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### Cover Page Footnote

I thank Margaret Chapman, Peter Felten, Deandra Little, Ariela Marcus-Sells, Tom Mould, and Paula Patch for comments and insights that helped me develop or hone the approach explained here.

# Beyond Chili Peppers: Using Custom Surveys to Improve Learning and Assessment

Raj A. Ghoshal, *Elon University*

**Abstract:** This article shows how customized learning surveys can be used to capture students' perceptions of their learning in ways that aid pedagogy and students' growth. In contrast to relying solely on standardized university-designed evaluations of *teaching*, thoughtful use of self-designed surveys about *learning* offers four benefits. First, this technique generates timely feedback in a way that allows instructors to adjust our teaching when it matters most. Second, custom surveys allow instructors to center learning as the core outcome and therefore facilitate specific, educationally relevant, and useful feedback. Third, the approach can cue students to think of themselves as the core agent of their own education, which helps them move toward greater self-directed learning in the long term. Finally, the approach facilitates the collection of data that can be used in annual assessments or applications for tenure and promotion, which will be increasingly important as more universities seek alternatives to using standardized student evaluations in personnel decisions. In this article I lay out my rationale for adopting this method, describe how it works, and explain why I see it as fruitful for improving assessment, teaching, and learning.

**Keywords:** Teaching and learning; Pedagogy; Assessment; SoTL

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## Introduction

Advancing students' learning hinges in significant part on understanding it. For instructors, this understanding is useful for enhancing pedagogy: how well are we doing, and how can we do better? Administrators share this interest in increasing instructors' effectiveness, and also seek this information to guide hiring and retention decisions. Of course, other factors enter these equations; for instance, both instructors and administrators have incentives to maximize students' satisfaction, which might either correlate with or come into conflict with educational goals (Arum and Roksa 2011; Bunge 2018). Nonetheless, most of us working in educational contexts are invested in learning and seek to facilitate it.

But knowing how well we are doing in this task is surprisingly difficult. Students' performance on assignments gives some guidance. But if students do

well in a course, is it because of their pre-existing talents, because of our high-quality instruction, or because our expectations are too low? Alternatively, what share of poor outcomes are attributable to failures of instruction versus other causes? Which of our techniques worked well and which worked poorly? Five years out, how different are students for having studied with us? Ultimately, how well does our instruction stack up against what students would have learned with no instruction, or with the best possible instruction? None of these questions can be answered through assignment performance alone.

## Assessing Learning: Dominant Methods and Their Limitations

To assess pedagogy and learning, academic institutions have implemented various techniques beyond graded

assignments. These include standardized end-of-term evaluations; peer and chair assessment of classroom instruction and teaching materials; assessment of students' performance on purportedly objective metrics; and informal mechanisms for student feedback.

End-of-term standardized student evaluations are the most institutionalized of these methods. This tool for assessing teaching and learning has some strengths (Barre 2016). Student evaluations allow student input on the educational process, provide a potential check on inappropriate behavior by faculty, and measure positive emotion, which is likely correlated with learning. However, there is little clarity about which other outcomes evaluations actually measure and how well they do so. Instructors' scores on these evaluations are likely unrelated or even negatively related to some dimensions of learning (Braga, Paccagnella, and Pellizzari 2014; Carrell and West 2010; Uttl, White, and Gonzalez 2017). Because ratings are closely tied to students' short-term satisfaction (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark 2016; Rojas 2017), they can incentivize faculty to skip over material that students will resist. This concern is especially worrisome in sociology courses that address topics such as race, gender, inequality, and the like, as shying away from challenging pre-existing opinions can reduce students' learning. Ratings can also be influenced by "bribes" such as giving out cookies, higher grades, or extra credit, and can lead professors to lower expectations (Ewing 2018; Hessler et al. 2018). And they can be skewed by instructors' race, gender, age, and perceived attractiveness (American Sociological Association 2019). One study even found that instructors' perceived "easiness" and "sexiness" accounted for half the variation in overall instructor quality ratings on [www.ratemyprofessor.com](http://www.ratemyprofessor.com), a popular website for students rating professors that until recently allowed students to bestow "chili peppers" on instructors they found attractive (Felton, Mitchell, and Stinson 2004). While this website is not used by institutions to evaluate faculty, Felton et al. (2008) argue that perceived ease and attractiveness effects can carry over to overall "instructor quality" measures used in institutional evaluations. Finally, a handful of students use anonymity to make hurtful personal comments on evaluations, leading some instructors to not read

