to why an instructor might share such data with a Department Chairperson. If it were simply as evidence that the formative evaluation was carried out it might contribute to making the students even more cynical about the evaluation process. Indeed, one instructor stated that it was worth doing the evaluation just to create goodwill in the class.

The formative data might be shared for comparison with the summative data in a course. Caution should be emphasized here. The questions asked on the two instruments are very different, as are the response scales, so no direct quantitative comparison is possible. Even more caution would be warranted in the case of a comparison of the student comments on the backs of the survey instruments.

As Michael Threall has noted, “There are many good reasons for not using narrative comments for summative purposes including: 1) lower percentages of respondents (considerably lower than are allowable for good samples with quantitative data .. minimum 50% for large courses, 90% and higher for courses of 20 or fewer ); 2) the over-weighting of written comments simply because the written word is powerful (a well-phrased statement vs. a number); 3) lower reliability in interpretation of meaning (if a course is "fun", is that good or bad? .. depends who
you ask); and 4) the simple fact that those who submit comments get to express their opinions twice (quantitatively and qualitatively) thus biasing the sample (3).

An instructor might be justified in sharing the results of formative evaluations conducted over a number of years to look at longitudinal trends in the data. That would be a genuine reflection of the developmental purpose of formative evaluation but that purpose might also be served by the use of longitudinal data collected from the USRI.

Given those limitations on making the data widely available, it is not readily apparent how the use of formative evaluation would enhance the accountability of a Department or the University for the quality of its teaching other than from a goodwill perspective.

The students did suggest that the USRI include a question on whether a formative evaluation was conducted during a course. While that could also represent a goodwill issue, it can also indicate a genuine desire by instructors to enhance the learning environment. Other students went further and suggested a USRI question asking if anything changed as a result of the mid-term evaluation.

Feedback to the classes on the data gathered varied by class. Some students reported that no further mention was made of the data while others reported a systematic review of the data with the class with a request for suggested improvements. There was some concern about how open students might be to entering into such discussions. Options put forward for dealing with that included having a course TA collect student suggestions and having the class elect one or more spokespersons.

The instructors also spoke of their own evaluations. One did not discuss the data with the class and others reported various levels of discussion.

With the developmental focus of formative evaluation, discussion with the class is highly desirable. When instructors agree to change a teaching practice it must be done consistently to maintain the support of the students. One class noted that their instructor changed during the first class after the evaluation then returned to former practice.

Of major concern to the students was the issue of maintaining their anonymity through the process. That would be particularly troubling for them if written responses were asked for and no attempt was made to conceal the student’s handwriting by having an independent person type up the handwritten comments as was the case in this study. Some students were reluctant to engage in discussion of the evaluation data without the use of a third-party intermediary in the absence of the instructor.

The faculty also discussed the issue of student anonymity but expressed that interest by asking what the student concerns were.

There were many suggestions from faculty and students to improve the DET survey instrument. Student suggestions related mostly to the instrument itself. For example, replacing the forced choice response of agree/disagree with a five-point Likert scale and including a ‘not applicable’ option where that might appropriate. The faculty comments were more to do with the administration of the instrument. The preference was to conduct the evaluation early in the term and at the beginning of the class. One student thought that the evaluation could be conducted after the first three weeks of classes.

There was general agreement on the importance of providing written comments. The students were particularly emphatic on that as they preferred giving written comments to engaging in
post-evaluation discussion of the data. This opinion is probable based on their concerns over anonymity. The faculty appreciated the ease of administration of the instrument and interpretation of the data.

The students were particularly supportive of the continued use of formative evaluation. Given a choice, they would prefer a formative to a summative evaluation like the USRI. Again, this seems to be based on the level of cynicism about the USRI.

For one instructor, the summative was preferable because of the more frequent written comments. That could change with more explicit instructions to make written comments on the formative instrument. Others were in favour of the formative evaluation because it was of potential benefit to the class conducting the evaluation. One instructor commented that “it sends the right message to students about teaching.” That might imply a level of personal accountability for the quality of instruction by that instructor.

The results of the DET surveys and many of the student comments pointed to a desire by the students to be provided with specific course and class learning outcomes. There was some discussion about this by the faculty but it may point to a systematic issue for all instructors in the department to consider. This seems to be pedagogical issue in lecture based courses. To what degree should outlines, or even web based notes, be provided? What guidance is provided on note taking?

The faculty noted the general positive reactions of the students to the formative evaluation process. While this may have been a ‘Hawthorn effect’ due to the novelty of the process, it may equally be a reflection of the student’s desire to enhance their learning environment. The formative evaluation process gives them an immediate opportunity to contribute to that enhancement.
Conclusions.

It is readily apparent in the data collected in the course of this study that students attach great importance to the evaluation of teaching. They are particularly supportive of formative evaluation and would prefer its use to summative evaluation.

Students need to learn about the different uses to which formative and summative evaluation are applied. They seem more concerned with issues of accountability through evaluation, a characteristic of summative evaluation, rather than the development of instructors’ teaching skills, a character of formative evaluation.

The DET instrument is appropriate for a formative evaluation process. Greater emphasis should be placed on students providing written comments on the form and those comments should be typed before being returned to the instructors to maintain student anonymity.

Students should be given the option of discussing with the instructor the data from a formative evaluation but there should be no requirement that they do so.

The USRI should be modified to include a question on the use of formative evaluation in a course.

Professional development (PD) opportunities should be provide to faculty to help them conduct discussions with their classes, where requested, on data from formative evaluation. That might include conducting small group discussions in large classes and sharing the information with the whole class. Using of third parties to gather class data is an additional skill that could be developed.

There is an ongoing need for faculty to provide students with learning outcomes for courses and classes. While this is commonly reviewed in new faculty orientation programs, instructors who have not participated in such programs need assistance in the area and others may require a refresher activity.

Departments may wish to conduct PD activities for their members to explain the use and significance of formative evaluation.

Amy’s Comments.

(At the time the study was conducted, one of the investigators was the Vice-President (Academic) of the Student’s Union. In that capacity, Amy Salazin provided the following reflections on formative evaluation.)

Speaking from the perspective of a student representative, the response received from students participating in the pilot project was overall encouraging. This feeling of encouragement stems largely from the observation that their feedback appears to reinforce an intuition that we identify as a key advocacy issue – that undergraduate students do assign considerable value to their learning environment. Both the overwhelming general positive response of students to midterm teaching evaluations and their comments as to how to improve the process suggest their desire to be connected to the instruction they receive and to be engaged in the activity of improving it.

Previous to this exercise, the students’ primary experience with the evaluation of instruction was with end-of-term summative evaluation of their professors. Referencing their experience with such evaluations (USRIs), the students indicated that they found mid-term teaching
evaluations preferable. Speaking of the USRIs, many students indicated that they found difficulty feeling invested in engaging in an evaluation process where outcomes of their feedback were tangible only indirectly and at a distance, if at all. Implied broadly here, is that students see the evaluation of instruction as an activity having the potential to be both relevant to their own experiences in the classroom and to have real positive effects on the quality of teaching.

This implication carries through to many of the students’ comments with respect to possible improvements to the process of administering mid-term teaching evaluations. In terms of key aspects of the process, two major themes appeared to emerge: the ability to provide written responses and the importance of feedback sessions with the instructors wherein the results of the evaluation are discussed. While the clear and concise nature of the chosen instruments’ binary “agree” or “disagree” options was recognized as helpful by both students and instructors alike, the ability to provide written responses to explain and expand on these options was identified as essential. In such written provisions, there was seen to be the helpful opportunity to add meaning through clarifying reasons for choosing particular answers and/or providing potential suggestions for improving identified “problem areas”. While the opportunity to write undirected narrative responses on the back of the project’s chosen tool was seen by students as helpful, some suggested that they additionally would like to see the inclusion of more directed written-response questions and/or open-ended follow-up response sections to the current set questions.

As a second area of key concern, students spoke extensively about their feelings regarding the importance of follow-up sessions with their instructors in which the results of the evaluation could be discussed. While many students did not note clear and major changes appearing in their classroom as a result of the feedback the instructor received from the evaluation, this appeared to be overridden by their concern with the absence or presence of such a follow-up session. The message that students indicated was communicated to them by their instructor initiating a follow-up session was that the instructor “cared” about and took seriously their feedback. While students recognized the potential presence of issues regarding their anonymity and professorial anxiety to engage in discussions of “negative” results, they did not appear to feel that these were substantially impeding obstacles. This recognition does, however, point to the importance of both continuing to ensure that student feedback is dealt with in the utmost confidential manner and that professors are provided sufficient resources to appropriately deal with the feedback they receive. Speaking to the later, in their focus group sessions, instructors brought up concerns with respect to how to appropriately and constructively discuss the result of the evaluations with their students.

This said, even with the opportunity to feel fully engaged in the process in terms of providing meaningful responses and engaging in discussions with their instructors about their responses, it was seen as important by students that, where relevant, their feedback translate into real changes in the classroom. Several students spoke of the issue of “accountability” and the importance that when the feedback strongly suggests a problem area, steps are taken to attempt to rectify it. Although students recognized the importance that the results of mid-term teaching evaluations stay internal to their respective classroom (i.e. not shared with administration for additional evaluation purposes), they shared the hope that there could be ramifications for those instructors who chose to blatantly disregard feedback from their students. While dealing with such a situation may be an inherent potential problem with formative-style evaluations, as brought up in the focus group session, when they are coupled with summative evaluations the opportunity to highlight accountability problems does become an option.
References.


Appendices,

A1. Ethical Approval Application.

FACULTY OF SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
Grants, Fellowships and Contracts Ethics Statement

| NAME & AFFILIATION OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR IF DIFFERENT THAN APPLICANT: Don Carmichael, Arts. |

INSTRUCTIONS: Please complete each section. Write "nil" or "n/a" (not applicable) rather than leaving a blank space. You may respond by citing page and paragraph numbers in the proposal if the material is clearly distinguishable and constitutes a full answer. Use additional sheets as necessary.

1. Describe in detail the source of participants/data for the proposed research and significant participant characteristics (e.g., age, institutionalization, physical/mental health, etc.). Describe the manner in which participation will be solicited (attach copies of printed advertisements, transcripts or oral solicitations, etc.) and the nature of any inducements/promises offered for participation.

Instructors of lecture based courses in the Department of Political Science will be invited by e-mail and memorandum to consider taking part in the project. In opting into the study, they will agree to make class time available for the administration of the DET survey instrument at a point in the term where their students can provide an objective judgment on the progress of the course. Data will be collected in a manner similar to that used with the summative USRI evaluation instrument. In the absence of the instructors, the data will be collected by persons not involved with the courses to maintain the anonymity of the students providing the data. Students will be told of the purpose of the study and they can opt to be a part of the study by completing the survey instrument.

A random sample of students from some of the courses surveyed will be invited to participate in focus groups towards the end of term. They will be invited to answer open ended questions on the impact of the formative evaluation process in their particular classes. Students will be instructed that they are free to decline to participate in the focus groups and to leave them at any time during the meeting of the groups. In separate focus groups, instructors who took part in the study will be invited to reflect on the impact of the formative evaluation process for them. Instructors will be informed that they are free to opt out of the focus groups or leave them at any time.

2. How will you deal with the issues of informed consent and continuing voluntariness of participation in the proposed research?

Students and instructors will be told that they will only be included in the survey if they choose to be a part of the study. They will be told they can opt out of the project at any time.
Prior to students completing the survey instrument or participating in a focus group, they will be asked to sign consent forms to indicate their willingness to be a part of the study.

3. If concealment and/or deception is to be employed, provide explicit justification. Indicate how and when participants will be informed of the concealment and/or deception.

Concealment and/or deception will be actively avoided in this project.

4. Describe the nature of any risks to the physical or psychological well-being or integrity of participants that might arise from your procedures, and discuss your justifications, safeguards, and resolutions for these risks where appropriate.

Students taking part in the study may be concerned about ‘reprisals’ from their instructors. It is of major importance to maintain the anonymity of the students taking part in the study. This is why the procedures already in place for the administration of the USRI will be utilized. Student focus groups will be set up at times and places without the knowledge of the instructors. Tapes of the conversations will be made and erased after the material is transcribed without attribution to individuals. Tapes of focus groups involving instructors will be handled in a similar manner. Data will not be made available to Departmental or Faculty administrators unless individual faculty participants choose to make the material available.

5. Describe how you will grant anonymity to participants and how responses will be kept confidential. If names or other identifying information are coded with data, describe how access to data is limited and safeguarded. Indicate who will have access. If appropriate, describe how consent is obtained from participants for exceptions to anonymity/confidentiality. If data are to be taken from existing sources, discuss the implications of pre-existing (implicit or explicit) guarantees of confidentiality/anonymity.

Evaluation instruments will be completed anonymously and the data generated from them will be treated in aggregate fashion for presentation to instructors. Any comments by students on the back of the instrument will be transcribed verbatim without attribution. The survey instruments will be shredded after aggregate data is collected and the comments are transcribed. Taped conversations from student and faculty focus groups will be transcribed without attribution of the comments. Tapes will be erased after transcription. Data will not be made available to Departmental or Faculty administrators unless individual faculty participants choose to make the material available. The consent forms signed by focus group participants will stress that participants should regard the substance of the discussions as confidential and further note that the investigators cannot guarantee such confidentiality. This information will also be given verbally prior to the start of the focus groups.

6. Indicate when participants will be debriefed, and describe the extent of debriefing.

The focus groups with students will, in part, act as a debriefing. The impact of the formative evaluation process on their learning experience will be elicited and the significance of the intervention will be discussed. Instructors will be given the opportunity to debrief on the significance of the intervention in their focus groups. If data is gathered that may cause distress to particular instructors, the principle investigators will be available to assist the instructors in finding support to alter their instructional practice or offer assistance directly.

