Evaluating Adjunct Professors for Promotion
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Evaluating Adjunct Professors for Promotion:
A Case Study Approach to Review Adjunct Student Evaluation of Teachers Over Time

ABSTRACT: Student assessment of courses and instructors can provide meaningful data about effective educational practices. Adjunct faculty make-up the majority of teachers in higher education but they are often not evaluated consistently or promoted to permanent faculty. Instead, evaluations of adjunct faculty are primarily used to identify inadequacies. The deficit thinking model argues that educational leaders should not use the term "at-risk" as a pretense to explain student outcomes. Similarly, this study argues for the extension of the deficit thinking model to adjunct faculty. This retrospective mixed-methods case study investigated student feedback for one higher education teacher to understand procedures or best practices in the process of self-analysis for teaching effectiveness. The three emergent themes from the study included instructor effectiveness (69.47%), course effectiveness (18.56%), and areas of improvement (11.97%). Findings indicate that in some instances educational leaders in higher education should shift thinking about the way contingent faculty are evaluated, promoted, and included in academic institutions.

Student assessment of courses and instructors can provide meaningful data about effective educational practices. Adjunct faculty make-up the majority of teachers in higher education but they are not evaluated consistently or with the aim of understanding their teaching effectiveness. Instead, evaluations of adjunct faculty are primarily used to identify deficiencies. The Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) process is common in higher education but there is little research on how educational leaders can and should interpret collected data. Higher education is currently inundated with student feedback; faculty and educational leaders need best practices for using both quantitative and qualitative data to understand educational effectiveness.

Deficit Thinking Framework & the Adjunct Professoriate

It is seductive for educators to blame external factors for student performance. Dr. Richard Valencia (2010) argues that, even in our most challenging schools, educators must resist labeling students as "at-risk." Deficit thinking is a theory that argues external variables such as students' socioeconomic background, language, or family educational level pre-disposes students to fail academically. Many contemporary authors contend (Tough 2012; Valencia, 2010; Weiner 2006) that categorizing students as "at risk" is both a racist and classist approach and marginalizes students of color and their families. The implications of perceiving students as "at-risk," is that tasks can be oversimplified to accommodate external factors that should not influence educational leadership. The idea of deficit thinking is predominately applied to K-12 but similar attitudes permeate students and faculty in higher education.

In this research the deficit thinking model, or the assertion that external factors pre-disposes student failure, encompasses current attitudes towards adjunct faculty in higher education. Adjunct teachers are contingent labor and their employment is dependent on annual enrollment and budget. Contingent faculty are the new faculty majority in the United States higher education. Additionally, adjunct teachers are ethnically diverse and recent trends indicate a feminization of this workforce. Unlike tenure-line faculty, the teaching of adjunct faculty is evaluated yearly and independent from the span of all of their experiences. The theoretical framework for this study draws from the deficit thinking model because like dismissing "at-risk" students, arguments for limited evaluation of adjunct teachers marginalize people of color in the educational system.

Study Design

This retrospective mixed-methods case study investigated student feedback for one contingent higher education teacher to understand procedures or best practices in the process of self-analysis for teaching effectiveness. As aforementioned, adjunct faculty are only asked to report and review one to three years of data to demonstrate their competence. Therefore, there is little incentive for faculty members to engage in long-term reflection on teaching effectiveness as part of the teaching review process.

The purpose of this study was to provide a comparative analysis of the student feedback received over the length of one Chicana educators member's nine-year career. Feedback from the first two years of instruction was compared to feedback from the two most recent years, in order to develop a better understanding of how faculty performance and student feedback evolve over time in relation to contingent faculty. Thus, the aim of this paper is to use SET's to understand how faculty performance evolves over time for those without job permanence. The following sections present a brief review of the literature on SET's. The final section will present and discuss results, limitations, recommendations and conclusions.

Student Evaluations of Teachers

This section of the research will discuss existing scholarship regarding student evaluations of teachers in higher education. The use of SETs to measure teaching proficiency is a long held practice in higher education dating back to the 1920s (Clayson & Haley, 2011; Galbraith, Merrill & Kline, 2012).

