RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

A Brief Guide

to

The Evaluation of Teaching and Courses

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CENTRE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH, TEACHING AND LEARNING

Introduction[1]

In the contexts of the goals and objectives identified in Rhodes University's Institutional Development Plan, the evaluation of teaching and course design has a critical role to play. Not only does evaluation provide us with a means of developing insights into the way teaching and course design function, but it also allows us to reflect on what we have learned in order to ensure that our approaches to teaching and the design of our courses allow us to achieve the goals and objectives we have identified for ourselves.

Evaluation is critical to the development of the type and quality of learning valued by the University. Evaluation can, not only provide academics with insights into the kind of learning their teaching and course design is developing but, when well executed, can also provide a means for students to think about their own learning and their roles as learners.

Generating feedback data from our students is particularly crucial in a context of urgent calls for the transformation and decolonising of universities and curricula in particular. It is important that meaningful spaces are created for dialogues with students that will give them an opportunity to provide input into educational processes.

However, feedback from students does not constitute 'an evaluation'. Eliciting feedback from students is a way of finding out their opinions and perceptions of the teaching and courses they experience at Rhodes and is regarded as useful *data*. 'An evaluation', on the other hand, involves generating data from a number of sources, including peers, such as departmental colleagues, alumni and or external examiners and analysing that data in order to get a more nuanced understanding of what is happening in a specific teaching and learning context. Important in this process is that lecturers need to reflect critically on the data, bringing their own professional and educational understandings to the data and interpret it in ways which can confirm for them what is working well and /or give them ideas for ways in which their teaching or course design could be changed to lead to better student learning.

In addition, the data generated as described above can be complemented by insights from other sources. For example, empirical data related to course success and throughput rates over a period of three or more years can provide insights into the way a course has functioned as a student body has changed. Similarly, the use of theory and research can be used to challenge or affirm assumptions that underpin course design or teaching itself.

At Rhodes the responsibility for assuring the quality of teaching and learning resides in the hands of academics and academic leaders. There is no quality assurance unit that prescribes or oversees evaluation processes at Rhodes. There is no single student feedback questionnaire that is used by the institution to compare lecturers or courses. CHERTL plays a supportive role when requested to, in terms of assisting in designing feedback instruments, generating data and working with lecturers to think through how they can respond to students' feedback in ways which will improve student learning.

In CHERTL courses on evaluation, lecturers are encouraged to make explicit their beliefs about what constitutes 'good' teaching in their contexts and then to design feedback instruments appropriate to a specific teaching context. The data from that feedback (and other data) is then used to see whether the lecturer's actual teaching practices correspond with their espoused teaching philosophies and if courses meet their stated purposes. Lecturers are

[1] This section draws on the Rhodes University Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Course.

encouraged to design feedback instruments that focus on student learning rather than student satisfaction. CHERTL encourages lecturers to elicit feedback from students not only at the end of courses but also during a course so that any barriers to student learning can be identified timeously and acted on. Principled and useful evaluation practices are promoted rather than a rule-bound, bureaucratic one-size-fits-all approach.

The choice and design of feedback instruments need to be fit for purpose. Use of instruments which have rating scales to enable comparisons between teachers and courses is discouraged and is not common practice at Rhodes. Especially for large classes questionnaires which contain likert-scale type questions can be useful for giving lecturers a broad indication of particular issues. They do not provide nuanced data. Open-ended questions usually provide much more useful data. Lecturers should teach students how to give constructive and developmental feedback and model to them how to respond appropriately to feedback given in this spirit. These are skills that will be useful to them throughout their lives. Feedback from students will only enhance teaching and learning if it is seen as part of evaluation processes, if it is taken seriously and if it is appropriately acted upon by lecturers.

In a context where lecturers are being challenged to consider the effects of apartheid and coloniality on curricula (including teaching and assessment methods), it could be useful to follow up written feedback with opportunities for conversations with students to enable them to participate in curriculum decisions.