comments at all (Khan 2008). And post-course feedback comes too late to benefit a course's current enrollees.

Given limitations of student-only feedback, many universities also rely on peer and chair assessments of teaching. Faculty submit syllabi and assignments to peer reviewers or tenure committees, and observers sit in on classes as part of teaching evaluation. This method ensures that those evaluating instruction have direct experience with that instruction and can generate rich and detailed information. However, few chairs or peer observers have time to watch more than one class session per instructor per year, let alone to write and discuss useful formative and summative feedback across multiple sessions. It is difficult for outsiders to gain meaningful impressions of learning from one or two class sessions or reading over a handful of assignments (Lang 2019). This is especially true because instructor techniques that diverge from common teaching norms might indicate less-than-ideal teaching but may instead reflect deliberate adaptations to the unique dynamics of any given group of students; "best practices" are context-dependent and contexts can vary widely even within a single university. For these reasons, observations may be of limited use in assessing students' learning or suggesting ways to enhance pedagogy.

A third approach is to measure student outcomes via standardized performance assessments. This is fairly straightforward in fields where identical instruments asking questions with correct answers are used across multiple sections and may also work in fields that use well-institutionalized external instruments (e.g. a certification exam such as the bar exam). But this method is less useful when there is only one section of a course in an institution, when papers rather than exams are the main metric, or when there is no widely used external method of assessment. These three conditions are the norm in many sociology programs. And comparing final grades across instructors does not clarify whether an instructor whose students receive high grades had above-average students to begin with, or facilitated significant learning, or simply held class members to lower-than-ideal standards.

Finally, many instructors gather informal feedback from students at least once during a course. This may include asking students to write anonymous comments about the course or instruction on paper, collecting input via “minute papers” (Stead 2005) or clickers, or engaging in informal conversations. This approach can be useful but is often unsystematic and may also share some limitations of evaluations highly focused on satisfaction.

Below I present a different approach that overcomes some limitations of other methods for collecting information on students’ learning: repeated use of customized learning surveys. Based on my experience, and in contrast to relying solely on standardized university-designed evaluations of teaching, thoughtful and consistent use of self-designed surveys about learning offers four benefits. First, this technique generates timely feedback in a way that allows me to adjust my teaching when it matters most. Second, it allows me to center learning as the core outcome and therefore facilitates specific, educationally relevant, and useful feedback. Third, my approach cues students to think of themselves as the core agent of their own education, which helps them move toward greater self-directed learning in the long term. Finally, the approach facilitates the collection of data that can be used in annual assessments or applications for tenure and promotion, which will be increasingly important as more universities seek alternatives to using standardized student evaluations in personnel decisions (Flaherty 2018; Owen 2019). I describe how this approach works and explain its benefits for assessment, teaching, and learning.

### **Custom Survey Design and Use**

Students in a semester-long course typically complete about five surveys (sometimes more) addressing their learning, spread across the term. I design the surveys in Google Forms, which is easy to learn and offers the ability to craft many different types of questions (long-answer, short-answer, multiple choice, ranking, etc.). I share a link with students by emailing it out or embedding it in slides they can access. Students have

time in class to respond, though out-of-class response is also possible. Most of the surveys are brief. For instance, I might ask students to identify one important thing they have learned recently in the class; for their comments or questions about an imminent assignment; for their questions about recent course ideas they’d like me to revisit; for their questions about course logistics; and whether they have any additional comments or questions.