Validity of Data from Student Evaluations

Untruthful students that are displeased with course outcomes can skew evaluation results (Clayson & Haley, 2011). Additionally, students may report inaccurate information due to a misunderstanding of the evaluation process or questions. Students can "ignore or falsify answers" because they feel their responses are more significant than the question asked (Clayson & Haley, 2011, p. 109). They may also report specific instances, especially those that are negative, instead of providing their overall impressions or experience. Finally, students with personal motivations may simply provide inaccurate information.

Obtaining Accurate Evaluations

Some question the accuracy of SET's in measuring teaching effectiveness because obtaining accurate student responses is challenging. However, when an evaluation tool is constructed appropriately it can provide useful insights into a teacher's classroom practices.

Multiple approaches exist for assessment of teaching in higher education, and authors agree there are elements of teaching skills that can be effectively measured by student perspectives (Catano & Harvey, 2011). Catano and Harvey (2011) investigated different approaches to SET through a comparative analysis. In their study, they compared two SET instruments to determine which was more accurate. They found that SETs were a reliable and valid measure of teaching efficacy (Catano & Harvey, 2011).

Pepe and Wang (2012) researched what information from SETs can be useful in assessing general education instructors; simply put, which of the scale ratings indicates something about a teacher's ability. Teacher ability was compared from student's qualitative data that was represented in a decision tree analysis. The majority of students that participated in the voluntary evaluations ranked the teacher as "excellent" in most of the listed categories. The ability of the instructor to "effectively communicate information" was the one factor that was reported in a consistent manner. Teachers who rated low in communication skills on a quantitative measure were also qualitatively reported to have poor communication. Therefore, the student descriptions corresponded with survey data in assessing teaching.

Ewing (2012) studied the link between students' expected grades and the feedback they provided on their SETs. Previous research by Johnson (2003) indicated that students expecting an 'A' were more likely to give an instructor an excellent score, whereas, students expecting a poor grade were more likely to give a negative score. To inquire further into this phenomenon, Ewing (2012) conducted quantitative analysis on a data set containing 10 years of SETs from students who attended the University of Washington. This data included SETs for over 5,000 instructors, who taught more than 50,000 classes. Ewing (2012) found a significant positive correlation between students' expected grades and the instructors' scores on the SETs.

The utilization of SETs has become the most prevalent measure of teaching proficiency in higher education (Catano & Harvey, 2011; Clayson, & Haley, 2011; Ewing, 2012; Galbraith et al., 2011; Nowell, Gale & Handley, 2010). Student perceptions are one important feature in

determining teaching performance and as such, college and university administrators use SET findings in decisions about retention, tenure, merit pay, and advancement (Catano & Harvey, 2011; Clayson & Haley, 2011; Galbraith et al., 2011). However, there are factors, such as controversial content and failure to understand the process, that create inaccuracies in reporting (Elenes, 2001; Clayson & Haley, 2011). More importantly, student perceptions of teaching efficacy can be biased based on their expected grade (Ewing, 2012). Research does indicate that design of an evaluation instrument is critical to gaining meaningful data (Culver, 2010; Clayson & Haley, 2011; Catano & Harvey, 2011). Notably, there is little literature regarding the best practices for interpreting data from SET results.

Methods

This mixed methods design was based on a case study of a non-tenured Chicana faculty member (Faculty Member A) who has taught Introductory Public Speaking at a minority serving four-year public university for nine years. The faculty member also had experience in teaching similar courses at other institutions of higher education. Over time, Faculty Member A has developed the course to align with the university's learning outcomes, department goals, and general education objectives.

This qualitative approach was selected based on the paucity of existing literature, format of the data, and comparative thematic analysis of student responses to five open-ended questions. The emergent design of the study allowed for data collection and analysis to occur concurrently; codes, categories, and themes were refined in an iterative process. A quantitative approach was used to generate descriptive statistics related to data collected through the SET process. Results were presented in the form of frequencies and proportions.