Although Rhodes promotes a quality enhancement/improvement agenda, there are tensions related to who sees data and how it is used. The Evaluation Policy separates teaching and course evaluations in an attempt to ensure that feedback data is used in ethical ways and that safe spaces are created for lecturers to improve their teaching. However, it is acknowledged that academic leaders are responsible for the quality of the academic project and can thus request *course* evaluations from their staff. At Rhodes teaching feedback is usually seen as an opportunity for lecturers to reflect on their practices and to consider changes. Although we have largely avoided using student feedback for performance appraisal purposes, individual academics should be held accountable for the quality of their teaching and their students' learning. Where student feedback is used to make a case for 'good' teaching for promotion purposes, the data is used at the discretion of the lecturer concerned and is used to substantiate claims made by candidates for promotion.

Part of the complexity of evaluation also relates to the tensions inherent within it. Evaluation aims both to assure and enhance quality. As a means of assuring quality, evaluation calls on the need for individuals and departments to be accountable whilst at the same time requiring that both are protected from its misuse. When used in relation to teaching, evaluation aims to contribute to the ongoing professional development of individuals, who are the most valuable resource in a university. This requires 'safe spaces' to be created for academics to try out new approaches without fear that evaluation will be detrimental to them as individuals, and critically, for support to be made available not only for the development of those new approaches but also for problems that may arise as a result of their implementation. As well as being complex and fraught with tensions, evaluation is also an enormously time and resource consuming process. In a context where time and resources are scarce, pressure is exerted to ensure that evaluative work is planned and executed efficiently and effectively.

The purpose of this brief guide is make some suggestions for ways in which lecturers can generate data for evaluating their teaching or course design. Common in the literature on higher education is the suggestion that 'good' teachers constantly engage in critical

reflection[2] on evidence about teaching and students' learning. Stephen Brookfield[3] suggests four lenses or perspectives for critical reflection. These include reflecting on student feedback data, reflecting on data from peers, reflecting on ideas from the scholarly literature and systematic critical self-reflection. These are discussed further below.

1. Eliciting feedback data from students

There are many different ways of accessing student perceptions of courses and teaching. The method you choose depends on things like the nature of the feedback sought; the nature of the discipline; the level of study and the size of the class.

1.1 Questionnaires

The most common way of eliciting student feedback is by administering questionnaires. Lecturers can: design their own questionnaires, use CHERTL's web-based teaching and course evaluation tool called the Evaluation Assistant or they can from a range of other digital tools.

The **Evaluation Assistant** (EA) can be accessed at https://chertlapps.ru.ac.za/ea/. (First time users will have to obtain a username and password from the Evaluation Administrator (chertl-admin@ru.ac.za or extension 8171/3). Through the EA a lecturer can construct a survey questionnaire to suit his/her needs. CHERTL staff members are available to support staff in the process of developing a questionnaire. Some of the questions on the EA require a ranked response and some require a free-form response. A ranked response requires the student to respond to a statement (e.g. The outcomes for the course were clearly communicated to the students) by selecting one of the following options: strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree; not applicable. These types of questions generate quantitative feedback that provide the lecturer a broad indication of the distribution and range students' perceptions. Free-form responses, on the other hand, require students to respond in their own words to a question (e.g. What did you think of the assessment procedures used in the course?).

Free-form responses are analysed qualitatively and often provide more detailed feedback. To construct a questionnaire the lecturer can select questions from a bank of questions but can also design his/her own questions if those in the bank do not meet his/her needs. Ideally the lecturer will appoint a facilitator to administer the questionnaire rather than doing it him/herself. Students may well be more open and honest in their responses if they aware that the facilitator seals their responses in an envelope for return to CHERTL. A CHERTL staff member analyses the data and a confidential report is sent to the lecturer involved. Lecturers are encouraged to discuss the feedback with colleagues or staff at CHERTL who are available to collaborate with them in the development of strategies to improve their teaching and their students' learning.
Link to A Brief Guide on using the Evaluation Assistant
http://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/resources/briefguides/#d.en.136300

[2] "Master teachers are not born; they become. They become primarily by developing a habit of mind, a way of looking critically at the work they do; by developing the courage to recognise faults, and by struggling to improve" (Common 1989:385 in Leibowitz et al 2009:258)

[3] Brookfield, Stephen (1995). *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Digital tools for eliciting feedback provide lecturers with a broad array of options for obtaining and analysing feedback data. It is important to note, however, that the principles underlying a sound approach to evaluation must still be applied. The primary advantage of using digital feedback tools is that they enable flexible development and delivery of survey instruments and timing and frequency of feedback, as well as adaptability to contextual circumstances. Another major advantage is that the data – quantitative and qualitative – are captured automatically as the students enter their responses. This means there are no delays due to manual data capturing, particularly of open-ended text answers.