7. Describe any apparatus, element of the physical environment, substance or other materials that could cause harm to a participant if a malfunction, misuse, accident, allergic reaction, or side-effect were to occur. If the participant comes into contact with a potentially hazardous apparatus or material, who will be responsible for checking for defects/malfunctions, and on what schedule will inspections be made? If participants taste, ingest, or have applied to them, or come into contact with some substance that could cause harm, please document your safeguards.
The setting for the administration of the survey instrument and the conduct of the focus groups will be as comfortable as the institution’s teaching space allows.

8. Describe qualifications of research personnel if special conditions exist within the research that could cause physical or psychological harm or if participants require special attention because of physical or psychological characteristics, or if made advisable by other exigencies.

The research personnel are regarded as excellent instructors sensitive to the needs of their students and peers. If the data gathered is likely to cause distress to the instructors receiving the feedback from the students, support will be offered through programs like the Peer Consultation process administered by UTS.

9. Please attach copies of any questionnaire, interview schedule, test, stimulus materials, and other such items necessary for competent review of your application.

Attached: The ‘Diagnostic Elements of Teaching’ survey instrument devised by Dr. Tom Nelson, Department of Psychology, U of A.
PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Political Science & Biological Sciences

Investigators:
Don Carmichael 492 0692 don.carmichael@ualberta.ca
Amy Salazyn 492-4236 vp.academic@su.ualberta.ca
John Hoddinott 492 4587 john.hoddinott@ualberta.ca

Purpose of the Study:
The investigators are interested in gathering information that will assist faculty members in the Department of Political Science who are participating in the study obtain feedback from their students through the administration of a Formative Evaluation instrument. That feedback may form the basis for modifications in course delivery during this academic session to enhance student learning. The data collected may also be used for research purposes.

Methodology:
a. Formative Evaluation Survey Instrument:
Faculty electing to participate in the study will agree to invite one of the investigators, or one of their representatives, to administer a survey instrument in specific classes in Political Science. Students in those classes will be invited to complete that instrument.
b. Focus Groups:
Participating students and faculty will be asked to attend focus groups for the respective constituencies. The purpose of the focus group will be to solicit further information on the opportunities for enhancing learning in Political Science classes through Formative Evaluation.

Confidentiality:
Faculty delivering a course will not be present during the administration of the survey instrument in their course. All information collected will be coded to protect the participants' anonymity. Prior to releasing aggregated data, any identifying indicators will be removed. Participation in the focus group is totally voluntary. Groups will consist of either faculty or students. While the researchers cannot guarantee the confidentiality of comments made by the focus group participants, we strongly urge all participants to keep all comments confidential. In addition, audio recording devices will be used for information retrieval purposes only and any transcripts will not contain any identifying information. Data collected may also be used for research purposes and publications may result from this project. No comments or responses from individual participants will be attributed to any specific individual. No names will be used at any time in any publication.

Time Commitment:
The student survey instrument should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. The time required to complete a Focus Group would be approximately one hour.

Any Questions?
Please contact:
Don Carmichael, phone 492 0639 or email don.carmichael@ualberta.ca or
Amy Salazyn phone 492 4236 or email vp.academic@su.ualberta.ca or
John Hoddinott, phone 492 4578, email john.hoddinott@ualberta.ca

Withdraw from the Study:
You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time without any adverse
consequences. There are no known risks or personal benefits from participating in this study.

Participant Informed Consent:
I acknowledge that the research procedures have been explained to me, and that any questions
I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. In addition, I know that I may contact the
persons designated on this form if I have further questions either now or in the future. I have
been assured that the personal records relating to this study will be kept anonymous. I
understand that I may refuse to answer questions I am asked if I so choose. I understand that
I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and I will not be asked to provide a reason.

I consent to participate in the completion of the Formative Evaluation survey instrument and/or
a focus group on the results from the administration of the survey instrument.

(Date) ________________________

(Name of Participant) ________________________

(Signature of Participant) ________________________

(Name of Investigator) ________________________

(Signature of Investigator) ________________________
A3. DET Instrument.

Diagnostic Elements of Teaching (DET) Questionnaire
University Teaching Services

Instructor: __________________________________________________ Date: _____
Course/Section: _________________________________________________________

Instructions: For this course, decide whether you agree (a) or disagree (D) with each of the following statements. Using an HB pencil, fill in only one circle for each question. Completely erase any response you wish to change.

1. The instructor is well prepared.          A  D
2. Classes are stimulating.                                                              A  D
3. The course outline is adequate.                                                      A  D
4. I have a clear idea of what I am expected to learn.                                  A  D
5. I have a clear idea of how my work will be assessed.                               A  D
6. The instructor complicates things more than necessary.                            A  D
7. The instructor does not pause often enough, or long enough.                     A  D
8. The classes often make me think.                                                     A  D
9. The instructor follows the course outline.                                           A  D
10. The instructor makes the material interesting.                                       A  D
11. The course material is valuable and important.                                       A  D
12. I feel that I have to write down everything the instructor says.                 A  D
13. Audiovisual and technological aids are used effectively in this course.        A  D
14. The amount of material is appropriate to the length of most classes.       A  D
15. The instructor has good eye contact with the students.                           A  D
16. The instructor speaks audibly and clearly.                                           A  D
17. It is hard to ask questions or make comments in class.                             A  D
18. I am learning a lot from this course.                                                A  D
19. Course work (assignments, tests) has been returned in a reasonable time. A  D
20. The instructor uses too few concrete or applied examples.                          A  D
21. More discussion would help my learning. A D
22. Classes are well organized. A D
23. The instructor answers questions adequately. A D
24. Course work (assignments, tests) has been returned with appropriate feedback. A D
25. It is easy to know which material is important. A D
26. The instructor’s style of presentation keeps my attention. A D
27. The instructor makes good use of class time. A D
28. I am sometimes confused about where the presentation is leading. A D
29. The instructor uses questions to the class effectively in teaching. A D
30. The reading material and resources are appropriate for the course. A D
31. The instructor maintains an atmosphere conducive to learning. A D
32. I find the instructor helpful outside class time. A D
33. The instructor treats students with respect. A D
34. Assessment of course work has been fair. A D
35. The physical space is conducive to learning. A D

Your responses are appreciated as part of the consultation process, as well as on-going evaluation of this questionnaire.

Revised September 1998

1998
A4. DET Instrument (Grouped Responses for Faculty).

DIAGNOSTIC ELEMENTS OF TEACHING (DET) QUESTIONNAIRE
UNIVERSITY TEACHING SERVICES

Instructor:      Course:                Date:                 Number of Respondees:

The responses to questions on the DET can be grouped into the following categories for ease of interpretation. Scores from the Formative Evaluation Survey should be converted to percentiles of agreement (%A) or disagreement (%D) for ease of comparison.

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I. CONTENT

1. The instructor is well prepared.
3. The course outline is adequate.
4. I have a clear idea of what I am expected to learn.
5. I have a clear idea of how my work will be assessed.
9. The instructor follows the course outline.
11. The course material is valuable and important.
18. I am learning a lot from this course.
30. The reading material and resources are appropriate for the course.

II. PRESENTATION

2. Classes are stimulating.
6. The instructor complicates things more than necessary.
8. The classes often make me think.
10. The instructor makes the material interesting.
12. I feel that I have to write down everything the instructor says.
13. Audiovisual and technological aids are used effectively in this course.
15. The instructor has good eye contact with the students.
16. The instructor speaks audibly and clearly.
20. The instructor uses too few concrete or applied examples.
25. It is easy to know which material is important.
26. The instructor's style of presentation keeps my attention.
29. The instructor uses questions to the class effectively in teaching.
III. INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS

17. It is hard to ask questions or make comments in class.
19. Course work (assignments, tests) has been returned in a reasonable time.
23. The instructor answers questions adequately.
24. Course work (assignments, tests) has been returned with appropriate feedback.
29. The instructor uses questions to the class effectively in teaching.
32. I find the instructor helpful outside class time.
33. The instructor treats students with respect.
34. Assessment of course work has been fair.

IV. CLASS MANAGEMENT

9. The instructor follows the course outline.
7. The instructor does not pause often enough, or long enough.
14. The amount of material is appropriate to the length of most classes.
22. Classes are well organized.
27. The instructor makes good use of class time.
28. I am sometimes confused about where the presentation is leading.
31. The instructor maintains an atmosphere conducive to learning.

V. INFORMATION OVERLOAD

4. I have a clear idea of what I am expected to learn.
7. The instructor does not pause often enough, or long enough.
12. I feel that I have to write down everything the instructor says.
14. The amount of material is appropriate to the length of most classes.
25. It is easy to know which material is important.

Related items that may be cause of overload

6. The instructor complicates things more than necessary.
9. The instructor follows the course outline.
22. Classes are well organized.
27. The instructor makes good use of class time.
28. I am sometimes confused about where the presentation is leading.
30. The reading material and resources are appropriate for the course.

VI. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

1. The instructor is well prepared.
11. The course material is valuable and important.
27. The instructor makes good use of class time.
31. The instructor maintains an atmosphere conducive to learning.
33. The instructor treats students with respect.
35. The physical space is conducive to learning.

Additional Student Comments:
A5. Cover Letter to Faculty on their DET Data.

To: Participants in the Formative Evaluation Study.  
Department of Political Science. 
From: Don Carmichael & John Hoddinott.

Recently we administered a 35 item survey to your class on the progress of the class to date. The data from that survey has been aggregated and is attached to this note. Also attached are transcripts of comments that students wrote on the back of the survey forms.

The responses to the 35 items have been grouped into related topics for ease of interpretation.

It is generally useful to have a brief discussion of the responses with the class. How you choose to respond to your class to the feedback contained in these attachments is up to you. You may wish to simply acknowledge their feedback, explain why a particular approach is being used or ask what other approach might meet your, and their, goals for a successful completion of the course.

If you wish to discuss the data attached to this memo or how to respond to your class, please feel free to call the investigators on this project at the numbers below.

Don Carmichael, 492-5321 don.carmichael@ualberta.ca  
John Hoddinott, 492-4587 john.hoddinott@ualberta.ca
A6. Student Comments on DET Survey Forms.

POLSCI 1XX Additional Student Comments:
Philosophy should not be part of PolS100.

POLSCI 1XX Additional Student Comments:

Before the final last semester I was hoping I could find a way to tell her/you that she’s a great prof and I really enjoy the class but I didn’t know how without looking retarded. So here you go you’re a great prof! Oh and my ID# is … Ha ha.

On another note, this evaluation is a lot more effective than the ones we did last year.

Miss X,
You are doing a good job teaching this class. You get really excited about the topics you are teaching and your excitement makes me want to learn it. Your teaching style is very good, with legislatures more overheads could show the structure of parliaments more, this would help.
Peace out.
(Student name withheld).

This is, quite frankly, the worst class I have taken in my time at university. The instructor, although somewhat well informed, is in the habit of delivering lengthy and badly structured lectured on the minutia of political life rather than the base concepts for which we are responsible for. For example, lectures during one week consisted solely of the political decisions made by the G7 body during each and every summit they have ever had – and we are responsible for all the information, specific and irrelevant as it is.
The mid term exam was 2.5 h (allegedly we were given 3 but the official time was 2.5), featuring 20 multiple choice questions, 15 short answer (with multiple parts) and two essays! Too much and too specific. Her notes on the website were convoluted and focused too closely on the specific again – almost like political name dropping – when printed. They took an entire ream of paper. I understand this class has a lot to cover but this is ridiculous. Professors teaching other 100 sections have done much better in covering the material in a far more stimulating and efficient manner.

In addition, class discussion is a joke – those with strong opinions can steamroll & sidetrack discussions far off topic and use the class as personal political soapboxes. X seems well-intentioned and well meaning – but her teaching skills are far worse than anyone should have to handle. In addition, first year students in this course will assume this is all right and not question the lack of actual learning happening. Introductory classes should be solidly taught and easily understood.

POLSCI 1XX Additional Student Comments:
Dr Y does a great job with this class and maintaining interest @ a peak throughout the majority of classes.

He prepares us adequately for tests and offers suggestions when we are working on our papers. He keeps lectures interesting by using class participation.

Dr Y is my favorite professor. I never want to miss his class, not because I am afraid of missing something important, but because I enjoy them so much.

I wish that our classroom had windows or the like, because there are so many students in the class, that there is not enough fresh air. That may not be relevant to the quality of the course, but I thought I would mention that.
Dr Y provides a very interesting class. His style of teaching is well organized and makes his lectures easy to follow.

I really appreciate his use of humor and of colloquial examples as a means of explaining his ideas.

Dr Y’s style of teaching is excellent. I feel as though I am learning the material through his lectures. Also, he is very approachable, and open to questions. Overall, I have found him to make the material of interest to his students and create a good learning environment.

Prof Y is a wonderful teacher. He makes the class very enjoyable while informative. And it is great that he is always available for help outside of class.

**POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:**
I agree that we need to spend time learning the background of moral theory and ethics, but I had hoped we would be applying this background to political issues rather than spending so much time looking at political theories. Some of the talk about what we read is stimulating, but I don’t feel I’m really learning a whole lot yet from this course.

I had hoped that this course would focus more on debating moral issues in govt. (ie. abortion, capital punishment). I’m not an arts student and don’t relate to or understand the format we are following. It is too theoretical and I don’t find anything I’m leaning useful or applicable to analysis of govt. policy.

The material can be very interesting but I’m having trouble getting interested in them. Putting notes on the web would make it easier to follow in class instead of having to write everything down while the instructor is speaking.

This course is great!

