

Chapter 21

Using Reflection Surveys to Improve Teaching and Learning

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&

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Faculty are being held accountable these days for quality teaching, student learning, and student satisfaction like never before (Lowenthal, 2008). While research and publishing are in many ways still the sine qua non for faculty success and promotion as well as institutional prestige (Boyer, 1990), more emphasis is being placed on quality teaching these days (Lowenthal, 2008). At the University of Colorado Denver, like many other institutions, end-of-course student evaluations (called FCQ's) are one of, and unfortunately more often than not, the most often used method to assess how well individual faculty are teaching. And while research suggests that these evaluations can be useful and even improve *aspects* of teaching if used in certain ways (e.g., with a consultant or a peer) (McKeachie, 1997), these evaluations often suffer from a number of weaknesses (see McKeachie, 1997). For instance, researchers have expressed concern regarding how such things as class size, grading leniency, workload, and even learning environment and delivery format influence these evaluations (d'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997; Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997; Kelly, Ponton, & Rovai, 2007; Marsh & Roche, 1997). While the average faculty member tends to be suspicious of their value, these evaluations appear to do a decent job of measuring student satisfaction. Issues of selectively and inconsistently using these evaluations for tenure and promotion aside, perhaps the biggest problem we find with these evaluations is that faculty often do not receive their end-of-course student evaluations for weeks, if not months after the semester. This is too late to fix any problems with the course in question. Instead, faculty have to wait to make adjustments to the course and their teaching strategies until the next time they teach the course in question.

In addition to this timing problem, in our experience, every group of students is slightly different. So, if we make revisions to the spring version of course B, based on end-of-course student evaluations from the fall version of course B, we may address a problem that does not exist. We may also make a change that creates problems with this different group of students.

To address this problem, we began using periodic reflection surveys in our courses. We started using them a number of years ago in our face-to-face courses but over time we began using them in our online courses as well. Basically, we use these periodic reflection surveys to customize our courses to each group of students, to help students link new information to their prior experiences, and to encourage students to establish a reflective approach to their career. In the following chapter, we describe how we use reflection surveys, some lessons we have learned, and some tips for ways you can use reflection surveys in your courses.

Background

The focus of this chapter is on how reflection surveys can help faculty improve the instructional quality of their courses and meet the needs of their students. The

research on the effectiveness of reflection, as a learning strategy, is expansive and consistent. Fosnot (1996) argues that reflection is the driving force of learning. Jonnasen and Reeves (1996) define reflection as deliberate and careful thinking that enables us to make sense of our experiences. And Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) suggest that reflection is an interpretative process of abstracting meaning in an effort to understand reality.

While research argues for the importance of reflection, in our experience, most students need some structure and encouragement to engage in reflection and that is where reflection surveys come in. Our students benefit from reflection surveys because many of the questions we ask require them to carefully think about their learning experiences, how those experiences link to their prior experiences, and what additional questions or concerns they have about the new information they are trying to learn.

Reflection surveys also help us. For instance, we, as faculty, benefit from reflection surveys in that they provide data with which to engage in continuous improvement, perhaps even “real time” improvement. Given these benefits, we are now going to describe how we use reflection surveys in our courses.

How We Use Reflection Surveys

In our online courses, we administer a four to six item reflection survey to our students at the end of each unit; each unit is two weeks long. See Figure 1 for an example of what one looks like. While we currently use the Google Docs form tool (which is shown below in Figure 1) to administer these surveys, we have also used SurveyMonkey in the past. In fact, essentially any survey tool could work. In our case, we strive to find a tool that is easy to use and enables students the option to provide anonymous feedback if they want. We have experimented with making these reflection surveys optional as well as assigning points. In our experience, we get a much better response rate (and therefore better data to improve our courses) if we assign points for this assignment while at the same time giving students the ability to provide anonymous feedback. Students in our courses currently earn 25 points for completing each survey. Students have approximately three days to complete the survey once it is administered.

Figure 1. An example of a reflection survey

The questions we include in the reflection surveys are different for each unit. We typically include a few questions based on the unique discussions, assignments, and / or problems in the current unit. However, we also always include the following

question: “Additional comments, questions, concerns, issues, suggestions for improvement?”

The answers to the questions we ask provide us with the data with which to improve the course and customize it to meet the needs of the students in the course. Additionally we strive to make this a 360 degree feedback loop. So, after students answer the questions on each reflection survey, we compile all of their answers anonymously to each question and respond to themes and patterns, as well as individual answers. We then post our responses to their feedback in the course shell for every student to read and comment on if they want (see Figure 2). We have found this to be a very effective way to (a) be “real” with our students and have informal exchanges with them, (b) elaborate on course topics, (c) clarify misconceptions, (d) calm fears and anxiety, and (e) ask them for suggestions on what we can do to help them be successful in the course.