Participants

The participants for this retrospective study were the 507 students who completed SETs for Faculty Member A as part of their enrollment in Strategies of Public Communication during two time periods. The first time period, referred to as "Period 1," included academic years 2006-07 and 2007-08. The second time period, "Period 2," included academic years 2011-12 and 2012-13. The Period 1 data set included a total of 12 sections of Communication 108 courses with 237 student responses; 206 students opted to provide handwritten comments. The Period 2 data set included 12 Communication 108 courses with 270 student responses, 239 of which featured comments.

Instruments

The SET instrument used to collect data features 12 Likert-style questions for which students rate the degree of their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. Four additional multiple choice questions ask students to report their reason for taking the course, their current grade in the course, the number of hours they spend each week on the course, and the number of hours they work each week. On the back, five open-ended questions inquire about the instructor's teaching, the classroom atmosphere, the instructor's standards, the instructor's strengths, and the potential areas of improvement for the instructor and/or course.

The researchers also served as a data collection instrument for this study. Although the SET responses served as the data sets, the complete data collection, analysis, and interpretation process depended on the skill of the researchers in order to achieve reliable and meaningful results.

Procedure

SET forms for each course were made available by Faculty Member A. Comprehensive data sets from both time periods were established with each SET response included in the analysis. Individual SET forms from the 12 sections of Communication 108 courses taught during Period 1 were numbered sequentially; files from each section were maintained separately in order to facilitate comparisons between different sections if needed. Forms with handwritten comments were flagged for coding, and forms from students reporting a grade of "C" or less were flagged for further review. Each SET with handwritten comments was listed by its assigned number in an Excel database. Columns for each open-ended question were created, and handwritten comments were carefully transcribed into the database. Within the database, a note was made of each SET form with a self-reported grade of "C" or less. The same process was repeated for the 12 sections of Communication 108 included in Period 2.

Creswell's (2012) steps of qualitative data analysis were utilized in order to manage, describe, classify, interpret, and represent the data. To begin the manual data analysis process, the researchers created a *data management* plan to organize and become familiar with the data. Through repeated *readings* of transcribed statements, the data was *described* and *classified* in a coding process. Meaningful words and phrases were bracketed and items with similar meaning were grouped into codes to reduce redundancy. In accordance with Creswell's (2012) philosophy about code counting, researchers counted the frequency of occurrence of each code for the purpose of understanding the participants' interest in certain topics; however, these frequencies were not the primary guide for the data analysis process. *Memoing* was used to record the researchers' thoughts and ideas as the coding process unfolded.

Separate sets of codes were maintained for Periods 1 and 2 in order to allow for later comparison. Individual codes were then reexamined for similarities and differences, and substantive categories were identified through an iterative process (Creswell, 2012). From the categories, patterns and relationships emerged which illustrated the themes of the data. Through the use of constant comparison, codes, categories, and themes were continuously refined throughout the data analysis process. Finally, researchers made decisions about how the *interpretation* of the findings could be meaningfully portrayed in this written report. The narrative and *representation* of the data is presented in the findings and discussion section.

The transferability of this study's findings to another setting is limited by the case study approach that was used (Ary, et al., 2010). The dependability of this study was enhanced by multiple strategies. An audit trail preserved items including the raw data, notes related to coding and decision making, and messages between team members; this information could be used as a guide for another researcher to follow the same process. Interrater agreement was also used, in which multiple members of the research team engaged in parallel coding with memoing and checking for agreement.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by several factors. First, student completion of SETs was optional, so the response rate for each section of Communication 108 courses was less than 100% of the documented enrollment. Some SET forms were not fully completed, and some students elected not to provide handwritten comments; therefore, the complete perspective of each Communication 108 student may not have been included in the two data sets. Second, the instrument of data collection was generated by previous faculty members, and was not designed for the purpose of this study. The wording of some questions may be imprecise and students

may interpret the questions differently.

Students may provide inaccurate information either on purpose or inadvertently; the SET is an anonymous survey of student perspectives, which allows students to openly share both information and misinformation without consequence. Third, this case study investigated the student feedback related to one faculty member who teaches an introductory level GE course at a mid-sized public university in California; therefore, results of this study may not be generalizable to other situations and settings.