Where is the middle ground? *(Note from JH. This may be a comment about the forced choice of agree/disagree on the survey instrument).*

**POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:**
a. I really enjoy coming to this class, I haven’t missed one yet because I find the lectures really help me with the readings. It is also one of few classes where I have no problem staying awake!

b. This class is going quite well. I like how you are available outside of class, and for proof reading essay before they are due. Pausing more after a key concept during lectures will give people writing more time to take notes. In all keep up the good work.

c. Too many class disruptions.
Class is not controlled which explains negative aspects of course.
More feedback on work is needed.

d. Responses to papers remarkably brief & don’t seem very informative on how to improve. May be result of short paper length.
   Clear direction and constant pace
   Good but if varied pace and position in room, would better hold class attention.
   - something other than an overhead would help. The entertaining absurd examples (e.g. Your dog does not contemplate existence) add variety to class.
Questions informative.
Occasionally the class gets off the rails with superfluous questions.

POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:
There are only two left handed desks in the room & the one that is really usable squeaks.
Text book is super boring.
I have thoroughly enjoyed this class! Good job.

Instructor is doing an excellent job, but needs to be clearer on what examination will be on. Sometimes it is difficult to know what is relevant to the course and the exam vs. what is just side talk.

I personally feel that Dr. Z is fantastic – he has stimulated me and encouraged an interest in learning. The material is presented wonderfully, and I enjoy each class. I would recommend Dr. Z for any teaching award.

It is hard to know what material we are going to be tested on. Prof seems very interested in class topics, which makes the class more interesting. He is very sincere.

Excellent course, very informative and relevant. The prof is very good. You can tell he’s passionate about his job.

Great Class!! -> Very interesting -> opinions & facts are well mixed as to allow class to make judgments on own, but with an idea of what others think.
-> Excellent.

POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:
Steve is an excellent instructor. He narrows down the large topics we cover so they are comprehensive. He encourages group discussion and is always asking for feedback. When I contact him via e-mail for information, he answers quickly & provides very helpful information.

Overall, this instructor is excellent and knows his subject very well.

Audiovisual problems in lots of classes as the equipment is difficult to use, if the techs would get it completely set up & running for him.

When I first learned I had to take this class, I was nervous. This type of stuff is usually not interesting to me & I don’t usually think in this way. The instructor has made the material interesting and easy to learn. His teaching style is appreciated by myself (not too much or too little of anything).
Thank you.

Not the instructors fault that the material isn’t interesting. This course is mandatory for our faculty so we aren’t necessarily interested to begin with. He obviously has a very large knowledge base.
Classroom is very cold & so is not conducive to learning just becoming an ice cube.

Dr Q is a wonderful professor.
He always tries to stimulate group discuss and always tries to relate back to Health Care.

Annoying when the laptop & technical equipment does not work. Not instructors problem but this organizations.
Should have N?A category for eval. form.
Dr Q is great!

Overall, Prof Q is doing a great job to involve students inspite of ‘technical difficulties’.

The instructor tries to make the course interesting and applicable.
I find that having a group assignment assigned in essentially a 6 week course is a little unreasonable.

* Return marks from tests.
* Less readings per class.

13. PowerPoint often does not work.
Have more yes/no options to answer.

He is an excellent instructor and I enjoy his class.
We haven’t done any assignments yet so I couldn’t answer some of the questions.

Note: the audiovisual aren’t working in this room, when they are used they’re useful.

The course work is not adequate in order to make a fair evaluation. The instructor, although he addressed the problem and said the class structure would change, does not allow time for questions or debate, which is important in this type of class.

Too much readings for such a short time of class and the classes are not long enough to stimulate enough discussion. By the time it is a quarter to, discussion begins but by then too late to go in depth.

**POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:**
I don’t think that mid term evaluations are necessary in a year-long course – we already compile these in December.

Some of the questions are leading questions – questions are leading toward negative answers if an instance has only happened once. E.g. #28 – if you have ever been confused, you will most likely say so, negatively impacting professor’s evaluation – this is not a fair assessment – everyone gets confused at least once a term.

Some questions not necessary (#15).
Some are redundant (#2 & 8).
Some are conducive to negative answers for professor (#21) – more discussion always helps learning.

There is too much reading and teacher talks too fast and doesn’t give enough time to write notes. The objectives of class & relevance to everyday life and skills needed for future jobs is very poor & vague. Teacher’s objectives are also very unclear and often confusing. It’s very hard to know what material is important.

These questions have many qualitative ‘problems’ using phrases like: ‘too much’, ‘too few’, ‘difficulties’ and other highly qualitative wording is confusing & a 5,4,3,2,1, approach (on formal evaluations) would reflect my opinion better than A – D.

Some questions are irrelevant:
- technological aids? It is a lecture, chalk is sufficient.

In addition ‘well’, ‘more’ should be taken out as too qualitative.

**About the survey:**
The agree/disagree choice is inadequate – it limits ones responses and such clear-cut distinctions are not indicative of how I feel. When I neither agree nor disagree, I have no choice but to leave the questions blank.

**POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:**
No additional student comments received.

**POLSCI 2XX Additional Student Comments:**
Professor Trimble is incredibly organized and an overall fabulous prof. Lucky to have her.

**POLSCI 3XX Additional Student Comments:**
Keep the overheads, they make note organization easier.

I have had more reading in this course than in two other classes combined.

**POLSCI 3XX Additional Student Comments:**
I think the questions on this form give a more comprehensive eval of the instructor, however, I would prefer a 3-point scale over the A/D option as sometimes I neither agree or disagree and it’s not applicable.

This form is too long.

I enjoy this course very much. It’s made me evaluate what my options are and why I have them.

**POLSCI 3XX Additional Student Comments:**
There were no additional student comments on the survey instruments.

**POLSCI 4XX Additional Student Comments:**
The material presented in this course is at times unclear but Keating does a good job attempting to simplify things.

Prof Keating is one of those teachers you hope to have and remember long after. He is an asset to the department.

Don’t feel great deal of direction in course; I feel a bit lost, but that may just be me!!! Today’s overview helped, but maybe a mini overview at the start of each class would be helpful (ie. just quickly letting us know where we are in the big scheme of things)

I feel that although the course text (not articles) is informative, it is rather poorly written, and hard to follow.
I am often uncertain of where the lecture is directed, a quick outline at the beginning of class would be helpful.

These questions are repetitive. More appropriate questions on this form would be preferable.

I sometimes find we spend too much time discussing the same topic for a lengthy period of time. However, that cannot be helped for students ask questions that lead to further discussion.

This is the most irrelevant course evaluation I have ever filled out. This is fabulous course and the instructor is excellent but this evaluation was silly.
The professor is very respectful to students and this helps create an atmosphere that is conducive to learning.
A7. Transcript of Student Focus Group.

John ...if you’ve had any experience with this before. What we’re thinking about is when you fill in your summative evaluations at the end of the year, your USRIs, and you never know what the outcome of that is. Whereas, with the formative evaluations, the instrument you filled in during your courses, then you have some chance of getting feedback. Have you ever had experience with that formative method before, any classes have ever used it?

M? No, not at all.

F? In my English 101 class, or English 100, whichever it was, he asked us to write something at Christmas, I think it was a full year course.

John It was a full year course, obviously.

F? That’s right, and I’ve had a number of French classes where I’ve had, actually, a series of evaluations. She wanted feedback the whole time and so she had a whole thing for us to fill out, a whole booklet on...

John Was that language or literature classes?

F? It was more so language classes, but that was just, it was a beginner course.

F? I had one professor this year in Women’s Studies who actually did an evaluation, probably the third week of class, just to make sure. It was not unlike the one we did in the Political Science department, but it was on her own.

John Okay, now let’s just focus on the Political Science exercise that you all went through. What did you think of that process?

M? I think it’s valuable, definitely.

F? I think it kind of depends on the circumstances. I had one professor who went back over all the responses with us on every question she gave us. She gave us what she got as her percentage on every question. She asked us for feedback on everything. She was lucky because on most of them, she got, “Well, I got 90% on this one, so I don’t understand what the problem is. Help me.” So, I felt that was very helpful, but the actual questions, the ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’, where they were quite vague. They were just kind of out there.

F? I think the best way to make it useful is to let us write things because the ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ are very broad. Not even having a range of numbers to do, like the end of course ones, I don’t think that you get as good an idea.

John A lot of people did write responses on the back? Did any of you take advantage of that?

F? I think so.

John That wasn’t excluded, so you could have chosen to do that?

General agreement.

F? And like she was saying, I think it’s valuable who did it and never talked about it after that day. So, I don’t know if she saw them or if there was any response from her. At that same time, I had another professor who went through the responses and talked about them and talked to us about it. So, I think that it depends, too, on the professor and that they are interested in the evaluation.

F? I really think that should be an important part of the evaluation process for them. If we’re going to do the evaluations, they should at least take the time and effort to not only go over it, but maybe go over it with us in class. Maybe there was an overwhelming consent or agreement on either a really good job or a really poor job on certain aspects. We really had no idea at all, whereas in the class where I did get the feedback, it was really helpful.

John It’s fairly high risk for a lot of instructors, though, to go in and say, “Hey, 90% of you didn’t like me. Why is that?”

F? Yes, but just more on, for example, ‘Did I use audio-visual equipment?’ ‘I disagree.’ Well, maybe there could, one, either be an explanation, or maybe just an acknowledgement of maybe that’s what we need for our styles of learning, to actually grasp some of this information, because that, I found very hard to do.

M? One of the reasons you were saying it might not be a good idea for a prof to go into a class and say, “I didn’t get a very good rating,” and ask, “Why is that?” That might be an argument for why evaluation should be more written
than circling your response because it’s not very helpful. Even the evaluations they have for the end of the year, you can go onto the Students’ Union website and read them and they’re still not...they give you some sort of idea, but they’re really not that helpful. You can’t read into them very much.

F? I actually did one today in a different class and it had a series of questions at the end. Not only, ‘what did you like best’ and ‘what was most helpful’, but there were about 5 or 6 questions, and to actually have a guideline like that to comment on at the back, I think is more helpful than simply, ‘write what you think’. Especially, focus questions allow you to more respond to specific aspects, rather than simply, “Well, I didn’t like this professor.” That’s not very constructive.

F? Questions about the text are always good. Sometimes I forget that but it makes a big difference, what sort of resources they’re using.

F? I think some professors, I know I did and evaluation today where it was quite lengthy, took the whole page. She asked very specific questions about things that were structured just to our class and the way our class was formatted. I found those very helpful and it wasn’t just, ‘does the professor speak clearly,’ and blah, blah, blah. We could tell her, ”The way you do this is bad”, or, ”The way you do this is really good and it helps.” If the prof could even have some input, if they do something specific in their class that’s different from anybody else, then we could tell them we really like it or we don’t.

John Again, the sorts of things you’ve just given as examples are summative, they’re right at the end of the course and of no great use to you. You mentioned that one prof gave very full feedback and another never talked about it. Even though that prof didn’t talk about it, did you see any signs that they might have actually taken to heart what they’d read?

F? She’s pretty much the same. I can also say that maybe there wasn’t big complaints anyway. I don’t think there was something major that she had to change, but just in contrast to the other professor who took 15 minutes out of a 50 minute class to actually go through it, I just felt better that she actually cared. It seemed like she actually cared about what we had written down. And then that doesn’t mean that the other professor didn’t, but I didn’t notice any change in that class.

F? No.

John More broadly, in any of the classes, even when the professor went through and read the instructions, did you see any change in what was going on?

F? I really think that if somebody does very poorly on one aspect, for instance, just to go back to the audiovisual stuff, just resources. I really think that she would have changed that, had it been a lot lower. But, I think her responses were actually quite high on those because she uses a variety of them. Other professors, not so much or not at all. I think that maybe that can be a hint that we learn better with those kinds of resources, or just switch it up a little bit, I suppose. I know that, traditionally, university professors sit up there and talk, but we like to mix it up a bit.

John As you look back on the process, and you’ve made some comments along the way, what do you think would make it a better process from your perspective?

F? For me, it would simply be more written responses because the letter responses only say so much.

F? I think encouraging the prof to take some time to go over it because I think in the middle of the year, you have a lot of opportunity to say something important, like, ”Seminars are no good to me and I wish that we could do something different with them”, or something like that that could actually make a big difference in how the rest of the class goes for you.

F? It’s particularly a useful tool when you don’t necessarily feel comfortable about going to that prof and speaking about some of these problems. I have certainly felt that this year, and I really appreciated having the chance, especially in an all-year class. Are these evaluations only for all-years classes, or are they meant also for one-term classes?

John They are mostly given in one-term classes, in the middle of the term.

F? Really, because I would see it, because you don’t necessarily get to know your professor as well in a one-semester class. In the full-year classes, I see it as almost imperative, as so important for them. I’ve had so many all-year classes that changes could have been implemented or just have feedback from your students on what works and what doesn’t.

John But even if it was an all-year class, I think we’d still try and use the formative instrument half-way through the first session, so you get a term and a half of benefit, rather than just half a term.
M? Would that work? That would be my inclination to do that, but what would you, in a full-year class they give you enough time.

F? To do it, you mean two separate times?

M? Instead of doing it at Christmas, to do it late October, when the class is running so you have a...if I were an instructor, that's when I would want it.

F? I think you've had enough time then to notice any big problems.

F? Unless they don't start seminars 'til Christmas.

F? That's true.

M? But a lot of, when you have a class that's just a single term, they start fairly early on, second class you're right into work. So, I think by two to three weeks in, you should be able to tell if there's any real problems. It shouldn't take very long for something to come up if it's going to.

John What you see after a couple of weeks is what you're going to get for the rest of the semester?

General agreement.

John Any other things that would improve it from your perspective?

F? I have a question. Is the professor the only person who sees the evaluation?

John Yes.

F? Because I think that the onus is on..

Don Unless they choose.

John It's their information. What they choose to do with it is...

F? I was just thinking that if a professor chose not to do anything with it in terms of sharing information with the class, but there was a problem, I would be a little bit frustrated if we did that and everybody identified and problem and then nothing happened because it's the professor's choice. I don't know. I think that, maybe if the chair of the department could at least see them, to know that this particular class has a big problem with this, I think that would be helpful. Especially in full-year classes, I've had problems with pros who, just starting in October and we just suffer through it until April. It's just really difficult and if you do an evaluation and they don't do anything, I think the students would feel even more helpless and really wouldn't want to go talk to them about it.