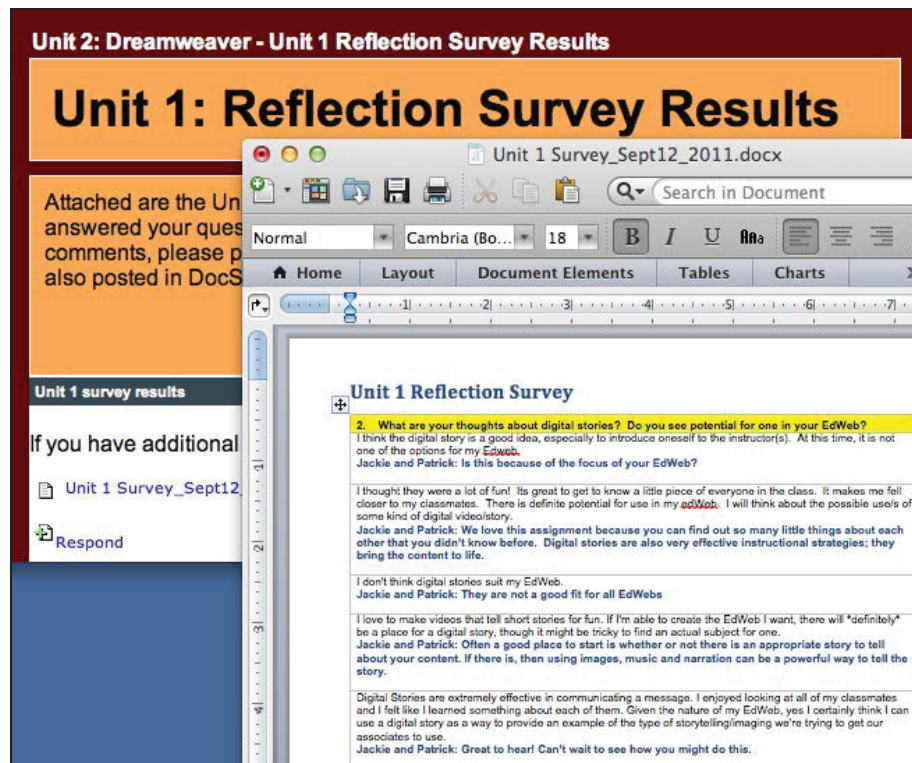


Figure 2. An example of a reflection survey results document with our responses posted as an attachment in a threaded discussion.

Another benefit of these end-of-unit reflection surveys is that students tell us that they get a sense of community and camaraderie in reading the results of the reflection surveys. In other words, the reflection survey results documents seem to help students feel that they are a part of a group or community of learners.

Tips on Using Reflection Surveys

So based on our experience using reflection surveys, we recommend the following:

- **Identify Timing of Surveys Ahead of Time:** If possible, decide how often and therefore how many reflection surveys you want to administer during a given semester. While we administer surveys every unit, you might decide to administer yours only 2-3 times during a semester.
- **Identify Purpose of Surveys:** Identify the focus of your reflection surveys. In other words, do you simply want to check-in to see if students are happy, struggling, and so forth or do you want to use your reflection surveys much like we have in which you inquire not only about students' satisfaction but also about how they are acquiring specific knowledge.
- **Consider the Power of Anonymity:** Decide whether you want the surveys to always be anonymous, never be anonymous, or to give students the choice on whether they want to submit their feedback anonymously. Since we assign points, we ask students to share their name with us but we do not include any student names in the results document we share with students. We think it is important for us to have student names for the occasional situation where we want to contact a person individually to work on a problem they expressed or a misconception they described in the survey. However, because we use Google Docs to administer the survey and do not make the first question about their name a required question, students always have the ability to submit feedback about the course anonymously.
- **Consider Adding Points:** Decide whether or not you will assign points to the survey or not. If you are making the surveys completely anonymous, it is basically impossible to assign points (unless you give everyone points regardless of whether they completed the survey or not). If you are going to administer reflection surveys each week or unit, we highly recommend assigning points for the assignment because in our experience students take it more seriously and their answers are more thoughtful.
- **Explain the Purpose of the Reflection Surveys in the Syllabus:** Clearly explain what the reflection surveys are, how they will be used, when they will be administered, and if points are associated with them.
- **Be Consistent:** Once you decide when and how often you will administer the reflection surveys, be sure to follow through on it. Also strive to be consistent with how you handle the surveys. For instance, if you plan to make the results of the survey's public in the course shell, be sure to always do that. We try to post the results within five days of the close date on the survey and we post the results in a threaded discussion so students can comment or ask additional questions.
- **Ask Qualitative and Quantitative Questions:** While quantitative questions can provide quick and easy feedback—especially in a tool like Google Docs

where the form tool will calculate the results for you, we find that we get the most useful and thoughtful information through open-ended qualitative questions. While they take longer to read and summarize, we often find we get results we never expect. Here are some open-ended questions we ask:

- What is the most important thing you learned in this unit?
- What three words best describe your thoughts about this course so far?
- What did you find surprising or interesting in the small group discussions?
- What questions or concerns do you have about
- How are you feeling about (name of major assignment)? What can we do to help?
- How will you apply (name of chapter or article) to your professional life?
- What did you learn from the (name of assignment)?

Concluding Thoughts

We have been using reflection surveys in our online courses for a number of years now. Asking students for their feedback, then responding to their feedback, and then sharing our responses to their feedback has been one of the single best things we have done in the courses we teach. We highly recommend that you begin using them in some way in your online courses. While they add a little work, we are confident you won't be disappointed!

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Bios

Jackie Dobrovolny, Ph.D. is currently a Clinical Professor, teaching online graduate courses, in the Information and Learning Technologies (ILT) program at the University of Colorado Denver (UCD). Her dissertation focused on how adults learn from online, self-paced instruction and she replicated her dissertation research methodology with the Mountain Plains Aids Education and Training Center (MPAETC), which is part of UCD. She also taught online for Capella University. Jackie thinks one of the important issues in online instruction is whether the instruction is group-paced, like the courses she and Patrick co-teach, or whether the instruction is self-paced, like the preceptor training course she recently developed for nurses in health care facilities throughout the US.

Patrick R. Lowenthal is an Academic Technology Coordinator at CU Online at the University of Colorado Denver. He is also a doctoral student studying instructional design and technology in the School of Education and Human Development. His research interests focus on instructional communication, with a specific focus on social and teaching presence. He also has a MA in Instructional Design and Technology as well as a MA in the Academic Study of Religion.