Longer surveys usually come near the midpoint and about two weeks before the end. The majority of questions focus specifically on learning, rather than on satisfaction. I begin by asking students to take a few minutes and state ideas of interest they’ve learned that they want to remember in five years. I inquire about the course lecture/discussion balance and which readings have been of particular interest. In classes where I have significant content flexibility (for instance, my current courses on race), I ask in one or two surveys whether there are particular topics we have not addressed that students want to see brought in. I also ask students about the quality of their efforts and outputs in ways intended to prompt reflection on their agency as learners and generate long-term growth, as described below.

After every survey, I read students’ responses. Within one or two classes I respond to common themes that arose. This might mean giving more explanation of an idea or assignment, adapting parts of an assignment, explaining why we’re doing an exercise or covering an idea, or noting that I’ll work to incorporate more or less lecture, discussion, or workshopping of assignments into the course. If there is strong interest in adding an additional topic, I often note that I’ll make that change. (As I now use shared Google Docs for syllabi, updating future readings/topics is fairly seamless.) If students have noted ideas about strategies for learning or doing high-quality work that they’ve found effective in their responses, I share those ideas with the full class. I retain surveys for future reference in noting patterns or trends in students’ reactions.

My ability to garner abundant feedback from custom surveys may have been aided by my typically small class sizes, which facilitate relationships and interaction. However, the technique can work with larger classes as well. Nearly all students want input into their educational process, and most appreciate the chance to give feedback when it can still be acted upon. With larger classes, giving time in class to complete the survey is especially important, as diffusion of responsibility might otherwise reduce participation. Though I mostly teach in person, I've also used surveys successfully in teaching online. While the surveys are anonymous and I don't grade for completion, simply including the survey among a day's assigned tasks yields a high response rate.

### Benefits of Frequent Custom Surveys

This approach to collecting information on students' learning has at least four benefits. First, it allows fast insight into what students are learning and missing. Do core ideas come through clearly? Are students stuck on misunderstanding of a concept or assignment? For instance, I recently found via a survey that many students in my Quantitative Methods class wanted additional explanation of one particular statistical test; having this communicated immediately was more useful to teaching and learning than hearing it after the end of the term (or never hearing it at all). While there are other ways of getting at these questions in the moment, Google Forms streamlines input in an organized and clear manner, removes concerns about anonymity, yields insight into thought processes, and allows easy electronic retention of feedback. This all occurs using a survey tool that can be set up in under fifteen minutes.

A second benefit is that when designed well, custom surveys prioritize feedback on learning. This stands in contrast to some standardized metrics that may be ambiguous about what considerations should guide students' responses. Because custom surveys can prime students to remember that classes are primarily about learning, they can yield more useful insights for assessing and promoting learning. The feedback on learning generated may be useful for assessing and

improving both overall course design and specific assignments.

To gain information on overall course design effectiveness, in my recent final criminology survey I opened by asking "What are 1-3 key takeaways or ideas you learned in this class that will stick with you?" Another question at the end of my last survey for a recent quantitative methods class read "Please share any other thoughts that will help me teach next year's students as much as possible about using quantitative methods." Similarly, one prompt from an early survey in a class I teach on 1960s social movements reads:

"My main goals in this class include for you to learn a great deal about the 1960s, the civil rights movement, and social movements, and for the knowledge and perspectives you gain to help you think about your own civic and political engagement. With reference to those goals, please tell me whatever would be useful for me to know at this point about your views on the format, structure, assignments, etc. of the class. Possible topics to address could be: what's working well and should be kept as is? What, if anything, should change? How is the balance of time spent on different activities & topics working? ... and anything else."

These types of questions can yield understanding of what big-picture insights students take from a class as well as understanding of how course design and flow are impacting their learning process. Though nothing stops students from sharing these types of insights on standardized evaluations, they are far more frequent in response to a specific prompt that references learning goals than when given simply an empty space to write whatever comments come to mind at the end of the term. Ultimately, knowing what learning students have found most memorable and what students believe is going well or poorly about a class is more pedagogically useful than general comments like "this course was awesome!" or "this course was terrible" – which arrive too late to be acted upon anyway.