Examples of survey delivery and data collection tools include:

RUconnected questionnaire tool: A questionnaire can be embedded in a course, making it readily accessible to students enrolled on the course (and not to other users of RUconnected). Responses can be exported to a spreadsheet for analysis.

External service, e.g. SurveyMonkey: This method has the advantage of independence from the course/ institutional context, which gives the impression of true anonymity. However, it can be difficult to limit distribution reliably to the target students. It provides some basic descriptive statistics for quantitative questions. Not all online survey services allow for download of responses, unless a fee is paid.

Google Forms: All lecturers have free access to G-Suite, including the survey tool, which is relatively quick and easy to use. The survey can be distributed to students by emailing a link to them, or by embedding a link to the online survey instrument within a course space like RUconnected. The survey responses (including open ended responses) can be collected automatically in a linked Google Sheet spreadsheet, ready for analysis.

Student response systems: These come in two basic variants: those that need a specific device and those that don't. The former system requires each student to have access to a proprietary device (often called a "clicker") whilst in a particular lecture hall during class time. Questions are projected for the class to see, and responses are entered using the clickers and captured by a radio frequency linked device plugged into a laptop. In the absence of clickers, students can use any Internet connected device (laptop, cellphone, tablet) to log in to an online survey space in which the lecturer has set up a questionnaire, and respond to questions. With both systems, the results of the survey can be seen immediately by both lecturer and students.

Alternative approaches:
Lecturers could consider setting up a Google Doc that is shared with students via a link. It enables the setting up of open-ended questions relating to particular aspects of the course or aspects of teaching that a lecturer would like to get feedback on. The link to the Google Doc is then shared with students. Students can then provide ongoing feedback in a common document that will grow over the period of the course. This is in contrast to most feedback methods, which are conducted at the end of a course. In this case the lecturer has acess to ongoing feedback that the s/he can respond to immediately.

Surveys and questionnaires are an efficient way of receiving feedback especially from large classes but they do have shortcomings such as that the data is often very broad; meanings of questions are not always shared by all the participants; students may suffer questionnaire fatigue and they tend to be used at the end of a course (providing summative feedback) rather than during the course (that is, they don't always provide ongoing developmental, formative

feedback). If student numbers in a course are low, we recommend that other forms of feedback generation are used.

1.2. Other strategies for obtaining feedback from students

There are many other educationally sound strategies for obtaining student feedback. A technique that has been found to be very effective is **Small Group Instructional Diagnosis** (SGID). SGID is a whole class focus group interviewing technique (developed at the University of Washington) designed to gather consensus-based student data[4] that enables lecturers to make informed decisions about their teaching and courses.

SGIDs are done in small groups and facilitated by someone other than the lecturer. The facilitator meets with a group of students and asks them to discuss, in small groups, a set of questions drawn up in consultation with the lecturer. When the groups report back to the whole class the facilitator has the opportunity to delve more deeply into important issues that are raised. It is a very effective method of eliciting data that focuses on areas of specific concern to a lecturer. CHERTL staff members are available to consult with lecturers to facilitate SGIDs. These are most effective with relatively small classes, but can be adapted for bigger groups.

There are also a number of more informal strategies which lecturers can use themselves in their classes, which are particularly useful to inform their ongoing teaching and course development in a particular course. Lecturers can:

- **Pose questions** directly to the class that they can respond to, usually in writing, individually or in small groups. For example: What was the most useful thing you learned today? How did today's task help you to understand the concept of …? How could I change my teaching to help students learn more from this class?

