Student Evaluations: Advice for Novice Faculty

Karen Hessler, MSN, FNP-C; and Jeanette Humphreys, MSN, RN

ABSTRACT
Student evaluations can be a valuable method to transform teaching strategies and course design in nursing education. Negative student comments are difficult to view as constructive criticism and have the potential to lead to negative changes, rather than positive, productive changes for improved instruction and course design. This article provides a glimpse of recent empirical evidence regarding student evaluations of instructors as well as providing novice faculty with suggestions for promoting positive change in teaching strategies.

Greater accountability and improvement is needed in the quality of teaching. To accomplish that, student evaluations of teachers have become a major source of data on teaching quality (Coadrake & Stedman, 1998). In addition, universities and schools rely heavily on student evaluations in determining faculty promotion and salary increases. For novice nursing faculty, student evaluations can be intimidating and negative student comments can be devastating. Understanding how to cope with negative evaluations and use them to promote positive changes in teaching techniques is the focus of this article.

Literature Review
Nursing faculty take considerable pride in being effective, excellent clinical instructors (Wolf, Bender, Beitz, Wieland, & Vito, 2004). Nurse educators frequently have moved from the role of expert clinician because of their clinical expertise, not necessarily because of a background in educational theory. Nursing students in the classroom evaluate teaching style, not clinical expertise. For this reason, student evaluations of novice faculty originating from a primarily clinical setting need to be reviewed as feedback on faculty’s teaching performance, not as an attack on their clinical knowledge. Considerable research has been conducted on the reliability and validity of student evaluations; the consensus is that students cannot judge all aspects of clinical performance (Chen & Hoshower, 2003). Students can provide valuable feedback on instructional techniques and course design but cannot necessarily judge whether the material in the course is current or whether the instructor knows the subject matter (Filak & Sheldon, 2003). Therefore, novice nurse educators should not interpret student evaluations as a reflection of their knowledge of the subject. However, suggestions regarding teaching style, course design, and delivery of material in the classroom or clinical settings are valid. Knowing what the student is capable of evaluating refocuses the criticism where it belongs.

Instructors may be hesitant to give difficult examinations and assign unsatisfactory grades due to the threat of poor student evaluations. Centra (2003) discovered that even after student outcomes of learning were controlled, expected grades generally did not affect students’ evaluations of their instructors. In fact, particularly in the natural sciences, students who expected an “A” in the course rated the instructors consistently lower. In addition, the low rating of courses was due to students’ perception of coursework as too elementary or too difficult. Courses rated as “just right” in difficulty level received the highest course evaluations. In contrast, Ikegulu and Bumble (2001) found that students’ expectation of their course grades significantly affected the ratings of their instructors. The lower the expected course grade, the less favorable the faculty evaluation. In the same study, female instructors were rated consistently higher than were male instructors. Similarly, female students gave better ratings to instructors than did their male counterparts.

Diekelmann (2004) reviewed the influence of innovative teaching strategies on student evaluations of nursing instructors. Some nursing instructors may not institute new teaching techniques or try interactive learning strategies in the classroom for fear of unfavorable student evaluations. Diekelmann (2004) recommended formative evaluations by students in addition to summative evaluations, provided that the instructor act on student suggestions during that course. If courses are evaluated only at the end of the semester, insights regarding changes are too late to implement. The instructor is left to interpret whether students were unhappy with all or only part of a course.

Timing of student evaluations is
also an important piece of the evaluation puzzle. Evaluations given after a difficult examination may reflect students’ discontent with examination questions rather than course content or instructor performance. For those without a current formative evaluation strategy, Diekelmann (2004) suggested the student write a letter to the instructor either midcourse or after a new teaching strategy’s implementation. Letters should include the student’s perceptions of the most and least meaningful activities and any suggestions for change. Such a strategy can enhance student-instructor relationships and create a dialogue for improvement in classroom learning.