F? I guess it's a matter of accountability, really. You can fill out as many forms as you want, but if only, literally, one person sees it, it's not necessarily? goes back to the way they interact with their students. It just doesn't necessarily have to be out there for everybody to see. I know the end of year evaluations, those are available for everybody online, but perhaps those ones, they should maybe be reviewed by each department. If there's a lot of problems that says something about, either in a positive or negative way, this person's teaching skills.

John Currently, formative evaluation is given out, it's strictly the property of the instructor. On the other hand, you guys know that you filled something out midterm and if it didn't produce a positive response, you're likely to say that when you write the USRs at the end of term. That does go to the chair, the chair will read that, it does become public, so it's in the best interests of the instructor to pay attention because you're all likely to make sure that the information is not hidden in the long term.

F? The other thing I think is important is, I was, we were all told (while) doing a final evaluation in a class last week, that they don't type up our written comments anymore; the professor just gets to see them. I think anonymity is important and I expect that many of my professors could recognize my handwriting or my style of writing. I'd rather that, if I'm going to write a lot..

F? in the middle of the year, ?????????

F? I'd still rather it be anonymous.
M? I agree totally, which is why I don't like the idea of the professors talking about their results in class, after. If a professor comes in and says they didn't get a very good response on this question, the people that obviously have a problem with it may not be willing to speak out in class. That sort of singles them out, you know.

F? That's true.

M? I don't see how that's going to be effective. I wouldn't speak up in class and say, "I have this problem. I didn't like that."

John Would you feel obliged in a situation like that, having already had the opportunity to express your opinion anonymously? Is that enough?

F? If you get to write, it's enough.

F? Yes, if you can go beyond just your simple 'I agree or disagree', and respond in written form on the back with maybe some constructive criticism, then I feel that would be enough. But, if she came back into the class and started asking, "What do you feel I can do here?", I think that should be a part of the evaluation, not something that should be brought up in class later on. Any remarks for improvement, or anything like that, maybe that should be incorporated ??

Don I'd like to talk a little bit about that, because as you probably have worked out, we felt so far, and the Student Union has agreed with us, we felt that we had to protect anonymity vigorously to get people to do it, or to get the people who probably most should be doing it, to do it. A lot of people do it anyway, and a lot of people have various informal ways of doing it, but the people, in my opinion, who are the most concerned, are the people who would be nervous about criticism. So, now what I'd like your advice on, because I think you've raised a really tricky point, let me just say, since you don't know me, I tend to do really well on these things, and I've done this in the past, but I would go into a seminar after and say, "These are the results. I'm going to leave the room and I would like you to give me suggestions about all the things that could be improved," leaving the room, but still, it's a small seminar.

F? I think that would be very worthwhile.

M? I've had a prof that's sort of done that before, actually one that did that same thing this semester, where halfway through the semester he asked, like he had three different TA's doing seminars. He asked each one of them in the seminar to give some sort of anonymous evaluation, some sort of feedback on the class. I thought it was a great idea, and the first class back after that, there were great improvements.

Don Is that right?

M? That was one class. The next class back, it was back to the same old thing, but I was impressed with the change. I don't know, maybe it's just the prof; he's set in his ways and that's understandable. He did change for one class, but I mean, maybe that is a way of going about things. I thought it was good.

F? And he may have gradually changed over the long term.

Don Let me say what I hear you saying. We may actually want to do something else. What I hear you saying is that it's integral to the process that the instructor discuss the results with the class, but that it should be done in a way where any suggestions about improvements should be done under the same conditions of anonymity that applied to the questionnaire.

General agreement.

F? I don't think that I would be comfortable sitting in a class that I'm having a problem with and saying, "I have a problem with the way you do this," or "I don't understand this way of going about it," or something like that. But, seminar groups are great because I think that a class, especially a full-year class, is going to know, as a group, what is a problem and what's just, 'maybe if you did the readings before class, you wouldn't find it so frustrating' kind of problem.

M? Whether it's individual, or sort of a wider...

F? Yes, and I'm sure that's more useful for a prof, too.

John One example cited was having the TA collect that information. Is that distance enough to give you a level of comfort over anonymity?

M? I felt comfortable with it completely. They have nothing to gain or lose from singling somebody out. Usually, especially if you've got a TA running your seminar, if you're asking those sort of questions half-way through the year,
by then you’ve got some sort of rapport and understanding with that person. I felt comfortable doing that. I didn’t have a problem with it.

John Even if the prof is the supervisor of that TA’s thesis?

M? Well, no, I mean that’s a situation that could occur potentially. In this case, it wasn’t, but I suppose we’re all human and the prof could, in a less than ideal situation, there could be repercussions there for the TA. The TA didn’t seem to mind and was open to it. Most TA’s are students themselves, they understand.

F? You know they’re out there to help benefit your learning process.

M? I didn’t feel worried about doing that at all. I thought it was a good idea. I was happy that he did it.

F? Although, I have to say that the TA that I had in that same class, her supervisor was the professor. I’m not sure that she would take these comments back in the same tone that we made them in, perhaps. I think she might have been a little bit more careful about what she said. Maybe that would be a disadvantage.

John …filtering, rather than singling you out.

F? Exactly, because I think that, and I guess it helps in that class because there was three groups, so somebody was going to say something. But if it was only one TA, I could see how she might not have delivered the message in the way we intended it to be, just for her own… That’s not her fault, but just for her own….

M? It might have been my TA, too. I know him and I know that it was going back to the prof word for word, what was said. I didn’t feel uncomfortable. I thought it was a good idea.

Don John, I have two questions. This goes to the vagueness of the questions and the need for good follow-up. One of the reasons we thought political science was a good department to test drive these things, because there’s a variety of different kinds of classes, including the seminars that are part of some of your classes, but also, …we did it in, I don’t know what classes you’re from, but we did it in some 400 level classes. So, bearing that in mind, were there specific additional questions, I heard what you said about leaving room for and encouraging written responses, but granting that, were there specific things that you would have liked to have been able to comment on by way of the directed questions.

M? Through written response, or do you mean through...

Don Were there items we should have put on the questionnaire for you to respond to?

John Or any sort of check response.

F? I’d almost have to see the questionnaire again to remember exactly what was on there.

F? I’m not sure if there’s something on there about the readings that we do, but that would be a good one if there was. Just about if you think the readings are appropriate or do you think the volume is too much. I think volume is a good question to ask.

John So, more specific questions on workload.

M? It’s always a major. Usually you focus on how the prof is approaching the class and what their lecture is like and those are good questions. But, it should also be based on course work as well.

General Yes.

F? I’d really like questions about how you’re managing the class. I’d like to be able to tell the prof, “You expect us to do this much reading before every class and I’m not getting it done, so it has an effect on the way that I manage your lectures.” Not necessarily that they would change their expectations, but that they would know. They could say, “Well, 75% of my students had no idea what I was talking about before I started this. Maybe I should think about that.”

F? Maybe the fact that most of us do have a five-course course-load and work, because tuition is going up every year. I expect a reasonable amount of reading and just extra work in every class, but this one class is being so excessive that I actually haven’t read the last text at all. I just feel that I’m at a really huge disadvantage because there’s been so much volume in this class.

F? And she at least knew that we weren’t getting it done.
You guys all know who you’re talking about.

All  Yes.

John  We’ll leave it with just you knowing.

F?  I also have a comment just on that. I wasn’t sure if there was a question on there to do with ‘Were the course objectives clear?’ There was? Okay, because course objectives, as well as how the course is going to be presented, because sometimes, ‘What’s the syllabus? Did it really answer the questions put out there?’ I don’t know if that was part of the questionnaire, but….

M?  A lot of the questions that were asked are quite open, in the sense that a lot of the responses that you’d like to make, as far as written comments, are offshoots of those questions themselves. Unless you make the questions very pointed, there’s a need for further comments. The two sort of work together, I suppose.

Don  Give me an example if you can. I take very seriously what you’re saying about the workload and your ability to manage it. Can you give me some examples of the kinds of things you would like to tell the instructors?

F?  That we need to know, specifically, what’s going to be covered. It’s really not very helpful to tell us to read Hobbs for the next class. It’s a very big book and if you’re going to be covering chapter 3 and then skip over to 5 and then 17’s going to be really important, tell us that and we’ll read that.

John  A clearly stated learning outcomes from, as to what you’re meant to get out of ????

M?  What I found about classes this year is that, like, I was happy with this last term, but the syllabus that we got at the beginning of most classes last year, were fairly good. One of the things I found this year is that they’re really lacking.

F?  A schedule of readings is helpful.

M?  Three of my classes right now, it’s really bad. They’re vague. They give no sort of, even if there was an, okay, ‘this week, this is what we’re focusing on’, even if week by week, rather than lecture by lecture would be good. But, some of the classes I have right now, it’s not even that. It’s, ‘these are the readings’ and there’s no dates.

F?  Yes, it’s just a list of books. That’s all it is.

F?  In this full-year course, we will be reading these six texts, so get on it.

Don  Does it assist you in managing your time, because students have different pressures, does it assist you in managing your time to have a breakdown for each day?

F?  Very much so. The best Political Science class that I’ve had is one where the professor has laid out, week by week; these are the readings that you’re supposed to do. If it changes, she tells us and at least if you know, ‘I didn’t do last weeks readings. I know what I have to do for this week.’ Whereas in the other class, where we only have a list of books, I really have no idea. Am I supposed to read all of it, are we halfway through? If you miss a class or a couple of days, you’re lost. The one where she laid it out, it was immensely helpful.

M?  In all fairness, the prof that we’re talking about, this is the first time that she’s taught this course in a 50 minute span, so she’s sort of… but I think after maybe the first semester, a new syllabus could have been handed out or a little bit more detailed outline.

F?  Also, telling us in class, just being able to say, “This week, we’re going to try and talk about justice in the republics”, just being really clear about the focus. In more than one of my classes, that’s a bit of a problem. They start in on the lecture and you’re not quite sure what you’re supposed to be taking notes on.

M?  That’s the way it is in three of my classes right now. It’s hard.

John  Things don’t change much over time, do they?

Don  I noted something in reviewing the responses. I noticed something in particular fields, not just one. But, all the instructors in the political theory field, and some other instructors, and I’m going to ask this question. Before you respond, I want John to indicate if it’s an okay question. The thing that troubled me, because ????? responses would be like, were questions that said, ‘I know what’s happening’. What troubled me is, people in political theory classes tend not to know that until the end. Do you know what I mean?

M?  You mean understanding where the course is supposed to be going?
Don But you might understand all the things you’re reading. You might be doing quite well in the course, but...

Many talking at once.

F? But shouldn’t that be incorporated into ???

Don What I’m asking you, is, is there a way that we can ask that, where people can say they don’t know what the big picture is, but where it doesn’t count automatically as a criticism of what the instructor is trying to do. Is that clear? Do you see what I’m trying to say by that? I want the students to feel comfortable and in control of the learning process, but if they don’t understand the fundamental questions of the history of western political philosophy, that’s okay. We don’t want them being unhappy that they don’t, but we don’t expect them to be Plato.

F? I’m unhappy.

F? I think, to go along with that question, is the fact that most of us can understand that not everything is going to come together until the end and that was even talked about at the beginning, that it shouldn’t come together until the end. But, ‘Do you understand where we are at this point in the course? Do you have a grasp on this?’, should mean, ‘We’re going to look at justice through each of these texts and we’re going to evaluate that and near the end you’re going to be able to pull it all together and do that’. So, if you don’t know that at that point in time because they’re each evaluated in their own way, each text is done in their own way, and you don’t know that it’s pulled together until April 3, 20 days before your exam, I don’t think that’s valid.

John You need a graded series of objectives, where the early objectives are specifically on a narrow focus of reading, and then broader objectives where you’re starting to analyze between all the readings that have gone on.

F? Yes, because I think that’s what our..., now, we’ve got a list of exam questions and it’s becoming a little clearer, but it’s been a long year, without a lot of clarity.

M? Guidance.

F? Direction...

F? ...in how it all comes together.

Don Thank you. I find that very helpful, personally. The other question I had is completely different from anything you’ve raised. I wonder if there was any change in the attitude of the students, either toward the class or toward one another, as the result of the process?

F? I don’t really think so, and especially...

F? It was done kind of late.

F? Also, in the one class that she didn’t actually come back with any responses to the class, there couldn’t really be any negative or positive response to anybody else. In the other class that I was in that she did really go over the responses, you know, for most of the requirement classes, there’s always some people that really want to take it and don’t necessarily want to take it. So, it’s just a variety of opinions anyway, but it never went, I never sensed anything against another person or anything like that.

John Any general comments about evaluation or anything else we haven’t touched on?

F? I’d like to say that I’m here today because I think it’s a valuable thing and I think it’s important. I took an hour out of an extremely stressful time because I really think it’s worthwhile and I thought it was a good idea to try all this out in the Poli Sci department, where it’s supposedly democratic, blah, blah, blah. We should be participating and I enjoyed that and I really take it as, if I’m paying $5,000 a year to be here, I would like to have some kind of input into, if I’m really not enjoying something about somebody’s class and it’s too late to drop it, or just anything, or that they’re supposed to be a really good instructor and just, I’m not getting it. I would like to be able to say that and I think it’s very valuable for so many classes.

F? This definitely makes me feel a little more in control of your own education, which is pretty much what we all want.

F? Yes.
M? I have a question, not necessarily in regard to these midterm evaluations, but just evaluations in general, the ones at the end of the semester. Where’s the accountability for those? What happens with them? I’m interested in the outcome of them. Aren’t profs held accountable for...

F? Because it’s only the good profs who are going to care.

Don Are you asking about Political Science or generally?

M? Generally, but more specifically about Political Science because that applies to all of us. I’m assuming it’s different for every department, since you say that.