Findings

For the two periods studied, the SET survey was administered to 630 students who attended 24 sections of Communications 108. Of these students, 80.5% (507/630) submitted a SET. Nearly 88% (445/507) provided responses to the five open-ended questions and 15.6% of the students reported expecting a "C" or less.

The qualitative data from the students' responses were coded and analyzed. Collectively, the students generated 3,125 responses to the five open-ended questions. The first question inquired about the instructor's teaching and generated 889 responses. The second question regarding the classroom atmosphere produced 675 responses. Students responded with 537 comments regarding the instructor's standards. The areas of improvement for the course and instructor resulted in 691 responses. Lastly, the question on areas of improvement produced 333 quotes.

Analysis of these responses yielded three themes: instructor effectiveness (69.47%), course effectiveness (18.56%), and areas of improvement (11.97%). Table 1 provides the counts for each theme.

Table 1.
Summary of SET Themes by Cross Section

Theme	Period 1		Period 2		Totals	
	Counts	Pct	Counts	Pct	Counts	Pct
Course	366	19.31%	214	17.40%	580	18.56%
Improvement	149	7.86%	225	18.29%	374	11.97%
Instructor	1,380	72.82%	791	64.31%	2,171	69.47%
Totals	1,895	100.00%	1,230	100.00%	3,125	100.00%

Discussion

The subsequent section is organized into the three themes: Course Effectiveness, Instructor Effectiveness, and Areas of Improvement. Of the 3,125 coded responses, 88.03% were clearly positive. As such, these positive responses are noted in the findings for course and instructor effectiveness. Despite the low number of negative responses, comparatively speaking, their discrepant portent is vital to the qualitative discussion on the course and instructor efficacy and enhances the credibility of this study. To this end, these negative responses are listed with the findings for Areas of Improvement.

Theme 1: Course Effectiveness

The Course Effectiveness theme consisted of responses related to the course design. This theme contained three sub-clusters: course content (56), organization (10), and rigor (514). The

content sub-cluster included student responses on alignment (4), assignments (5), assessments (1), content relevancy (40), and online environment (6). The organization sub-cluster contained responses related to course structure (3) and organization (7). Finally, student responses related to expectations (492), knowledge gained by students (17), and workload (5) were grouped under rigor.

Table 2.
Theme 1: Course Effectiveness

Theme	Sub-Theme	Period 1 Counts	Pct	Period 2 Counts	Pct	Total Counts	Pct
Course	Content	47	83.9%	9	16.1%	56	100.0%
Effectiveness	Organization	6	60.0%	4	40.0%	10	100.0%
	Rigor	313	60.9%	201	39.1%	514	100.0%
	Total	366	63.1%	214	36.9%	580	100.0%

Overall, the students felt the course content, organization, and rigor had a positive impact on their learning experience. The students consistently mentioned the meaningfulness and relevancy of the course content. For both periods of data collection, the students commented consistently that the assignments were meaningful, the online environment was used well, and the content was relevant and current. One student stated, "*The strength of this course is that I learned skills I can apply other places.*" Another student commented, *"The strength of the course was the online homework assignments."* They also noted the value of the online environment. They commented on how the course structure and organization facilitated a positive learning environment. The students indicated that the course expectations were high, yet achievable and that the workload was reasonable. More importantly, some students noted how much they learned from the course and how they were able to apply the knowledge gained to their professional and personal lives, as well as in other courses.

The most significant difference between the periods was in the number of comments. Overall, the students responses dropped 26.21% from 366 to 214 comments for the years studied. The responses for Course Content dropped 67.9% from 47 responses to 9, Course Organization dropped 20% from 6 to 4, and the Course Rigor dropped 21.79% from 313 to 201 comments for the years studied. For both periods, the students noted that the course structure and organization facilitated their learning public speaking. One student remarked, "*The course setup and organization was a definite strength.*" Additionally, students expressed how much they learned from the course. Additionally, students indicated that the workload was reasonable. One student noted, "*The standards are very high because she wants the best out of her students.*" The only other differences for these cross comparisons related to the course alignment and assignments. During Period 1, the students commented on the alignment of the syllabus with the department code and course objectives and the use of regular assessments, such as quizzes. In Period 2, the students mentioned the quality of the assignments.