At times, faculty may feel threatened, confused, or frustrated with the process and outcomes of faculty evaluations. Part of the frustration could be due to the gap between what students evaluate and what institutions promote as important, (i.e., specific scholarship and research) (Ward-Griffin & Brown, 1992). The original purpose for student evaluations of instructors was to provide feedback to improve teaching and course development. However, student evaluation data have been used for some time as major criteria for tenure and promotion decisions. Administrators struggle with how to best use this data and see the student evaluation as a weapon against instructors (Penny, 2003). The use of student evaluations for faculty promotion and tenure as they contribute to the personal and professional lives of instructors is of great concern. If these data are inaccurate, flawed, or punitive in nature, they have the potential to seriously damage not only the instructor but also the institution.

Ballantyne, Borthwick, and Packer (2000) addressed how to extend the application of student evaluations by using them as a basis for staff development. They found that students were more likely to be aware of the shortcomings in their own particular areas of study than were instructors. Students were more interested in giving feedback to staff on their teaching, whereas the staff’s main interest was on the promotion of student learning, motivation, and participation. Students often rushed to complete forms containing multiple choice questions, which had little to do with some individual courses and instructors (Watrous, 2003). Ballantyne et al. (2000) suggested the development of booklets for students, designed to support and complement the student evaluation process.

Accepting Criticism for Positive Change

Although the reliability and validity of student evaluations have yet to be conclusively proven, they remain an important part of our academic world. It is up to each instructor to use evaluation tools constructively for growth, rather than bitterness or stagnation. In a way, each student becomes a consumer of a product that the instructor provides and needs to have input in this product, its mode of delivery, and their satisfaction with the overall experience. Such feedback has been used for years to refine and perfect products for consumers; student evaluations can be used in a similar fashion.

Marsh (1987) noted that one of the primary uses of student evaluations was to provide diagnostic feedback to instructors regarding the effectiveness of their teaching. Unfortunately, using student evaluations in isolation has had little, if any, effect on teacher improvement (Ramsden & Dodds, 1989). Feedback from students regarding teaching effectiveness is critical but can be devastating to faculty, particularly those in a novice position. Therefore, the question remains how to receive negative criticism on evaluations and create a positive change to improve teaching ability.

Timing and presentation of the faculty and course evaluations to the student are important steps in the evaluation process. The following suggestions involve the distribution and initial review of student feedback.

- Do not schedule evaluations immediately before or after a final examination.
- Provide students with sufficient time to complete the evaluation forms.
- Prior to distribution, explain the evaluation forms thoroughly.
- Be certain that the student can differentiate evaluation of course content and curriculum from evaluation of instructor.

- Encourage students to use the comments section for both positive and negative feedback.
- Ask students to provide rationale for negative comments in addition to suggestions for improvement.
- Do not routinely dismiss negative comments as the response of a disgruntled student.
- Weed out student comments unrelated to the course, content, or teaching style and those that seem inappropriate or personal in nature. These have little to do with the course itself or teaching style.
- Consider the student as a consumer recommending product improvements.
- Consider whether the evaluation tool asks questions about teaching skills instructors want evaluated, such as: When was the tool developed and how was it validated?, Was it validated using nursing students or in clinical settings?, and Does the tool include parts of evaluation instructors think are important to know to improve teaching ability?

When student evaluations have been completed, the following suggestions will help instructors critically think about student comments in an open manner.

- If student comments focus on teaching style, ask a seasoned instructor to attend class and provide professional feedback.
- To further enhance personal teaching style, observe a seasoned instructor in action.
- Seek a faculty mentor.
- Look at the student evaluation data for trends that may reveal problems with course content or teaching style, rather than focusing on one negative comment.
- Consider a midterm evaluation for students to provide feedback; be willing to implement suggestions for the remainder of the term.
- Keep an open mind and be willing to move out of your comfort zone in the classroom. Try new teaching strategies.
- Do not be afraid to try new and different teaching techniques.
Conclusion

More research in the area of nursing student evaluations of instructors would begin to resolve the enigma of the evaluation process. Student evaluations can be a productive part of improving teaching strategies, course content, and student learning in nursing programs. Negative comments and scores are difficult to acknowledge and can be upsetting to even the most seasoned nursing faculty members. Student evaluations will continue to be an important part of the review process for course content and faculty performance. However, they should be coupled with peer evaluation and a frequent revision of evaluation tools in use. In addition, summative, as well as formative, evaluations are recommended to enhance active midterm adjustment of teaching style and course content.

References