Don In Political Science, now we’re talking about the USRI’s, we never did type the written comments. We have a requirement that if the class is small, below a certain number, then you can’t use the USRI, you have to use the other instrument, the answers of which are always typed. We try to protect anonymity there.

F? They aren’t given until after the exams are given back, anyway.

Don They’re absolutely never, in our department, we never usually give them to people until you’ve forgotten what the course was about. It’s actually been an aggravation, but, no, GFC policy prohibits their being released to the instructor until after all the grades are posted. In our case, though, and I don’t speak for other departments, the chair sometimes reads the comments, usually doesn’t in very, very large classes, but the chair reviews systematically the USRI scores for every instructor for every course. In the department, we have an FEC, what we call the Faculty Evaluation Committee, which makes a recommendation on each person’s performance for the preceding year. That committee looks at the USRI’s and sometimes the written comments on instructors, as well as other things. So, they are seen by the chair in an aggregate way, and discussed by the chair with instructors, or at least, they’re supposed to be. I’m speaking of my experience. I know our committee works this way. I know the chair works this way. I’m not sure what kinds of conversations chairs will have with instructors.

M? So, the main purpose of them is for the professors themselves to get feedback on the course, I’m assuming.

Don It’s twofold, and now, it’s become threefold. The twofold is so that the department and the dean can use them as part of the evaluation of the instructor’s performance as a teacher, in addition to the evaluation in other ways. They’re also for the benefit of the instructor improving the course and, lately, they have become for the advice and guidance of the students who might want to take that course and work with that instructor.

M? How weighty are these evaluations in determining the evaluation of a professor the chair does, the committees do, are these weighty?

F? If a professor got a really bad evaluation, would it be a big problem for them? Are there going to be any consequences of a lot of bad evaluations?

Don Yes,

John Especially if it repeats year after year, there are serious consequences.

Don It is expected that people do have bad times, but the one.., there are two.., in the Faculty of Arts, I can assure you that, categorically, and I believe this is true in the Faculty of Science as well, I can tell you categorically that repeated poor performance has negative consequences for a person’s income. Systematic outstanding performance has some slight, but definite, indications for the person’s income.

M? Just some criticism – the evaluations are saying that the committees???? evaluation committees, they use these evaluations; do they read the comments?

Don Sometimes. I think a lot depends on what the numbers say, and bearing in mind what the distribution is. You wouldn’t ordinarily????, however, unless I am mistaken, I believe that that FEC committee in our department has a representative of both the graduate and undergraduate students. I can tell you????, if you want, if you have concerns of that sort, then you should influence the selection and reporting of the student representatives. That’s why they’re there.

John Just to give you a different flavor of a different faculty – Science, you have your annual meeting with the chair of biosciences. He does review that data, he does review the comments and will address deficiencies if he sees them. He also addresses good things as well and that’s another way those evaluations are used because if people are clearly excellent teachers, then they’re going to be put into the awards process as a result of that feedback.

M? Will the midterm evaluations.., they’re solely for professor use, then, and it’s up to them if it goes beyond?
Don: These?

M?: Yes.

John: Yes.

M?: And will they...they won't be used for evaluation processes outside of the professor's use?

John: That's not the intention of them. It's to give feedback to the instructor. There would be huge resistance if we made it a formal requirement like the end of term one. Although, as I talked about earlier on, there's nothing to stop you, when you write the end of term things, saying, 'We filled in something in the midterm, and the guy clearly didn't hear us and we're a little upset about that'.

M?: I don't know if you can influence this at all, but maybe on the year end evaluations, you can have a question that pertains to the midterm evaluations themselves, and say, 'Was there a change? Did it make a difference? Was reaction to it acceptable?'

General agreement.

F?: I think that would be a very valuable question to add onto the year-end exam, if you are going to implement these midterm evaluations. That would almost be the driving point of the entire evaluation, is, 'At the end of the year, was there any difference?' Even when we're reading in the Gateway, when they were talking about these midterm evaluations, 'Do you feel that evaluations make any difference', and the overwhelming answer was 'No'. I have to say I put way more effort into doing the midterm evaluation. I spent way more time thinking about what to say than the year-end because, I mean, it's a bad time of year anyway.

F?: You know you're not going to have the prof again.

F?: You don't care, really. And it's a long evaluation. By the time you're finished reading it, and you're putting 'agree' for everything just so you can get out of the class or whatever. I've noticed too, because I always check during the summer to see how my profs did, to see if I was way off because I hated somebody. I think I'm just ???, but I do check. I've noticed sometimes that..., all the time, they get good marks. I've never seen a professor get really bad marks, where sometimes I thought, 'What were we complaining about all year?' I think part of it is, because I did one today where I was just like, "Oh, let's get out of here" and I didn't care.

M?: That was one of the reasons I was asking about the accountability for them, where the evaluations went. I'm trying to select classes for next year, so I was looking at the evaluations from last year on the SU website and there were two instances out of all the Political Science classes where I saw a prof get bad ratings. Two out of the entire..., maybe that's a reflection on the quality of profs, but I don't think so. I would expect that,...there wasn't always continuity between the......because a professor would have more than one different class evaluated there. They might have good evaluations for one class, and poor for another. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not sure how valuable they are when you see the same...it looks almost identical when you look through them. The evaluations look almost the same.

F?: The class I had last year, we had major problems with the prof. I gave her a bad evaluation. When I went to look at it, just to see, was I on target. There were two people who gave her 'strongly disagree' on everything and I know who the other person was because they were sitting beside me. I couldn't believe that people hadn't..., I know that people had a problem with the class so they didn't do it. I didn't think it was because, toward the end of the year, everybody loved her. I think it was because we were lazy and we wanted to get out of there. We didn't care because we knew we weren't going to take a class from her again, so why bother. I think that this is so important, because I would put way more effort into that midterm evaluation, to make sure that I told them exactly what I thought.

M?: I also think they're better because you hit evaluations in the middle of the year, you're going to get most of the class there. Looking at those evaluations on that ? website, gives you the number of students in the class and the number that wrote the evaluation and it's low. The professors...

F?: People who were really upset with the class had given up at that point.

F?: I missed the one last week because I stopped going.

M?: ....Professor Studer has been advocating to get the evaluations...., I think the last day of classes is dumb. Look at today – there were a couple evaluations today and there was nobody there.

John: It violates the rules of the administration.

M?: I know. They were supposed to be done last week.
F? Yes, I had one today too.

M? I know they were supposed to be last week, but I did have one today.

All Not within the last two weeks.

M? Not in the last two weeks! All of them.....

All talking at once.

Don I sat in a committee last year and we discussed, speaking of someone who has never done it any other day but the last day, I have students who will come on the last day, weak students will come on the last day in case we’re going to talk about the exam. I was appalled – for years I’ve been violating policy.

F? I had one teacher in EAS and she did just her own little evaluation in the middle of the year. It really was helpful. She just said, “What do you like? What do you dislike? What needs change?” She changed it and I think it made the class better.

John Did you see the same thing this time around in Political Science?

F? I actually missed that day, but I don’t see how that particular class could have gotten any better, so.... It was a really good class.

John Do you have any other general comments on those midterm evaluations? What worked for you; what didn’t?

F? Simply because I missed that one, I guess I can’t really say, other than I think it’s a good idea.

John Did you think that the class changed as a result of the results that went in?

F? I didn’t see a big difference before and after, no.

John One of the comments you were making while we were discussing when to administer these, the idea of linking it to the drop and add date for courses and having the formative (?) evaluation done before that. Do you think there’s some reason to push the drop and add date back?

F? I have been thinking about that a number of times. Sometimes, the first week, it’s great. You love that professor. I certainly did in this class. I thought it was wonderful. Well, even as recently as last week, I’ve been thinking about dropping this class. So, I don’t know. I think the add/drop date is really difficult to deal with because it’s too early. You really don’t know what’s happening in that class yet, because it’s just...

F? If you could, if it was just late enough that you could say, “Okay, I’ve sat in this class and I already know.” We have a lot of required courses and if you sit there and you say, “I have to take this course from this professor this year”. We have courses like that and I’m not going to be able...I’m going to have a big problem with this. If you can say that. I guess that doesn’t really apply for add and drop because sometimes....

Tape flips.

F??...and this semester I had one class and it was a day before the drop date and the first class, quite often, all you get is the syllabus. You don’t really get a sense of the teacher, even. You just kind of jump in and see what happens.

F? I think you would put more into the evaluation as a student if you knew you had to be in the class and you were going to get a mark at the end. Like, it matters to you that this professor isn’t doing well and this matters to my GPA. I think you would put more into it than if it was, “Well, I’m going to drop it next week, so what do I care about what I write on here?”

F? I think you couldn’t get the date back far enough that you could identify a problem, tell the professor about it and they could change it, and then say, “Oh, they’re not changing it, I’m going to drop the class”.

General agreement.

F? If it was before the withdrawal date, at least, so you could...

One thing that I was concerned about is on all of these that we do now at the end of the year, they say the profs not going to see all these comments until after your marks are turned in. So there used to be some way of keeping anonymity. In smaller classes, you just can rewrite it, ????? so I don’t know if those things are in place or not.
F? That would be a fear I’d have, like you mentioned in 400 level classes, if I did have a major problem with a professor, but we had to hand in written assignments every week, too. I would be....

F? They would know.

F? Yes, I would be really hesitant...

Don They are typed. Any class with an enrollment under ten, they’re typed. Any class with an enrollment under ten, we don’t use the USRI.

M? Why?

Don Because ? might go to the website and see lots of courses that aren’t there because the number was too low. We use this other form and they are automatically typed.

M? You’ll see some classes where there are 60 people enrolled and there’s only 17 people responding to this.

Don If I were you guys, that’s the statistic I would use in judging that course and that instructor. I don’t care how many...

F? How many people really actually attended the classes.

M? Maybe that’s one of the reasons the evaluations are so high. You get the people that go into that class and say....

Many interruptions.

F? That’s true though.

Don If you had the choice between two kinds of questionnaires being mandatory, but only one, you’re going to do one or you can do the other, but it has to be done. Would you trade the end of the term USRI mandatory form for an early in the term mandatory instrument of the kind that you used?

All Yes. (No delay)

M? Like I said, it only takes you, it doesn’t take very long for you to get an idea of what the class is going to be like.

F? If it’s midterm, you know.

M? Three weeks at the most. Yes, by midterm you’re going to know for sure and you’re going to know what changes need to be made.

F? I’m just curious what the professors’ response to this is. Is it an open response? Is it across the board? Are they willing to look at this and change? Or, are they just going to say, “Okay, this is another thing that I don’t have time for”?

John We’re going to be asking the professors in a forum just like this.

F? Because what’s the point of doing it if all it does is either increase their tenure or ?????, probably not. If it’s not going to change anything, what’s the point of doing it, early or later?

M? It does give them a chance to change, though, so that’s why I like the.....

F? It depends on the prof, whether they actually will or not.

M? I think the year-end evaluations...

F? If you’re teaching that course next year.

F? But it gives them a chance to start new and fresh, but I think the midterm – they can make that choice as well.

John Our motivation in doing this study is more to enhance the quality of the learning environment that you’re in, rather than enhancing the promotion prospects of the faculty.
M? Which is why I think the midterm evaluations are a lot better. When I write that evaluation, I want to do it for my benefit. It sounds selfish, but the next class that that prof teaches, the same class, I don’t care what they do.

All speaking at once.

F? ...midterm to the end, too, in some ways. But how I would have judged some of my classes in the middle and how I judge it now, I’m just glad to be almost done with it.

F? Oh, it’s not that bad.

F? ...but, yes, if there’s going to be a difference, it would...

F? That’s our overwhelming response.

F? YES. We like midterm evaluations.

John That’s good. That’s the sort of clear cut message we really like to get out of groups like this.

Don We’re reporting this to the Student Union.

F? A lot of the Student Union people that ran, ran wanting to have midterm evaluations. Obviously, a lot of people thought it was going to be valuable.

Don They actually got the idea from groups like this.

F? Well, no, they all gave you guys credit, too. Everybody I heard, did.

Don If you would, I don’t know whether you could do this, but I wonder if you have suggestions for us, in speaking to students, suggestions that we could use to encourage instructors, more generally, to do it. To that end, I would specifically invite deliberately to one kind of instructor, the hardest kind, I think, for us. Instructors who are good, or who at least think they’re good, will do this kind of thing, partly because they don’t expect bad news, and hopefully because, if there is bad news, they do want to know so they can deal with it. The problem is with the other kinds of instructors. Do you have any suggestions you could give us?

M? How you make them do these evaluations? Is that what you’re saying?

Don How we could lead them to do it and how we could lead them to implement the results.

F? To care.

Don To care, yes.

F? Shouldn’t that be part of..., I almost think, maybe incorporate that into a job description. If 90% of your students think that you’re doing a bad job, it shouldn’t just make a difference in your pay. Maybe it should make a difference in..

M? Having a job or not.

F? Yes.

F? It’s very frustrating for me. I found it very frustrating in some of my courses this year, not just my political science ones. I had one class last semester, to sit in it and realize, this professor has to teach a course but he really doesn’t want to be here, he really doesn’t care if we learn it and I just really don’t understand how the hiring process, or how the job description, or anything is set up, but I think that it’s pretty obvious that some professors are not teachers. They’re researchers. Even if it would be possible to say, “This person, they’re a brilliant economist, but it’s really not fair to inflict them on students anymore. Let’s just pay them to do research.”

F? I agree. There are a lot of professors that you can tell they’d rather be... From what I understand, correct me if I’m wrong, there’s a lot of pressure for profs to be publishing articles and doing that sort of thing. Some of them you can tell, which ones would rather be ?. They’re the ones, the first day of class, that say, “Don’t bother showing up to class. It’s all in the textbook. Show up for the exam.” I’m going, “Okay, why am I paying you?”