Theme 2 : Instructor Effectiveness
Student comments related to the instructor's qualities (695), subject matter knowledge (112), and teaching practice (1,364) were grouped under the Instructor Effectiveness theme. The sub-cluster instructor qualities contained responses regarding the instructor's approachability (147), availability (25), encouragement (121), engagement (234), and professionalism (168).

The comments related to responsiveness appeared for the Period 1 only. The other difference between the two periods was the number of comments related to availability increased in the second period. The students remarks included "*She was always there for office hours,*" "*Her strengths was responding to emails in a timely manner,*" and "*She was very helpful with students and always willing to spend extra time to fulfill their needs.*"

The subject matter sub-cluster consisted of comments on instructor's subject matter knowledge (58) and passion for teaching and the subject matter (54). Out of 234 comments, entertaining (44.4%) and enthusiastic (35.5%) were the most commonly described qualities. Spontaneity was mention only in the last period. The students' remarks included "*She was outgoing, enthusiastic, and responsive.*" The cross comparison of the two periods indicated that the number of comments relating to the instructor's knowledge dropped 48.1% from 48 to 14 comments. The students' remarks included "*She loves to teach. I have never been bored in her class,*" and "*She is very passionate about teaching this subject.*"

Lastly, comments related to the instructor's classroom atmosphere (708), communication skills (285), grading practices (12), lecturing style (151), and teaching methods (208) were grouped in the teaching practice sub-cluster. Student comments included "*The classroom atmosphere is very relaxed and easy to learn in,*" "*I like how people can easily speak their mind in this class,*" and "*The classroom atmosphere is very accepting. Everyone participates rather than the same two people.*"

Table 3.
Theme 2: Instructor Effectiveness

Theme	Sub-Theme	Period 1 Counts	Pct	Period 2 Counts	Pct	Total Counts	Pct
Instructor Effectiveness	Qualities	374	53.8%	321	46.2%	695	100.0%
	Subject Matter	84	75.0%	28	25.0%	112	100.0%
	Teaching Practice	922	67.6%	442	32.4%	1364	100.0%
Total		1380	63.6%	791	36.45%	2171	100.0%

Overall, the students felt the instructor was effective. The type and amount of positive comments for this theme highlights its significance. The instructor effectiveness comments comprised 69.5% of the 3,125 comments for both periods (72.8% for Period 1 and 64.3% for Period 2). The instructor created a classroom atmosphere that was conducive to learning public speaking and performing speeches, communicated well with them, graded their assignments fairly and timely, lectured effectively, and used appropriate teaching methods. The cross comparisons of both periods revealed that comments were consistent. Additionally, the instructor's communication skills, grading practices, and teaching practice were moderately even for both periods.

The most notable difference between the periods was in the first period. Close to 40% (94/237), of the students completing the survey indicated that the instructor needed no improvement. Other differences included that the students reported fair and timely grading and the good lecturing style more often. For Period 2, the students added focused to the descriptions of the classroom atmosphere. Comments regarding the engaging atmosphere dropped 16%. Additionally, more comments on the use of examples appeared under the instructor's lecturing style.

Theme 3: Areas of Improvement

The SET survey had one open-ended question asking the students about areas of improvement for the course and instructor; however, the students tended to make comments related to this theme under all the questions. As such, the areas of improvement included student responses from all five open-ended questions that were related to course and instructor improvement. These comments fell into two categories: course (77) and instructor (297). The course sub-theme grouped comments related to improvements for the course content (64) and online environment (13). The instructor sub-cluster contained comments regarding the instructor's availability (8), communication skills (151), student interactions (9), approachability (22), and teaching practice (107). In terms of approachability, the students indicated that the instructor was friendly, helpful, non-intimidating, outgoing, patient, and relatable. One student remarked "*She was very easy to talk to and approachable*." Another student wrote, "S*he really cared about the students*." These comments were consistent for both periods, with the exception of patience, which only appeared in Period 1. Other responses included, "*More time to do assignments*" and "*Too much busy work and things not related to communications.*"

