

Anonymous online student surveys anywhere

Vicky J. Meretsky

Keywords: assessment, CATs, knowledge survey, opinions, student-centered teaching

Framework

Anonymous surveys can be a valuable tool to gather information from students regarding their perceptions of their own learning styles and progress, of an instructor's teaching styles, assignments, tests, and of other aspects of the learning environment. Some course-management software systems provide a built-in capacity to administer an anonymous survey, but not all do, and not all instructors have access to course management software. In addition, students may not always trust the anonymity of one module of a software system whose other modules are explicitly not anonymous.

Free online surveys are available through several providers including (in early 2013) SurveyMonkey, KwikSurveys, QuestionPro, and others. Instructors from anywhere in the world can access the services. Surveys are easy to construct and a survey-specific URL makes them available to students for any desired period of time. Results of multiple-choice questions can be summarized and answers to essay questions can be collected within the software. Survey results can be used to promote reflection by students and instructors, monitor student progress, and fine-tune teaching approaches.

Making it Work

Because instructors have no means to compel students to take anonymous online surveys or confirm that students have taken them, these surveys are best used in a support role, rather than as a required activity. Surveys targeted to assess specific assignments, events, etc., can be time-limited, but surveys could also be used to provide a means of general, anonymous feedback throughout the semester.

Online sites that provide free surveys tend to permit a wide variety of question types, including single-answer multiple choice, multiple-answer multiple choice, essay questions, ranking, ratings, and matrixes. Fixed answers, such as in multiple-choice questions, are easier to summarize, but essay questions permit more thoughtful responses. Templates may be available, with standard questions for various uses, including university instructor evaluations.

I find it very helpful to quickly distribute a short, targeted survey to sample student reactions to a new teaching approach or an activity based on difficult subject. The kind of information I elicit in a targeted survey is different from the on-the-fly, in-class classroom assessment techniques (CATs; Angelo & Cross, 1993) such as asking students to list the most difficult or least clear concept in a given class period. I try to keep targeted surveys short (5-6 questions). I begin with a multiple-choice question or two, such as a Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, don't know) question, because students can answer those quickly, and generally do so. If they choose not to take the time to answer a later essay question, I at least have their answer to the summary question. For an end-of-semester survey to supplement the required survey at my institution, I often use slightly longer (6-10 question) surveys that combine focused (*Was homework feedback sufficiently timely and*

detailed?) and completely open questions (*Please add any other comments you like*). Instructors who have not previously written survey questions may want to consult some basic reference material on survey design but I find my information needs are usually fairly clear-cut, which simplifies question construction. Anonymous surveys can also be used for pre-post learning assessments as one measure of learning outcomes.

Some sites (e.g., SurveyMonkey, QuestionPro) limit the number of questions or the number of survey respondents in their free services, others (e.g., KwikSurveys) do not. Some providers also have commercial versions with increased support and services, as well as more flexible downloading options. Advanced analyses of survey results require transferring survey results to another platform such as a spreadsheet or statistical package, and free services vary in the ease with which large or complex response sets can be downloaded.

For surveys that may be pilots for larger studies, designers might use the freeware version from a supplier that also offers commercial support; if the pilot study evolves into a larger project, the commercial support may be welcome. Indiana University presently supports discounted prices on several levels of annual Survey Monkey subscriptions for instructors on all its campuses, and other universities may also support such services.

Future Implications

Metacognition – the practice of reflective learning – is encouraged both in students and in instructors (Brookfield, 1995, 2006; Schön, 1987). Anonymous surveys provide us with the means to do both simultaneously: to learn about how our teaching is perceived, while asking to students to reflect on their learning.

I have rarely had all students in a class respond to either targeted or end-of-semester summary surveys, but I generally get answers from well over half my students (graduate and undergraduate, class sizes of 25-50) and from a range of levels of progress and satisfaction. Students often provide thoughtful and well-reasoned critiques that give me an opportunity to consider aspects of the course through the lens of their experiences.

If I receive conflicting responses on a question, I may take the issue back into the classroom to explore it further. Giving students the opportunity to understand that they are not uniform in their responses can help to defuse frustration or stronger emotions. Evidence of diversity in student responses reminds students that the instructor's goal must be to support all class members in their learning and that they, the students, are all part of each other's learning environments. Clickers and other instant-feedback devices could also supply this kind of range-of-reaction information, but they are not in wide use, whereas online surveys are freely available wherever Internet access is available.

As we strive to become more intentional and transparent in our teaching—clearly enumerating desired learning outcomes and linking activities and assignments to those outcomes—quick, anonymous online surveys are a useful source of evidence to support teaching decisions. In contrast to quick classroom assessment techniques, anonymous online surveys are well suited to address aspects of a course beyond basic comprehension of content. They give students more time for thought, but still can provide instructors with student feedback in a time-frame of days: much closer to the same-day or same-week response of classroom assessment techniques than the after-the-semester response of institutional course evaluations. To give closure to students, instructors should, in turn, give students feedback on what they learned from surveys and how or whether they will act on information (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Closing the

loop with students is easier to do with surveys that are taken during the course when conversation with students is still straightforward, but instructors may be able to provide feedback on end-of-course survey results by email, if desired.

Online survey results are a good way to demonstrate reflective teaching and teaching that promotes reflective learning. Results of these quick, shorter surveys can be used in teaching portfolios and can be a foundation or stepping-stone for scholarship of teaching and learning. Anonymous online surveys are quick to create, easy to administer, and easy to archive. They produce useful results that can promote better, evidence-informed teaching and better learning.

References

Angelo, T.A., & Cross, K.P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Brookfield, S.D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Brookfield, S.D. (2006). *The skillful teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Schön, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.