F? I could buy the textbook and challenge the exam if that was possible. I think if there was a series of bad (?) evaluations or something, what I would actually like to know, are there professor workshops? Is it an ongoing series of workshops? Incorporate new teaching strategies – this is how some of the most successful professors at Chicago have done it. Bring them in, talk to the department, this is how we implement our things...
M? Make it mandatory.

F? Don't make the really bad professors teach, because...

John That just sticks up the workload for the really good ones.

All talking at once.

Don Speaking of the U of Chicago, do you know what has the best undergraduate program in political science in this country?

F? Here?

Don If you think things are bad here, you should try anywhere else.

F? I don't think things are bad at all. We've got some amazing teachers here.

M? That was interesting, when you brought up those workshops. I didn't know they had those. Are those mandatory?

John No.

M? Make them mandatory.

John In other countries, they're mandatory. In the U.K. you have to get accreditation to be a university teacher. I know people who have gone through the process and they've just erased the tape as soon as it's over. It's just like taking a course that isn't....

F? ..that doesn't have any...

F? But, no, like ongoing workshops.

F? Just like they do with teachers. Do they have something like that for profs, where they...

Don John gave one a couple weeks ago. I gave one last year.

F? So, there are ongoing ones.

John We're both going to a conference this summer to report on this study.

F? But, they're not mandatory for profs.

Don Generally speaking, the people we get are...

All speaking at once

F? There should be consequences of really, I don't know if you can do that, of...

Don There is stuff we can do. First of all, if you have, if there are any questions about how the things work in ours, I'll be glad to answer any of those. I think the more you know, but, there's one thing you guys could do. You really can make a difference. Make the student union take teaching seriously. Take the Arts representative and just tell them, just say to them, the student union, next year, is going to have one issue. It's going to have tuition fees. You tell them you have two issues.

M? That would be nice. Ideally..., I won't get started with the students union because..

F? It's another frustration.

Don You can effect real change through the students union.

M? Not when the students union, the executive (?) is unwilling to..

F? But we're starting new next year, right? There's always hope.

M? I'm not sure how you make profs willing to give these evaluations. They've got to want to and even if they do give them, it doesn't mean they're going to look at them. I think the only, as far as students themselves go, there's
not too much you can, maybe as a class you can ask. Just one thing to bring up -? right now, the prof, I won't say anything bad about him, but I don't think he's great. He has assigned at the beginning of the class, two student reps for students to express their opinions through. I think that's a good idea.

F? This is the class where he changed for a day and then he went back, but we can talk to that person. The people who volunteered for student reps are the type of people who speak up in class and say, "We think this is bad", and have done so numerous times.

M? I think it's a good idea. It hasn't necessarily worked.

F? ..the way we might have wanted it to.

M? Again, that's a reflection of the prof himself. I think it's a good idea because when that rep is going to that prof, the prof knows that it's not that rep that has the problem. It's somebody else in the class. There's anonymity. That's a good idea. Maybe a student initiated evaluation. If the students feel there needs to be more, maybe...

M? That's the way people will....

F? ...volunteerism, though.

F? Unfortunately, students......

M? I think if it's there for the prof to give, if the prof assigns a representative..., in that one class that we have, what's the, before class starts, what's everybody talking about?

F? About the prof, that's what we do.

M? When there's a need for it, you can initiate something like that.

F? That was a good idea that he had. Actually, in this particular class, and I don't know why, we didn't even do a midterm evaluation in that class, of the Political Science classes. That might have changed the atmosphere, because he's doing all these other things.

M? That was the class where the TA did..., for some sort of feedback.

F? So he pursued it in his own way.

M? He says that's something that he does for all of his classes. That's good.

F? When the evaluations come in, just getting back to professors that need to change, so, it's compiled and then it's given to them by a supervisor, is that correct? Or, how do teachers get the results?

Don Are you talking about the USRI or the ones that...

John End of term?

F? I guess I'm talking about end of term, yes, I don't know. I'm assuming that if these ones come into being, that they will be one thing. How are these ones done?

John The way it's done – you filled them in, they came to me, I have them machine scored, then I move the responses around so they were grouped under areas like workload and class communication and a variety of other things. So, all the related questions were pulled together. Then I transcribed all the comments that were written on the back so the profs would never see the handwriting. Then I sent them to the professors and we offered to talk about them. In most instances, no one followed up.

F? I was going to say, a way of accountability would be requiring them either to meet with you or somebody or else to respond to it with some goals for change. "Okay, in response to this, this is what's going to happen. The same is going to happen ?????.

M? I think it's a good idea to incorporate a question on that year-end evaluation that says, "Was there a response to the midterm evaluation?" If a prof gets a bad response on that midterm evaluation, and hasn't changed anything by the end of the year, he's got to be held accountable for that, to whatever degree each department deals with it, that's a different thing.

F? I think, honestly, a related question to always go along with that, is, "Did the professor change anything?" A second question would be, "Did they need to?" I have a couple of professors, I didn't want them to change anything. I
perfectly loved the format and all the different ways that they’re going about it and everything like this. But, “Did they need to change?” I think, is a very applicable question to the one before, “Did they change?” Or, “Did they change for the benefit?” I really think just in simple..., for me, it’s job description. It’s, “What is your job?” Maybe part of the job is incorporating student evaluations at the midterm, into what they’re doing, formally acknowledging that they looked at it, and taking it back to the class. Maybe that’s something that actually has to be done.

F? I would just say, some sort of acknowledgement is important because otherwise it just gets filed away, “Oh, I’ll look at it when I have time”. And yet, for the teachers that are keen and that are good teachers, they’re going to look at it and are going to change. The ones that think that they’re doing fine and don’t really care what anybody thinks, they’re just going to file it.

John I asked for an hour of your time. I’m quite happy to sit here and talk some more, but don’t feel obliged to stay. We really appreciate it.

F? I think we appreciated the opportunity.

F? Exactly.

Don This will have a., it’s not going to change the world, but it is going to result..., your comments are going to be very useful in persuading a number of people, like the student union and others? instructors, to start doing this.

F? I find it amusing that four of us are from the same class.

Tape was turned off and on again.

M? I mean, I think I know who it is, but

All talking at once.

M? I think it’s a really good idea – it’s worthwhile.
A8. Transcript of Faculty Focus Group.

John: The original tape will be destroyed after the transcripts are made. Are there any questions to start?

No response.

John: I want to ask if any of you had any experience with formative evaluation prior to this particular study?

Several: No.

John: That was easy. What did you think of the process – the submitting of the midterm evaluation form to the students, its rapid turnaround and the content being given back to you in the format that came back?

??: I think it was excellent. I had no difficulties with it at all. John’s communications are always very crisp and clear and gave me a lot of time to decide when was best to have the people come in and do it. I appreciated the fact that I was given some discretion in terms of the timing. That was good. I found that it was relatively quick, painless. I found that the students appreciated it. I asked them the day after, whether they appreciated having such a thing. They said, indeed they did. It gave them the opportunity to provide their views as to how things might be going along. From my point of view, therefore, it was painless, well carried out. I have no suggestions I could make, except two little ones. One is that, and this may have been my fault, I would suggest administering the exam at the beginning of the class. It was done at the end of the class and whenever you do that, the students are in a rush to leave. They know that nothing’s going to happen after this, so they have a tendency to complete the form in a perfunctory way. If they could do it at the beginning of the class, then that problem is obviated. I certainly would make that as a strong suggestion. I think so highly of the idea of these tests, these evaluations, that I think it’s useful to give them a chance to breath a little bit and say what they want to say, carefully, not looking at the clock. The other is, I’m not sure if the actual form contained it or not, is to give them an opportunity for open-ended comments. Did it have that?

??: Yes.

??: It did, because..., is that under the general assessment, then?

John: We certainly asked that the students provide any additional comments they want on the back of the form and if you received any, they were transcribed and sent back as part of your report. I know that I did that for some of you. It may not have been the case with yours.

??: My feeling is that if you do it at the beginning of the class, there will be more time for them to think a little bit and provide some of that open-ended comment, which I think is very useful to do. Those would be my only comments.

John: I appreciate the comments about how to improve the process. Perhaps we could leave that for a separate question.

??: Can I say one more thing? It would have been useful to receive a copy of the questionnaire as it was administered to the students, to see how it was laid out and in what order.

??: You didn’t get that?

??: No. I got the response, which was organized in a way that repeated several questions, so it took me a few minutes to figure out, “Oh, it’s the same question”. So, it would have been interesting to see how that was laid out. I agree about administer it at the end of the class. I chose that, but it was unwise. I only got one comment. I think the value of it would be to get comments from those students who disagreed with particular questions, or agreed, and why. That would have been useful to figure out what to do next.

??: I thought it was a good exercise and I think the students appreciated the opportunity. It gave the impression we cared. I think they liked that.

??: Perception.

??: Yes, perception that we cared about it. I found talking to them about it after useful, in terms of, if I identified certain percentages and said, “Okay, you feel this way about the use of technology in the classroom. Well, what do you think about it? Elaborate on that. What do you mean when ‘x’ percentage say this? What do you have in mind? Where’s it being used, either well or badly in other classes?” It was useful because it sends the right message to the students about teaching. I thought it was useful as well for that reason. You could go back to them and talk to them about the questionnaire so you get additional feedback in that respect. The idea of it being midterm as opposed to the end of the class, I think is good, because again, it goes to the point of, is this something you can use in that particular class, as opposed to either using it or not at the end of the year. A final thing that comes to mind is, I liked forcing them to decide whether they agree or disagree with something, as opposed to this sort of mealy-mouthed 9 to 5 point
scale, about where are you on that. They either agree with what you're doing, or they disagree and I liked that aspect of it.

?? I found it especially useful, given the size of my class, 100 people. You don't really get to know them and they don't warm up and say what they want to say until later on in the term. Having a class that size, it's especially useful for this kind of thing. In a smaller class, you probably get a feeling for how they're getting along, earlier on. So, it's especially useful in a larger class.

?? I didn't get a favourable response from my students. They were more indifferent to it, the ones who commented on it. It may be though, because it was a 400 level course, that I chose to use it in there. There were 50 students in the course, and we, weekly, have seminars. So, there's a fair amount of interaction as we go along. That may have been why they seemed to be less enthusiastic, shall we say, about the process. I think the way in which the process was conducted was useful, but it may be that it's more appropriate for junior level classes, perhaps, for some of the reasons that have already been expressed. But, I thought, in terms of how it was administered and the quickness of the response and everything was quite commendable, in terms of giving me the sort of feedback you wanted soon, rather than sitting and waiting and giving the opportunity to integrate some of that into the class, that was being suggested. But, my students didn't seem to be..., at best, indifferent to it. That may be simply because most of them are graduated students.

?? That was my experience too. The administration of it was very well done, but my students didn't think it was really worth it. Part of that, because it's so late, it's too late anyway - they couldn't drop the course if this crystallized their idea of what they didn't like about it. It was way too late for that.

?? What level was it?

?? 200. Full year course. They just thought, they didn't like the 'agree', 'disagree', the ones that talked to me, anyway. Maybe the vast majority did, but the ones that talked to me, didn't like the just 'agree', 'disagree'. They kind of agreed, but kind of didn't. So, I'm not sure that it was all that useful, in a sense. It could just be idiosyncratic - the things were, I didn't get good scores on things that I was going to change anything about and if I wouldn't have started then, talking to them to explain why I wasn't going to change anything about it, it would have sounded self-justifying or apologetic, as opposed to something they were supposed to figure out. I couldn't, you could bring it up and address it, but the ones that I didn't like the numbers on, weren't ones that I would address, because there's no way I'm going to tell them what the exam questions are at the start of the year, which was basically, you know, not being sure what they were going to be examined on, was that question.

John Is that necessarily the response to that particular item?

?? Yes, in this course, it is. In another course, it might not be, but in this course, that would be it.

?? Although, some of that, though, to tell them why, to explain to them, "Okay, a majority of you had a certain comment about grading," for example. "Here's why it's done that way." It gave me the chance to explain things again. I thought I, maybe I didn't lay it out good at the beginning, way back in September. It also would give me a chance to say, "You know, this isn't something I'm going to change, because I do the grading myself, and that's why it takes longer for you to get it back. I know that might make you frustrated, but you're paying $4,000 a year. I think that tenure/tenure-track prof should do as much of their grading as they can." So, it would let you do that sort of stuff.

?? You could do that, yes.

?? So, even if you're not going to change things, because when I talked to them in respect to a couple questions, that what I said. "It would be nice if more of you felt better about this than you do, but here's why I do what I do." So, like you said, ????

?? But I mean, to assess that, you might want to really know how they actually answered that question on the final one, if it made any difference explaining it again. I don't remember that one being on there, because I don't remember any ones, except the ones I didn't like my scores on, but I'm very bad with grading, I mean, very slow, because I do it all myself. But, I hear that all year. It's like, "When are we going to get them?" so I don't need the form, I don't need this, to let me know that that's what they don't like about the way I teach.

John Do you warn them about that at the start of the year?

?? Repeatedly.

?? Yes. They still don't like it.

?? I put on my outline how quickly they can expect to get things back. That seems to satisfy them.
In terms of the process, when, in the future, for full-year courses, it would be better to do this in the first term.

Yes – September.

What I found, in terms of talking to them about this, the outcome of the questionnaire, I felt really awkward about doing what Ian did, except with the technology. We had a conversation about that. But, for those who disagreed that classes are stimulating, I’m not going to put them on the spot in this large class and say, “Okay, why not?” I’m not going to ask my students why they didn’t find the classes stimulating. I did invite them all to tell me what they thought I could do better, and I never received any responses. I think for the questions that, where the students disagree or agree, however it turns out, however the question is worded, they should be invited to explain or offer a suggestion. That’s the biggest problem I had with it. There were some things where I didn’t have 100% agreement, so I wanted to know what the students found problematic, what they thought I should do about it. I never found that I got any kind of satisfactory explanation for that. Maybe there isn’t one. I don’t know. But, inviting them to give some sort of open-ended explanation of why they agreed or disagreed, would be helpful. I only got one comment. It was nice, but it wasn’t helpful. At the end of the day, I wasn’t sure what to do with this, except with the ones where they seem to be happy, and that’s fine, that’s gratifying.