- Use **Critical learning statements**: Students are asked to write down three points which, at the end of a lesson/ section are clear and three which are muddy. Recurring themes will provide useful formative information for what needs to be addressed in future lectures.

- Ask students to draw a **concept map** showing what they have learned in a particular class or about a topic.

[4] The SGID process described above can be adapted to suit specific needs and contexts.

- Ask students at the end of class to do **free writing** i.e. give them a topic and ask them to write, without lifting their pens, for three minutes, in response to a topic or question you have posed.

- Administer a **Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire** (see Appendix 1 for an example).

- Ask students to elect a few **representatives**, meet with them weekly to discuss how the course is going.

- Generate and administer **student-devised questionnaires**.

- Ask to borrow a few students' **lecture notes** and compare to your lecture notes.

One of the aims at Rhodes is to encourage a culture of evaluation in the university; to encourage students to see their participation in evaluating teaching and courses as part of their role as active learners. In order to do this, it is *crucial to feed back what you have found out from students and to discuss with them how you are going to act on the information that you have received*.

Student feedback can and does provide valuable information but it cannot always tell individuals everything needed to validly and reliably evaluate teaching and courses. Student feedback data thus needs to be used along with information from other sources (much like 'triangulation' in other forms of research).

2. Peer feedback

Getting feedback from one's peers, if it is well managed, can contribute not only towards an individual teacher's professional and educational development but also promote conversations on 'good teaching' based in disciplines/faculties and improve teaching *across* those disciplines/faculties. A testimonial letter written by a colleague, such as one usually finds in *curriculum vitae*, does not constitute developmental peer feedback. Research has shown that in order to increase the reliability and validity of peer feedback it can be helpful for departments to set up a system of peer feedback that works for their particular circumstances. We recommend a **five-step peer observation strategy**:

Step 1: A **pre-observational meeting** between the lecturer and the peer observer to establish rapport and learn about the context of the teaching (nature of the course; aims and learning outcomes for course & specific lectures; number and composition of students; material covered; teaching materials used, etc.); the purpose of the evaluation (which aspects of the teaching are to be evaluated); the form of the evaluation instrument; who is going to see the report. During this meeting the parties also consider a range of practicalities such as whether the observer's status will be announced and where s/he will sit).

Step 2: The **observation** in which the observer *records* what happens in the class(es).

Step 3: A period of **analysis** in which the observer analyses what he/she has seen in relation to: the terms of the pre-observational meeting and other matters arising out of the observation.

Step 4: A **post-observation** meeting in which the observer reports on 2 & 3 and the lecturer 'talks back' to the feedback. The observer and the lecturer discuss strategies for development/management of issues identified.

Step 5: The **report** which is usually given only to the lecturer concerned and remains confidential. The report is only sent to other people if requested by the person being reviewed.)

The lecturer needs to be involved in the selection of a peer reviewer and the main criteria for selection should be that the reviewer is committed to the primacy of staff development over summative evaluation and that the lecturer feels comfortable with him/her. A peer reviewer could be a lecturer from an academic's own department, from a cognate discipline or a member of CHERTL. It is the role of the peer reviewer to:

- listen to what the lecturer wants him/her to do
- focus on providing feedback that will foster development
- give feedback that is descriptive rather than evaluative (this reduces defensive reaction and builds metacognitive knowledge). For example, "*I like the way you 'framed' your lecture by recapping what was covered in yesterday's class and then explaining what your intended outcomes for today's class were"*.
- provide specific rather than general feedback
- direct comments towards behaviour which the lecturer can change
- provide prompt feedback
- try to be unobtrusive in the class.

Peer feedback can also be obtained from other sources, such as:

- external examiners
- alumni.

3. Research and theory

Another way of obtaining insights into one's own practices is through critical reading of what lecturers at other universities have written about their research into the teaching of their disciplines. It might be useful to look at web sites of universities and to consult journals: both general higher education studies journals as well as discipline specific teaching journals. Through reading theoretical literature, lecturers' existing beliefs regarding 'good' teaching can be confirmed or challenged. In addition you may find theories and practical ideas that could be used to improve teaching practices.

