Ten Discussion Questions --
Student Course Evaluation Forms

1. How might we use a student course evaluation instrument to reflect as well as to shape the culture of learning and the expectations of students and faculty with regard to the meaning of effective teaching?

2. What should we expect that our students understand about the reasonableness and effectiveness of various pedagogical approaches, given their age, background, expectations, and levels of cognitive development?

3. To what extent are *student learning* and *student satisfaction* the same or different? If the two differ sufficiently, which should be the focus of student course evaluation forms?

4. How can we frame items which focus student responses on student learning and the central educational outcomes of the course?

5. What measurement principles should we keep in mind as we develop and validate quantitative and narrative student course evaluation forms? For example,
  A) How many distinct factors should we seek to measure?
  B) How many items will it take to give us an acceptably reliable scale for each factor?
  C) If more than one factor is measured, should factors be aggregated to create a composite score?
  D) What narrative questions should be asked, and how should they be pilot tested?
  E) How much precision can we reasonably expect in such measures?

6. Assuming the validity and reliability of the tools, how should we interpret whatever quantitative or qualitative data such instruments may provide? For example,
  A) Does it make sense to calculate departmental means?
  B) What is an acceptable range of variance among course means?
  C) Should we take seriously the mean score of any one question?
  D) Does it make sense to rank order faculty on the basis of their average scores?
  E) What essential elements of effective teaching can such instruments not capture?

7. To what extent should our expectations of new faculty, mid-career faculty, and veteran faculty differ with regard to teaching methods, student satisfaction, and teaching effectiveness?

8. As a matter of policy, which faculty should be required to use the same student course evaluation form and for what purposes? (e.g. for developmental assistance vs. summative performance evaluation).

9. As a matter of policy, which courses should be required to use the same student course evaluation form and for what purposes? (e.g. curricular development vs. instructor evaluation).

10. What other sources of evidence should be included in a robust and fully developed program of teaching evaluation for instructional improvement? For example,
  A) Peer classroom visitations,
  B) Colleague review of course syllabi and exams,
  C) Alumni and senior exit surveys,
  D) Development of effective teaching tools and instructional materials,
  E) Curriculum and program development,
  F) Successful student mentoring and academic advising.

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Course Evaluation Forms

Specific Learning Outcomes and Instructional Context

The Question of Focus: Learning Outcomes or Teacher Behaviors

Traditionally student course evaluation forms invite "agree-disagree" responses to items focusing on teacher behaviors, such as being an organized presenter of information or being fair-minded in grading. Or these instruments have solicited students' impressions regarding decisions the teacher may have made, such what the students think about the choice of text book or the course assignments. While this may all be helpful information to acquire for purposes of teacher development, questions with these foci offer little that addresses student learning, per se. And, therefore, little is learned about actual teacher effectiveness.

Contemporary thinking about curriculum development and effective classroom instruction, however, has shifted attention to what the students are actually taking from the course in terms of advancing their knowledge, skills, sensitivities, and dispositions. Using course evaluation tools to gather data regarding student learning offers two advantages: these data more directly relate to the central question in teacher evaluation, namely effectiveness in promoting learning, and second, these data contribute directly to the process of program evaluation and accreditation

The Question of Validity: Differing Pedagogy and Subject Fields

Traditionally institutions use only a single course evaluation form for all instructors and all students in all courses. This practice, which grew primarily out of the limitations of large mainframe data processing approaches to campus computing. Unfortunately, the "one size fits all" approach is not responsive to the differences in pedagogy, subject matter, learning outcomes, student demographics, and course level that characterize education today. To evaluate validly a large lecture course in general education course in history in terms of effectiveness of the instructor relative to the learning outcomes intended for that course one should be asking different questions that none might be asking with regard to a chemistry lab course, a freshman writing course, a junior level theater arts course, or a senior level business capstone course for working professionals.

Some learning outcomes, like critical thinking, may be advanced by many courses, or some, like professional judgment and ethical practice, may be the outcomes intended to result from the completion of the program in its entirety. Some might be the responsibility of a single course, for example learning a specific element of content or a specific set of performance skills, and some might be the responsibility of the faculty as a whole, such as achieving and integrated understanding of the discipline and its relationship to other fields of study. To address validly the learning outcomes of your program, and the courses that comprise it, you will not want to begin the conversation with the traditional "one size fits all" approach.

Course Evaluation Forms Program/Course Outcomes and Instructional Context

The design and implementation of a system of course evaluation forms should be approached with specific program outcomes in mind. Course evaluation form items should also suited to pedagogy, subject matter, learning outcomes, student demographics, and course level of a specific field. A systematic process of designing a student course evaluation forms would include the

° identification of course and program outcomes,
° identification of the relevant contextual elements such as pedagogy, course levels, and demographics
° the selection of items specifically addressing those outcomes in the context of those elements
° the design, formatting, and production of course evaluation forms for your use
° the scanning, scoring, and analysis of the data derived from the use of those forms

Going On-Line is the next step in student course evaluation. On-line custom designed evaluation forms can be offered to students to complete without using valuable class time and in ways that are compatible with on-line instructional technologies. On-line testing / course evaluation provides every greater versatility, for items can easily be substituted and questions adjusted as changing circumstances dictate. On-line service saves time, since data from the students' responses are gathered and processed immediately.