Table 4.
Theme 3: Areas of Improvement

Theme	Sub-Theme	Period 1		Period 2		Total	
		Counts	Pct	Counts	Pct	Counts	Pct
Areas of Improvement	Course	35	45.5%	42	54.5%	77	100.0%
	Instructor	114	38.4%	183	61.6%	190	100.0%
	Total	149	39.8%	225	60.2%	374	100.0%

Enhancements related to the course effectiveness evolved around the need for additional content, fewer schedule changes, modified expectations, more assistance with homework, more rigor, more time for assignments, and less course work. Other enhancements involved organizing the course differently, which would facilitate students' navigation and use of the online course content.

Regarding the instructor's efficacy, the enhancement included the need for the instructor to be more open, approachable, helpful, and patient. Other comments evolved around the instructor's availability for office hours, punctuality, and managing personal life circumstances. Clearer explanation and instructions were cited as well. The students stated the need for the instructor to be less talkative, speak slower, use professional language, and stay on topic. Treating the students equally and being more respectful were also noted. Lastly, the students suggested enhancements for classroom atmosphere, grading practice, time management, lecturing style, and organization.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The qualitative analysis of two data sets yielded a story of one Chicana faculty member's student feedback over time. Moreover, the comprehensive and comparative analysis of the SETs from Period 1 and Period 2 found overwhelmingly positive feedback indicative of effective teaching. Although fear of public speaking is common, it is clear that Faculty Member A successfully incorporated strategies that created a comfortable and productive learning environment. Faculty Member A developed relationships with students that facilitated

communication and learning, and was recognized as a knowledgeable teacher. There are few meaningful differences between the two data sets; in the context of significantly increased class sizes and more rigorous grading practices, this is a positive result. Faculty Member A appears to have maintained an effective approach to teaching over time, even as course standards and class sizes have been increased. The progression of the feedback was not significant because in this instance the student evaluations of teacher are strongly positive.

This comprehensive study has revealed the importance of considering qualitative student feedback to understanding teaching effectiveness. Creswell's (2012) steps of qualitative data analysis can be utilized in order to manage, describe, classify, interpret, and represent the data. Rather than mining for select content, these findings indicated that coding of feedback establishes emergent themes. Additionally, these findings suggested that thematic trends do not support minority student views. A single scathing or glowing comment should not be the focus of student data assessment or the retention of a contingent professor.

In instances like this case study, educational leaders should shift their attitudes about the promotion of contingent faculty. The nine years of the data analyzed in this study is similar to most tenure time-lines. During the tenure process, research and teaching performance of faculty is tracked throughout time to demonstrate the need for permanence in the academic community. The findings from this longitudinal study were positive and thus professional outcomes for Faculty Member A should parallel those earned by her tenure-line colleagues.

More research is required to address deficit thinking or attitudes about the role and capacity of adjunct professors. When expectations from educational leaders are low, poor student and faculty outcomes are inevitable. Future studies should grow the scale of this case study and investigate SET's of long-term contingent faculty. Additionally, data should be collected regarding the success of advancing adjuncts to the tenure-line ranks.

Student assessment of courses and instructors provides meaningful data about effective educational practices that should be used to justify promotion. Academia has become increasingly reliant on a contingent workforce. This paper does not argue for the discontinuation of adjunct hiring but that educational leaders look to their adjunct ranks in hiring future tenure-line professors. Student evaluation of teachers provides a mechanism to evaluate the competence of existing contingent employees. Arguments against promoting adjunct professors often contribute to deficit thinking similar to that attributed to underrepresented students. Findings indicate that, similar to their tenured peers, over time teaching praxis of adjunct professors can evolve. In these instances educational leaders in higher education should shift thinking about the way contingent faculty are evaluated, promoted, and included in academic institutions.

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