

## Processing Mid Semester Evaluations: Opposites and Outliers

Many schools and programs administer mid-semester course evaluations, in addition to the final course evaluations, in an effort to gather information from students that instructors can use to identify the strengths of the course at the mid-point, as well as to gather input on feasible improvements for the remainder of the semester.

Many faculty struggle to know what to do with this feedback. If this is you, here are a few quick tips:

1. Do a quick analysis of the themes that emerged (on the “strengths” as well as the “improvements” questions, don’t just focus on the negatives).

I’ll take a moment here to mention the “opposites and outliers” and how to handle them.

The opposites are those items where half the class LOVES the online post requirement in your LMS (learning management system) and the other half of the class HATES the online post requirement. These are very challenging to respond to at the mid-semester because as soon as you change the online post requirement to accommodate those who hate it, those who loved it are now unhappy. No way to win!

This is quite different from the outliers. The outliers are the comments that are contradictory to the majority perspective in the class. For example, the vast majority of the students commented on how much they LOVE the online post requirement but one person mentioned really HATING the online post requirement. Or maybe, no one else mentioned the online post requirement at all so the only comment you have about it is from one student (who either LOVED it or HATED it). These outliers are also very challenging to respond to at the mid-semester because without enough similar data points to suggest a theme, it is unclear what you should do about it. We often wonder, is it necessary to adapt the content to meet the needs of the outlier? This does NOT mean that a single comment about a course element is unworthy of attention. (See tip #2 below – if the comment is surprising or atypical, it warrants additional consideration, at the very least). There are some obvious situations when even a single comment should be given significant weight. For example, if one student describes feeling emotionally unsafe in class when discussing sensitive or challenging topics, it would be important to consider how to address that with the class, even if no one else mentioned this as a concern. In doing so, you’re creating a sense of safety for that one student and perhaps for others who didn’t provide comments on the evaluation but were also feeling the same way.

On the other hand, many times those outlier comments are not about an issue as serious as emotional safety in class and they simply reflect one student’s opinion about a course element. In these cases, it may not be necessary (or possible) to adjust that course element and you can chalk it up to the old adage “you can’t please everybody all of the time”. In these cases, you should still make a note of that piece of feedback to see if it shows up in future semesters. When analyzed over time, those outlier comments can actually demonstrate trends and themes of their own.

2. Ask yourself (and your TA or co-teacher) if any of the ratings and/or comments are actually surprising and if so, what made it surprising or atypical? Consider:

- a. Is this typical feedback? Maybe they always think there are too many readings/assignments or too few guest speakers.

b. Can you connect their comments and ratings to a change you made to the course content or structure? If so, it's important to note how students are responding (positively or negatively) to your changes.

3. Determine how (NOT if but how) you want to process the feedback with your class. Best practices for teaching suggest that you should present and discuss the feedback with your class – students need to feel that their feedback is heard and that their perspectives are respected! This has the added benefit of making it more likely that students will complete the final course evaluations, thus giving you (and your school) an accurate picture of the student experience in your class.

One suggestion is to present a summary of the feedback in class:

- Include an example or two of “opposites and outliers” and mention how challenging it is to know what exactly to do with these types of comments. If the outlier is related to something significant (like emotional safety), explain to the students that you take even a single comment about this seriously and then describe how you plan to address it.
- Include the themes that emerged related to the strengths of the class as well as the consistent suggestions for ways to improve the class content or structure.
- You could then discuss options for course changes you can make for the rest of the semester or identify things that could be changed in future semesters.
- Sometimes, the things that students want to see changed are not things that you can actually change. It is important to clarify those things to students so they know that you aren't just ignoring their suggestions. I call this “naming it and claiming it”.

Happy teaching!

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