4. Systematic critical self-reflection

Critical self-reflection is probably the most effective strategy for improving teaching and course design. Self-reflection involves critical reflection on information gathered in the process of looking at one's teaching through the other lenses described above. It involves

lecturers using their professional knowledge and experience to decide which of the feedback given by others they need to consider to help them to develop their teaching and their courses. It also means justifying why some of the comments are not valid and why they do not need to be responded to.

One of the ways of ensuring regular self-reflection is through keeping a diary or journal in which reactions to or interpretations of events in a lecturer's teaching life can be recorded. In addition, the feedback on teaching and courses from peers and students is only really valuable if lecturers reflect critically on it in the light of their own experiences and beliefs.

A way of documenting the feedback from others as well as self-reflections and responses to all of these is in a **portfolio.** (See CHERTL's *A Brief Guide to the Development of a Teaching Portfolio)*. Teaching portfolios are a means of documenting good teaching at both institutional and personal levels. In addition, building a portfolio is particularly valuable in developing oneself as a teacher. Submission of teaching portfolios is a requirement for lecturers on probation and for lecturers applying promotion. Find the promotion policy here: http://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/institutionalplanning/documents/Promotion%20of%20Academic%20Staff.pdf

5. Using feedback data for research processes

At Rhodes the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is promoted. SoTL is generally understood as scholarly inquiry into student learning which advances the practice of teaching (including curriculum and assessment) by making the findings from the inquiry public (through sharing with departmental colleagues, presentations at conferences and publications). SoTL, often, although not always, takes the form of case studies in which academics engage in inquiry to understand what is happening in a particular context or they report on interventions they have devised for addressing particular teaching and learning challenges. Student feedback is often used as part of their data set for these inquiries. Feedback data is more often than not a small component of the data set used for research into teaching and learning. It does not constitute the sum of the data used for making claims. As with any other research, ethical protocols need to be observed, and data collection and analysis methods need to be shown to have been valid and reliable. Please see appendix 2 for *Guidelines on the ethical use of student data in teaching and learning*.

There are a number of papers in the RU SoTL archive that demonstrate a range of ways in which feedback data has and can be used for research purposes. These can be found here: https://www.zotero.org/groups/207954/sotlatrhodes/items

6. Conclusion

This brief guide has encouraged lecturers to see evaluation as a process which involves looking at their teaching and learning context from many different angles. Lecturers have been encouraged to:

- use a variety of means of eliciting ongoing formative and summative feedback from students
- inform students of how they intend responding to their feedback and showing them that their input and opinions are valued

- elicit developmental feedback from peers
- read literature and research on teaching and learning
- reflect critically on their teaching and on the feedback received on their teaching and courses
- act on feedback provided where appropriate
- document these processes in the form of a portfolio
- be mindful of ethical requirements for use of feedback data and undertaking educational research.

CHERTL is available to assist lecturers with:

- devising a questionnaire or survey using the Evaluation Assistant
- conducting SGIDs and other focus group/ interviewing techniques to elicit more specific and detailed feedback from students
- setting up peer review systems in departments
- providing peer reviewers
- finding literature on teaching and learning
- deciding how to respond to feedback received
- building a portfolio.

Contact information

Please contact Nomfundo Siqwede at chertl-admin@ru.ac.za or any other CHERTL staff member.

Appendix 1

THE CLASSROOM CRITICAL INCIDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Please take about five minutes to respond to the questions below. Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. On xxx (a certain date) I will be sharing the responses with you. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help me make the class more responsive to your concerns.

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?

3. What action that anyone (student or lecturer) took in the class this week did you find most affirming or helpful?

4. What action that anyone (student or lecturer) took in the class this week did you find most puzzling, confusing or hurtful?

5. What about the class surprised you the most?

Appendix 2

RHODES UNVERSITY ETHICAL STANDARDS COMMITTEE (RUESC) GUIDELINES ON THE ETHICAL USE OF STUDENT DATA IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

It is important that all student data collected by staff and students at Rhodes University follow the guidelines for ethical research practice involving human subjects as outlined in the RUESC handbook (which is in accordance with Rhodes University Policy and national requirements).
Thus, in using student data, all staff and students should adhere to the principles of respect, dignity, transparency, accountability and integrity.
In practical terms, these principles translate into:

1) Information to participants as to the purpose of the data collection
2) Informed consent by participants
3) A right to withdraw from the collection without any adverse consequences to the participant involved.