Yes, there could be, is it possible for the mechanics of like, getting this through the computer, to have an ‘if not, why not’ and then have a blank line under each question, or does that not work?

I’m sure with computers, all things are possible.

Well, you can set it up so that part of the thing could be machine scored, but the rest would have to be entered in another way, which would make for a lot more work. Or, you could simply give, I don’t know how you’d do this. It would be more valuable, but it would be considerably more labour intensive, to produce those.

In my own practice, I use exactly the same question instrument, using WebCT in the survey mode, and you could build in those supplementary questions and it would all be completely anonymous. The machine would take care of everything. So, that’s an option if you use WebCT in your course.

That would be good.

There’s a way, too, possibly you could structure responses, like, auxiliary questions, ‘Is the lecture stimulating?’ Well, ‘What would make them more stimulating? Current events? Guest lecturers? Other material?’ They might have three or four that you determine might be constructive to get some feedback on, in terms of what they want, “going too fast, going too slow, more examples”, whatever.

So, in other words, we could make the formative evaluation a lot like the summative one, the USRI, where there’s a core of questions, perhaps the ones we have there, and then you could add on the supplementals, that your experience tells you that is appropriate to your situation.

That might work.

Can we do that with the other one? Or, is that department-wide?

You can do that with the other one? Or, is that department-wide?

You can change anything you want, at least parts of it. Parts of it, you can’t.

First ten are mandatory, after that...

The ones we have in the department are all ?????. Some have to be used everywhere. All the ones we use have to be from the department, but you can add anything you want.

They have a book where you can select questions from.

Or, you can write your own.

There’s some questions that the students didn’t know exactly what to do with. For instance, in my class, we have seminars. I think this is typical of second year classes, in Political Science, anyway. So, the question about discussion, ‘more discussion would help my learning’, they didn’t really know what to do with that. There’s nothing on
here about seminars and that would be useful too, as an add-on. 'Do you find seminars useful? Do you attend seminars?' The other one was, 'I feel that I have to write down everything the instructor says'. Well, some students told me that they didn't want to disagree with that, because that would be perceived as negative, but they don't feel they have to write down everything I say, so they felt compelled to. But, they didn't know how I'd interpret it, so there was some consternation about that one. I don't think there needed to be, but...... They also were a bit put off by the ordering of the questions. They'd be going along, merrily agreeing or disagreeing, whatever the case may be, and then the direction of the questions would switch. That's to keep them on their toes, but they thought there could be some mistakes as a result of it.

?? This isn't Florida.

?? I know that in survey design, it's a very good idea to switch the direction of the question. It's essential, but that was just their response.

John Just to give you some history on the instrument we were using, it was originally developed by Tom Nelson, once chair of Psychology here, on a research project on formative evaluation, funded by the province. The instrument has been used by University Teaching Services as part of their peer consultation program for many years. So, it's a well-validated instrument, but your points about it being 'one size fits all' are very true. That's the way it was designed. That's why it's useful to think about how we can customize it to every individual.

?? Is the test group just Political Science at this point?

John Yes.

?? Oh, I didn't know that.

?? Another bottom line was, you want it administered after the first exam. That was the idea, which made sense, of course.

John That would certainly make sense, in terms of the feedback on performance. Yes, it's better if that happens. In fact, a lot of students, as I remember the comments, said that, "We haven't had any feedback yet, so this is an irrelevant question."

?? That's true, likely.

?? When we got it back in the form of, you typed it out, with the repetitive way, that question that Linda brought up, about, 'I felt I had to write down everything the instructor said', came back as a criticism if they answered 'yes'. I'm sorry, write your lectures so they have to. That's a stupid question, if we're getting into the details of this. Or, at least, presented that way, it's a stupid question. If you write your lectures well, then they should be trying to take every word down. If you're wasting all their time in class and they only need to put down every tenth sentence you say, then you don't. But, when we got it as feedback afterwards, this was one of those things, 'you might help them if you let them know they only have to take ten percent or every fifth word or whatever, as though that's the goal to aim at. I'm still working the other way. I'm still working that every word may make a difference. I'm still working to make my lectures more structured, more perfect and not easier and only every tenth sentence or when I say, "Now, write this down".

?? Well, what's easier about a lecture? If that's what you want to do in your lecture, that's great. So, usually you'll structure it that way, so you do it that way. If I want to pose a question to my class and I want them to think about it and I want them to discuss with me in class, then I'll structure my lectures that way. It depends what you want to do to your class.

?? That's what I mean, so that question doesn't...

?? So, if they say, 'Yes', that could be a positive.

?? For you.

?? Yes, as opposed to..., and then it comes back as a feedback in a negative sense. Well, not in this case, sorry. That one's really an awkward one to interpret.

John If twenty percent of the class is lecturing and the students are taking very detailed notes on that twenty percent, that may be very good. But, if the whole of your class is very detailed lecturing notes, that's probably a very bad thing. So, you can't tease that out from the question.

?? Right. That's one of the ones where you'd like a little bit of feedback or, if it's appropriate...... Yes, you don't want them taking down the response of every student who's discussing something, like in Ian's example. That would
actually intimidate them from talking, if the students are writing down all that kind of stuff, too. But, the question is whether it’s appropriate, I guess, and not just....

?? That’s interesting. I had a similar reaction. The question upon which the responses were the least to my satisfaction, as it were, was the one about not telling them what is important and not important. My reaction was the same as yours. I’m not going to tell you what is important and what isn’t. It’s all important. If I’m going to say it, it’s important. But, like Ian said, it gave me a chance to tell them, “I feel your pain, but...”. So, it gave me a chance to explain, “Look, I know you don’t know what all is important, but that’s the whole idea. That’s why you’ve got to take note and that’s what you’re going to have to figure out.” But, at least it gave me the chance to say that.

General agreement.

?? It is true that some of these questions, the one that Heidi cited, it would be a problem if the students were to pick these up and put them on the USRI’s, so they could be used as judgements. They can be useful information if you’re free to ignore the information that’s not ?.

?? How’s the discussion one worded? I didn’t bring my..., the one about discussion in class.

?? ‘More discussion would help my learning.’

?? So, it goes in a direction. That’s what I couldn’t remember, if it was just a question about discussion, generally, or whether it...

?? And a ‘no’ on that could mean a huge range of things, from, ‘No, it’s just exactly the right amount’, ‘No, I don’t want to hear those students yak anymore’. There’s just a huge range of things that a ‘no’ means, or a ‘yes’. So, they don’t help me unless I find out...

John Unless you ask the class what they really mean.

?? And you start asking the class and it can be awkward to do that in certain situations.

?? Could I ask a question, particularly to the two or three people who are doing full-year courses? We were, obviously, much too late, but we were doing these courses..., what we tried to do was every different kind of course in the department, including 400 and ? service course, first year course. My question to those of you who were doing full-year, especially core, courses, is, would your concerns have been less severe if you had been using it in mid-October, as opposed to..

?? In what, sorry?

?? Would your concerns have been less severe if it had been applied..., in other words, would it have been more useful and would your concerns about these questions go away, if you’d have been applying it in mid-October as opposed to in February?

?? It wouldn’t have been very helpful in mid-October, in terms of the grading, because they wouldn’t have received anything back. So, early January works for me. I think they need to do it after the midterm, which is December, so that’s when I would do it. I think we did this in February.

?? Yes. Well, you did it twice.

?? I actually didn’t. I didn’t do it in the other class because it was too late, anyway.

John Heidi, you....

?? I did it in both.

?? I did, too.

?? I think perhaps, yes, January, when they’d already seen their midterm mark, but mid-October, in my case, would be not good for a completely different reason and that is, we’re still on the first book. So, they don’t have an idea yet of what I’m doing in the course.

?? I would definitely, for teaching a full-year course, I would definitely want to do this on a regular basis. I go through the whole year, wondering how it’s going. You get some sense, of course, but there’s some things that they won’t tell you or you might get some feedback from a couple of students, but not enough. I think it’s really, really useful and I like the idea of doing it on the web to get the open-ended comments. How would you get them to do it?
You just ask them.

That's right.

You don't have to say, "Look, this is our only feedback during the year. This is your chance to make a change. Please write something on the back."

That would do it.

Yes, so they probably needed more than ten minutes. We did this ten minutes at the end of class and obviously, it wasn't enough time for it.

I think Morris' comments there are quite appropriate.

Yes, when you read the feedback, you said that the only other long comments were on the administration, so you didn't send those, I don't think.

That's okay, but I had one student come up to me in a rage afterwards. It might even be one who wrote a long diatribe saying this was so unconscionable. He must have got the wrong impression about the privacy or something. He was absolutely in a rage that we would find this out before the end of the year.

That certainly wasn't the stuff I withheld.

...and that I could take retaliation on them, or something like that.

How would you know?

I have no idea.

One critical comment and it was mine.

I did tell him he didn't need to worry and then he flew off the handle, so maybe he would've been just been calm about it before, but he was flushed.

He was saving that for you. I withheld things about?????

He didn't have to do it. They were told they, I told them, "You don't have to fill this out. This is absolutely optional."

No, I think it was the whole idea of it. I don't think he was worried I would retaliate on him. He thought the whole idea of this was unconscionable because, "You never know", he said. "There were some professors who would just turn on the class after they got one of these back," or something to that effect.

I was just wondering, did you get any of that kind of response, that the students are concerned that the prof might come in and just be a hardass afterwards or start giving harder grades or easier grades or something like that? Did the students, in your groups with them, did they have a worry that this could impact the second half of the class in a bad way?

No. They were certainly concerned about anonymity, but they weren't worried about retribution as a result of this process.

That would have been the focus group, I guess.

John, apropos that, I think the little script that sent was very good and I appreciated that because the less I have to say, the better. I feel very uncomfortable saying anything to them about anything. I'd just as soon take the sheet and say, "This has come to me and I'm going to read this to you and then I'm going to leave the room."

Did that happen with you?

Yes.
?? I had someone else come into administer it. I didn’t realize...

?? Yes, someone came, but beforehand, I sent this script over that told the student what this was all about, why they were doing it, and that it was not mandatory, etc, etc. That was good.

John Maria would have certainly reiterated that as well.

?? She probably reiterated that as well.

John Linda made a comment that she didn’t see the original sequence of questions and there were just 30 questions for them to deal with one by one. We’ve repackaged them and grouped them under the subheadings that we provided to you. Did you find those subheadings helpful in informing you about the nature of the feedback?

?? Yes, I thought that was great. I think it’s just my behaviouralist desire to look at the original questionnaire that makes me ask for that, not any particular pedagogical reason or anything. I thought this was useful. Once I figured out that certain questions were repeated in various sections, I thought it was quite helpful.

?? So, they’re going to be presented with repeated questions now?

John No. There are 30 questions, but then we pulled individual questions and grouped them under things like workload, just so related responses were packaged for you to help your interpretation.

?? I have to run now.

John Thank you for your participation. Are there any other general comments on process or the instrument? Any comments on the whole process you’d care to make?

?? This is a question I asked the students. I was curious as to whether you thought it had, whether the process made any difference in the chemistry of the class. Whether it loosened the class or made people more responsive or they had more sense of… Anything like that?

?? Not in my case, because of the nature ??????. It wouldn’t have happened.

?? Not in mine either, but I think it was because it was conducted in February, and because I see them in seminar groups and that’s a more informal setting where we get to laugh and chat and stuff like that. So, they were all pretty comfortable with me, and each other, by that point. But, I do agree with Ian. They had some problems with it but they were happy to have it conducted. They really want to give that kind of assessment, especially during a full year course.

?? I don’t think my class would be representative because I explained to them that this was a study to see if we should have studies. So, they got a giggle out of that and then I explained why they had to have a study to see if there should be studies. So, I don’t think they saw it as, that theirs was going to make the biggest difference possible this year. I’d have to see that, if it was just a procedure that we followed, if we just did it. I would have to assess it after that.

?? I don’t think the instrument can do that, Don. I guess I just don’t thing that it’s sort of a something that will…, by that point in time, you’d established your style in the classroom. They should know what they can expect from you and, although I do believe they appreciate the consultation that goes on, I don’t think that it can really change dynamics in the room much.

?? One other thing I thought about it – after I got over my disappointment at not knowing what to do to improve the things where there was kind of minor disagreement, at least it told me what I was doing right. That was useful. Those were things that I no longer had to really worry about.

?? in those, I wasn’t that happy with it. The things that it tested aren’t necessarily the things that I think are the most important in class. I’m in slight disagreement with what Ian said, or just a refocus of it, for me. I do think that these things can matter. If a student thinks this is what the class should be like, which is what they get, this is how they’re evaluating you, then that isn’t necessarily good. The other problem, I guess, is that there are studies that indicate that once you’ve given a certain response, you’re crystallized into that response, and then you start looking to see if your negative comments are the specific ones addressed afterwards. I mean, I’ve never had a word; I’m not worried about that myself. It’s just in terms of whether it can have no effect on a class, I think it can, but in terms of whether it helped me, whether it necessarily gets the most important things about teaching out, I’m not so sure.
That point goes to, we can interpret, we all interpret these things differently. Some percentages I might get on something, I might like because of what I want to do in the group, and some, "My God. This is not going the way I wanted at all."

But I don't think we should be catering to trying to get 100% because we do different things in our classes. That's true.

John I think it's important to state the purpose of this instrument wasn't to try and radically change your teaching behaviours. What it was trying to do, was allow you to fine tune what it is that you do with that particular cohort of students. The cohort will change every term you teach the course. You know that from your own experience. So, this isn't deep in the sense of trying to get you to undergo radical change. It's trying to match what works with the students with what you care to do.

Then could it be said, when it's administered, that these are not the same kinds of questions, necessarily, or the same questions as the survey that will be asked in the final evaluation? That the purpose of these questions is to, perhaps, help the rest of the class, as opposed to being the final evaluation of the teacher. That might be better for everyone to be clear on.

Good point.

I think the responses to the question, 'The physical space is conducive to learning', should be submitted to the university ?.

What can you do?

All they'll do is take our good lecture rooms and turn them into smart rooms, which is what they're doing now.

That would be okay with me.

No, they're not doing any smart rooms. There's no smart rooms available.

No, there isn't.

But those two good lecture rooms over in humanities are now smart rooms, so we can't use them for lecturing anymore. We're stuck with the breezeway (??).

You know, the classrooms are deteriorating and what can you say to these students? Nothing I can do about it. I had one class that I switched the classroom on them three times because it was just awful, just awful. That kind of information needs to be supplied. It makes a big difference.

Several of you indicated, in different ways, I think because of the different levels and kinds of courses you're teaching, that the instrument wasn't specific enough. If you were to add questions for your own purposes, I'm curious what kinds of questions you would add. What kinds of things would you like to know?

In the case of my course this year, it would have been specific questions directed towards the seminars and the way they were conducted.

Yes.

So, it would have been very specific, partly because I tried to design it differently this year. So, that, for me, was the more interesting aspect of the course that I would have liked to examine. Once they go back in a 260 room during a full-year course, that sort of question might not be pertinent at all, and this sort of questionnaire might be quite useful in a 260-type group.

I would ask them if they find the seminars valuable, seminar material, what they think of the TA's because there's no feedback here on the seminars. Other than that, probably supplemental questions to some of these. But, for a full-year required course, for major, it might be useful to ask them, and they're usually pretty honest about this, "Are you taking this course just because you need it for your degree? If so, did you come into it with an interest in Canadian politics?" If yes to that, "Has your view changed at all? Have you found something at all interesting about that?" Because, with some of these questions about classes being stimulating or the material interesting, it's hard to know whether they're just intrinsically uninterested in the material or whether I'm really boring. I'd like to know which one it is, frankly. If it's just, Canadian politics, couldn't care less, have to take the course, there's probably not a whole lot I can do, but...
I think as a general question, I don’t know if it should be in this one or at the end, I would think midterm might be better, but I think all students should be asked whether they feel restrained in class because of not being politically correct enough. I’ve had so many students complain to me that they can’t speak in class because they just get laughed at if they try to defend what’s not popular. Like, try to be pro-American right now, or something like that. They’re saying that it’s just unbelievable. Some kind of question like that might be a good thing. If not, even if it’s not the truth, if they feel that constraint, it might be something that the teacher then could sort of open up a little bit in the second half of the year and indicate, “Yes, maybe I’ve been saying things that sound like I’m on this side, but here...”, to open it up. I hear a lot of frustration from students about that.

I think we all do, some frustration.

So, maybe some question about that might be a good idea. But, I would say that just generally, in the whole Faculty of Arts. I’m not suggesting specifically here.

Whether it’s due to the instructor or the other students, or a combination...

Or even just to have that issue raised some time during the year. It doesn’t matter how they attribute it. They might be just dead wrong in why they’re attributing it; they might not want to identify who it is, but if it is an issue, then you can address it. There will still be time to do that before they leave the class feeling resentful.

John You’ve now had experience with a formative evaluation and you’ve been doing summative evaluations for some time. If you had to pick one or the other, which would you prefer?

They both scare the hell out of me.

Well, we don’t really have a choice. I can’t think of this beyond the context in which we actually have to conduct the summative evaluation. It’s a requirement.

I guess I find the summative a little more helpful, only because there tends to be a greater use of the open-ended. I find the structured questions pretty well useless in terms of giving me the information. The open-ended questions on the summative evaluation, I find extremely helpful. So, generally, I would say, if that became a more extensive part of formative, it would probably be equally helpful. That’s why I would pick the summative as more helpful.

In a full-year course, couldn’t we use the summative evaluation in December, if we wanted to?

Sure.

You couldn’t call it that.

No, no, you couldn’t call it that, but you could administer it.

John Just for your information, we asked that exact same question of the students. Unanimously, without hesitation, they said formative.

Really. Well, that gives them, if there are problems, that gets them resolved before the end of the class. Whereas, the summative one, you can say something out of the goodness of your heart that will improve the class for next year, but...

I think I’d say a formative evaluation with an element like that incorporated into it would be better. I like the idea of doing it partway through because it gives me a sense of what I’m trying to do in the class and whether they think it’s working or not. It might be questions, and I do get those sorts of disagreements, and then you have to decide whether you’re right in doing it the way you’re doing it, or whether you’ve got to make changes. I think it sends the right message to students.

Anything that makes teaching (be) seen as more important at the university, I’m in favour of. This seems to have potential for doing that.

The students generally echoed you on the open-end comments.

You mean they didn’t have enough time, or...?

No, what they said, in a number of different ways, was that they didn’t like, one of them said, “Let us write what we have to say”. That summed it up but they all, at some point, indicated that they felt really constrained by this.
Some of them indicated that they didn't even realize that there was that provision. We did it at the end of the course because we didn't want to intrude on your time. None of the students it needs to be done at the start of the class.

I think if I were doing it again, I'd stress to them and have the person who was administering it stress that they can say whatever they want, please take the time to do so. It will only benefit them if they explain their answers, totally anonymous, but any feedback they can give will be really useful.

I would actually announce a week before it's happening that I would like them to think about what kinds of things could be done, to take it very seriously.

And to give constructive, specific kinds of comments.

I'll let them say anything. I won't say constructive things, I'll just tell them to think about it ahead of time and say something on the back.

We would have to, I mention this in case you have suggestions about it maybe, over the coming weeks. The students were enthusiastic even when they didn't think it was particularly useful in their own case. But, they were adamant, unanimously insistent on the issue of confidentiality. So, we have to find a way to broach that issue over the open-ended comments.

Oh, yes.

Does that mean it will cost a little more to get them all typed up?

Yes, that's the huge advantage of doing it on the web. It's just packaged for you and you get the open-ended comments coming through as a block.

I wonder what would happen if, say this were administered and you got a really ghastly evaluation; there were serious things wrong. Having conducted the midterm evaluation, whether the students would have different expectations for the second part of the class and if those weren't met, even if the instructor explained, "I'm doing this because...and I'm sorry about this, but blah, blah, blah.", so if their expectations weren't met, what kind of effect this would have. I'm not explaining this very well, but whether this would create a sense among them that, if there are problems, that they would and could be fixed. Now, some instructors may have a teaching style such that some of the problems students identified could not or would not be fixed. That may be so problematic for those instructors they would decide, 'No, I'm not going to do this because every year I get the same kinds of responses and look where it leads me. Students are even harder on me at the end.'

A few of the students spoke to that. Do you want to know what they said?

Yes.

They seem to, it mattered to them that the thing was being done and they didn't expect instructors to change significantly. They really drew sharp lines between instructors who have follow-up discussions and those who didn't. So, an instructor who went into class and had a follow-up discussion, inviting comments but also saying, "This is why I do this and it's important to me. That's not going to change." They liked that. They liked that more than, they talked about instructors who had done it, who hadn't done anything, never made another reference to it.

I never made another reference to it in class.

They didn't like that.

I took about two weeks because I didn't know what to say to them. I didn't know whether I was comfortable asking them questions. I really struggled. I think I emailed someone and, "What do I do with this? What do I day to them?"

I'm a kibitzer.

So, I finally went in and I was honest. I said, "I got this score on this and this score on that. I would welcome anything you have to say."

I didn't. I thought it was a study to see if there should be studies and that any interference on my part might taint the results of the study.

Certainly, when I use formative evaluation, I will generally go into the class and say, "Thank you for the kind words", where appropriate, and "There seems to be some disagreement over this. Would it help if I did this?"
I would do that if this was a formative evaluation. I thought it was a study on whether there would be this study and thought I should say little about it.

I believe that ? does use the WebCT version of it and I’m going to do that next year. We'll see if we can get a really simple thing that, where you don’t need...

I’d be willing to work on that. I’d like to see that.

I can just send you the file that you can just load straight into WebCT.

I have to learn how to use WebCT.

That changes the dynamics of everything, doesn’t it? That means the students do it outside of class time?

Yes.

No, that’s completely different, sorry. There’s a whole bunch of issues there that I won’t have, I would never be part of.

Again, you can structure it because the survey tool allows you to specify when you have access. If you tell the students, go down now to the computer lab, this is your time in there.

I won’t have any part of it.

There are options. There are things you can do.

There’s a certain value in having them as a captive group. Well, they have a choice whether to do it or not, but saying, "This is the time you have to complete this", and then you get as many responses.

And they all do it the same day.

Participation rate is considerably higher when you’ve got....

I think that’s really important.

Yes, and you skew the results if you don’t have a high participation rate.

Right, if they choose, they’re either really happy or really unhappy and you don’t get the in-betweens, arguably (?).

Yes, I would try...

Tape ends and the other side is blank.
A9. Additional Telephone Comments from Faculty.

Comments from individuals to Don Carmichael.

Dr R
"I got some absolutely crucial feedback at the moment I needed it"
"It was a good class but there were some funny rumblings, but this put an end to the
rumblings"
as she described it ... it was clear (eg from written work) that it was a really bright class, but
this level was not indicated by the class discussions. These were monopolized by some super
keen - but less bright - boys in the front row. The evaluation exposed this. Some written
comments said `there's a bunch of us in the back of the room who are tired of all the attention
you are giving to the boys in the front'. In a discussion of the evaluation, the instructor was
able to indicate appreciation of the issue (carefully, without confronting it head-on) ... and this
seemed to pull the other students into greater participation. "And then we just had fun for the
rest of the year"
suggestions
- questions aren't really designed for a liberal arts class (eg, on use of av, students split 50-50,
even tho avs weren't used at all)
- it would be nice to have an open-ended question on "what's the atmosphere in the room?"
Our queries:
was there a change in the atmosphere? "Yes - you know there's a moment in a class when
they say `ok, we fully give you our trust'' - this happened within a week of the evaluation
mid vs end of the year?  - mid
when to do it? In a fully year course, mid-January.

Dr S (teaching a 3 hr evening service class)

there were problems getting the results back (a delay of about a month) but it was still worth
doing. No suggestions for improvements. Holds that the actual data not much help (possibly
owing to the delay) but it was very worthwhile on account of the goodwill it gebeetated among
the students. There was also a good chemistry in the room among the students.

Mid or end of term? Definitely mid. Let's you make changes (the other format - you change
for the next year but you have a different group of people)

"it opens up the atmosphere ...Helps them feel a little more invested in the course" Whereas
"nothing is at stake for them in end of course evaluations ... they comment in a different spirit
... this inspires them to voice their comments more constructively"

(One student who was away on the day of the USRIs wrote a letter to the chair, cc to the
instructor, commenting esp on the
instructor's use of the mid-term evaluation, as a sign of the instructor's responsiveness

this instructor also suggested that the good results (atmosphere, goodwill) may be due to the
fact that it was expressly part of a pilot. She suggests that these results might not obtain if the
instrument was used routinely (without some effort to engage the students)

John - nb this last comment. Heidi is an interesting contrast she got little of value from it,
having presented it as almost an alien requirement.
Dr T (12 week service course compressed into 6 weeks)

comments as written to Judy.

mid or end of course? Mid. Because there's a chance to discuss the results with them (esp in a full year course)

SP amplified that his criticism (not sure worth the time and money) is in contrast to the rather frequent checkings that he does with his classes.

Comments from individuals to Judy Garber.

Dr U

I had one done in 3XX. The results pointed out some aspects of the course for me to think about, but weren't definitive as relatively few of the students completed the survey. The Student's Union will need to do some publicity to improve participation rate if my experience is any measure. Also, training the people who administer the questionnaires in motivating their fellow students to take part would be a good idea. I didn't stay while my students completed the questionnaires, but I got the impression that the students who distributed them didn't generate much interest in them among my students.

Dr X

I think these are very useful. Thankfully, the folks seem quite pleased with the course, but one specific area some noted was the need to know more clearly what might be coming up in a test/what they should know, etc. This is not surprising, as we deal with lots of current 'breaking' issues, given that it's a Canadian Political Issues class; but knowing they've flagged it gives me a chance to try and improve on that aspect.

It took very little time to administer, the questions are good, the results are shown in a clear manner, and can be very helpful as an "early warning system", which I guess is the whole idea of it. I'll ask the class their thoughts on it, but given that they had a chance to evaluate early, I would think they would be all in favour of it. I certainly am.

Dr S

I did one of these and I certainly found it useful. The students indicated they did too, but they didn't say much about it. Frankly, I think what is best about a mid-term is the goodwill it establishes. the students feel heard (as indeed they are), and this gives them a more positive sense about the course and the instructor overall. This, in turn, makes for a more positive learning environment, which makes for better teaching etc. SO from this (snowball effect) point of view alone, I'm a strong proponent of such a mechanism. In fact, I've been thinking of constructing something like an early to mid-term evaluation sheet for classes in which this process is not offered - I think if we find out some of what we're doing right and wrong early enough on, we can respond accordingly - at least up to a point. (Obviously, it's too late for my other classes this year, but it's certainly something I plan to keep in my mind for the future.)

Dr T

It was useful, but no more so than the entirely informal midcourse evaluations I've done in the
past. On a number of occasions in the past I've asked my students to write down a couple of things that are problems or should be changed. Then we talked about their thoughts and suggestions for improving the class. It may be true that some criticism were held back because I was directly involved in this informal evaluation, but I don't think this was a major problem. Once I put then at ease, the students were quite frank with me - and it is the discussion of the evaluations, not the numbers, that is the most important in any case.

Bottom line. while pausing for a mid-course "check" is good. I'm not sure this process is worth the time and money.