



Integrating Student Evaluations into Online Teaching

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Introduction

In July 2009, the University of Pittsburgh Health Sciences Library System was awarded a three-year grant from The Institute of Museum & Library Services to support the development and implementation of a post-master's Certificate of Advanced Study in Health Sciences Librarianship (HealthCAS).

- The 15 credit program consisted of four courses:
 - Term 1: Libraries in the Healthcare Environment (summer semester; 4 credits)
 - Term 2: Management of Library Collections & Resources in the Healthcare Environment (fall semester; 4 credits)
 - Term 3: Library Services and Instruction in the Healthcare Environment (winter semester; 4 credits)
 - Individual Applied Research project (3 semesters; 3 credits)
- The HealthCAS curriculum was developed by HSLS librarians.
- Two cohorts of students have graduated from the program.

As novice instructors, the librarians teaching the Term 1 course (Libraries in the Healthcare Environment) were aware that online teaching is different from face-to-face teaching, and may require a different set of teaching skills and different approaches to course content and presentation (Treacy, 2007). To identify the strengths and limitations of their class, these instructors analyzed evaluations completed at the end of the semester by the first cohort of students, using that feedback to modify and improve the course content and teaching methods. Evaluations completed by the second cohort of students were analyzed to determine the impact of the changes made to the course.

Methods

- At the end of the semester, students were asked to complete two evaluative tasks:
 1. Write a reflective "letter to a future student" where they shared their thoughts about the course and strategies for completing the course.
 - a. The response rate was 92% for Cohort 1 and 100% for Cohort 2.
 2. Complete a standardized course content and instructor evaluation form that consisted of 25 Likert-type questions and 4 open-ended questions.
 - a. The response rate for both cohorts was 80%.
- Letters and comments were de-identified.
- A matrix was created using an Excel spreadsheet to identify patterns:
 - For each year, 2010 and 2011, a spreadsheet was created and included a column for reflective letter comments and a column for the standardized evaluation comments.
 - Within each year, comments from each column were compared for similarity.
 - Course and instructor strengths and weaknesses were revealed.
 - Based on the results, the instructors made adjustments to the course.

Discussion

- In developing the course for Cohort 1, the instructors thought exposing students to guest speakers with specific subject expertise would be beneficial to the students, but this did not work in an online environment. Students were confused by variations in teaching styles and lesson content, as well as the interpersonal styles used by instructors. This confusion may have been exacerbated by a relative lack of contact with instructors via discussion boards, feedback on completed homework assignments, or other online means of communication. For Cohort 2, the number of instructors was reduced to 2, with no guest instructors. Several course topics were revised into formats consistent to those of other modules. These revisions appeared to positively change student evaluations of instructors and content.
- The course was challenging and required students from both cohorts to be able to manage their time well. Although this criticism was taken seriously by instructors, they chose not to decrease the amount of coursework because they judged it to be consistent with standards for post-graduate coursework.

Results

Evaluation of responses from the first cohort indicated:

1. Use of multiple instructors (3 primary instructors, 2 guest instructors), with corresponding differences in teaching and interpersonal styles, led to student confusion over lesson objectives and assignments.
2. Students felt unprepared for and challenged by the required readings and homework assignments.
3. Students wanted more interaction with instructors.

Course changes for the second year included:

1. The number of instructors was reduced to 2 with no guest instructors.
2. Several modules of the course were redesigned so that the content (assigned readings, homework) more closely resembled that of other modules. The total amount or number of readings and /or assignments remained approximately the same, however.
3. Instructors committed themselves to increasing the quality and quantity of comments or feedback provided on homework assignments, and to ensuring that they responded to student questions or concerns in a timely fashion.

Evaluation of responses from the second cohort indicated:

1. No concerns about confusing variety of instructor teaching or interpersonal styles.
2. Continued student concern about the amount of readings and homework assignments.
3. Student interest in addition of topics to existing course content, such as information needs of allied health professionals or consumer.

Conclusion

Selected use of feedback from Cohort 1 appeared to produce improvement in students' overall course satisfaction.

Reference

Treacy B. *What's Different about Teaching Online?* [Internet]. Oct 2007. EdTech Leaders Online. Waltham, MA: c2000-2012.; [cited 2012 Nov 6]. Available from: <http://edtechleaders.org/learn-more/our-research/whats-different-about-teaching-online>.