Similarly, custom surveys also offer the potential for in-depth questions in relation to specific assignments and concepts. In my criminology course survey, one question read:

“Please comment on the op-ed project so far, especially as relates to learning how to persuasively write about crime & punishment for a public audience: In the course of working on the final project, have you deepened (or do you expect to deepen) your knowledge of how to write an op-ed about a crime-related issue, or your knowledge of the issue you’re addressing, etc.? What aspects of this assignment work well, & are there any ways this assignment should be altered in the future to maximize development of the skills it addresses?”

Most students answered these questions thoughtfully, and most answers included reflection in relation to the overall class goals, assignment goals, and/or students’ own learning goals that I had cued. I believe these questions yielded more useful information for both assessing and improving my teaching than most standardized questions do because they explicitly cued students to focus on learning. Similarly, in customized surveys I’m able to ask specifically about assignments and skills built in ways that can generate useful information. For instance, in my quantitative methods class, how do my students assess their own growth in their ability to conduct a content analysis? Or to design an audit study? Or to interpret tables in quantitative journal articles? While these types of questions cannot take the place of directly assessing the quality of students’ work, they offer useful information that can be used in concert with product-based assessment.

A third benefit of instructor-designed surveys is that they can push students to recognize their agency as learners in ways that benefit them long-term. As Herbert A. Simon points out, “learning results from what the student does and thinks and only from what the student does and thinks. The teacher can advance

learning only by influencing what the student does to learn” (Ambrose et al. 2010). But nearly all standardized evaluations I’ve seen implicitly or explicitly cast instructors’ performance, rather than students’ learning, as the central object of evaluation. That we discuss “evaluating instructors” far more often than “evaluating learning” suggests a misalignment between our assessment tools and our pedagogical goals. If students (and instructors) are repeatedly told that the best way to understand how much learning happens in a classroom is by evaluating instructors’ most visible actions, they will logically conclude that the ability to learn depends mostly on others’ actions – an inaccurate and limiting conclusion.

Custom surveys can prompt students to think about their agency as learners in various ways. For instance, I often ask students in surveys whether they produced high-quality work of which they feel proud on various assignments, and sometimes ask what share of reading they have done. I follow up questions that ask what participants have learned with a question that asks how they have learned it. I’ve at times inquired whether students have developed their ability to learn more on their own about the field in the future if they want to, and about how much they perceive their own learning in courses as stemming from my actions, their own pre-existing abilities, their effort, the course content, or their classmates. In combination with asking students to reflect on what from the course they want to remember years down the line, these prompts place students’ own actions at the center of their learning. The purpose here is not to minimize my responsibility as a course instructor, but rather to help students attain a realization that will help them for the rest of their lives: that their own actions have more impact on their learning than does any external agent.

Finally, data collected in a regular and organized manner through custom surveys can be useful in job applications and in tenure/promotion portfolios at institutions that value teaching. Instructors who can show that they have been tracking important learning outcomes in more considered ways than generic evaluations have already shown that they put serious

thought into teaching. Discussion in a teaching statement of why one has used the prompts that they have and how the data collected has influenced one's teaching will rightly make a positive impression on committee members interested in good pedagogy. Numerous institutions have already moved away from using standardized student evaluations in personnel decisions (Flaherty 2019), and more are likely to do so as legal questions about using metrics with likely gender and race biases escalate (Owen 2019). Institutions will

likely seek measures of teaching effectiveness that combine aspects of self-assessment and other-assessment and are more squarely focused on learning, and custom surveys are ideally positioned to fill this gap.

Instructors across many different contexts who believe that student input is valuable but want more substantive, timely, and/or pedagogically helpful feedback than other methods alone provide may find this approach as beneficial as I have.

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