In addition to adhering to the general principles set out above, staff and students are alerted to the need to apply to departmental/faculty ethics committees and/or RUESC for the collection of student data where student data is used for research purposes as set out in paragraph 2.2 below.
Where student data is used for internal processes & strategic objectives only (as per paragraph 2.1 below), there is no need to apply to an ethics committee.

2. USE OF STUDENT DATA

Data is collected from students for two reasons

2.1 **<u>Internal processes and strategy objectives of an academic department or Faculty</u>**

Primarily for the use of the lecturer and/or department or Faculty in *evaluating teaching and courses* to contribute to improving teaching and curricula. Data collected in this way is *not shared outside of the university* and is essentially part of reflective teaching practice.
In accordance with the general principles above:

1. It is required that students be given information about what the data will be used for, how it will be reported and told that participation is voluntary with no adverse consequences arising from non-participation.
2. When this data is used in portfolios for probationary and promotion purposes, it must be used in ethically sound ways.

See the Rhodes University Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses and CHERTL's Brief Guide on the Evaluation of Teaching and courses for further guidelines.
Often, difficulties arise when student data is initially collected for evaluative purposes as set out above, but the lecturer and/or department or Faculty later wish to use it for research purposes. It is recommended that whenever there is a chance that such collection may be used later for research purposes (i.e. published outside of the university), that ethical clearance from an ethics committee be obtained. This accords with the general principle in research ethics that clearance cannot be obtained retrospectively.

2.2 Research on teaching and learning

Primarily for purposes of conducting *research on teaching and learning* which will be made available *outside of the university* e.g. as Masters and PhD theses, journal articles, books, book chapters, presentations. This also includes any lecturer/employee of Rhodes taking an external course requiring evaluation of their context through means of surveys, interviews, focus groups etc.

1. An important principle of ethical research involving human subjects is informed consent. Informed consent means that participants must be made aware of what the data will be used for, their rights (e.g. to withdraw at any time) and the way they may be identified (anonymous, confidential, by class etc.).
2. Ethical clearance for research on teaching and learning for any type of course requirement, be it **certificate, diploma or degree purposes** must be obtained from the relevant accredited department or faculty ethics committee **prior to commencement of the data being collected.**
3. Ethical clearance for research on teaching and learning for publications, etc. must be obtained from accredited departmental or faculty ethics committees **prior to the data being collected.**
4. Additional approval from RUESC will be required should the research involve vulnerable participants (RUESC Handbook Chapter ll, section 3.3).
5. Use of existing (archival) data collected by Rhodes at a central level for research purposes requires ethical clearance via departmental or faculty research committees before access will be granted by the Registrar.

It is essential that academics intending to undertake research on any aspect of teaching and learning consult the RUESC Policy and Handbook (http://ruconnected.ru.ac.za/course/view.php?id=5399).

3. EXAMPLES

Do I need ethics approval?	Ethics Approval Required	
	Yes	No
1) I am evaluating my teaching using course evaluations for my own purposes. I will never publish the results or present them outside RU.		X
2) I am evaluating my teaching using course evaluations for my teaching portfolio, which will be submitted for personal promotion only (not published or as part of a degree or diploma).		X
3) I am collecting student data as part of a degree or diploma course which may be externally examined.	X	
4) I am considering using information derived from course evaluations for a publication/conference presentation.	X	
5) I may consider publishing my teaching portfolio or part thereof.	X	
6) I wish to collate several years of course evaluations for a publication. Only depersonalised and/or archival data will be used.	Will be dealt with on a case by case basis.	
7) I am not in an Academic department but am taking a diploma course which requires me to survey my colleagues.	X	
8) I plan to use my teaching portfolio/course evaluations for other external purposes not mentioned above.	X	

4. GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION