

Increasing Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) Response Rates Through Reminders

Objectives

Administrative personnel decisions about tenure, promotion and raises are often made based upon student evaluations of teaching (SET). These assessments play a big role in an instructor's progress at a university. In addition, they help create a culture of where good teaching is rewarded. Because of their important role in fair decision-making, it is essential that these assessments be processed in a transparent way, conforming to standards of good assessment practice, and that the scores be representative of those attending the course.

SET can strongly influence committees charged with tenure, promotion, and salary increase decisions. Furthermore, SET helps universities demonstrate accountability in teaching. Despite their importance, this era of shrinking budgets can lead to pressure to reduce costs. The panacea of online SET offers a reduction in class time, processing time, plus costs associated with optical recognition paper, temperamental scoring machines, and trained staff.

Unfortunately, a recurring problem in the implementation of online SET has been its low response rates (Nulty, 2008). The problem with low response rates is that the scores can become less representative of the ideas of students who attended the course.

Typically, evaluation of teaching is governed by policy, not research theory. However, the literature related to assessment has suggestions for improving data quality (Nulty, 2008; Bennett, & Nair, 2009) and particularly, about how to increase response rate from 10-27% (Nulty, 2008, 303-304):

1. Increasing time which the assessment is available.
2. Asking instructors to encourage students to participate or use incentives.
3. Sending students selective reminders.

Theoretical Framework

Evaluation literature is largely theoretical, and pragmatic. Although focused upon practical considerations such as cost and time, applied research benefits from good research design and methodology. This study was informed by methodological research on effect size (Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981) and sample size (Neyman, 1934; Krejcie & Morgan; 1970, Dillman, 2000) plus a more recent application of these formulas to the SET literature (Nulty, 2008).

Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate the value of selective reminders to increase student participation in online Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), when applied in a large, urban, decentralized, Midwestern university.

Response rate was measured retrospectively by noting response rates of online SET in relationship to different historical initiatives by special groups. Two independent variables were measured:

1. Student variables such as student level in the university
2. Usage of reminders

Response rates, as the dependent variable, were measured over time, before and after reminders were sent to students. They were also measured in one group with no reminders, compared to another group with reminders. T Tests were used to calculate significance.

Results

First, the extent of the difference between online and paper SET response rates was measured. Results are noted in Figure 1. and number of participants are noted in Table 1. The results suggest that response rates are much lower for online compared to paper SET. Furthermore, the results suggest that response rates are higher as students progress in their academic program.

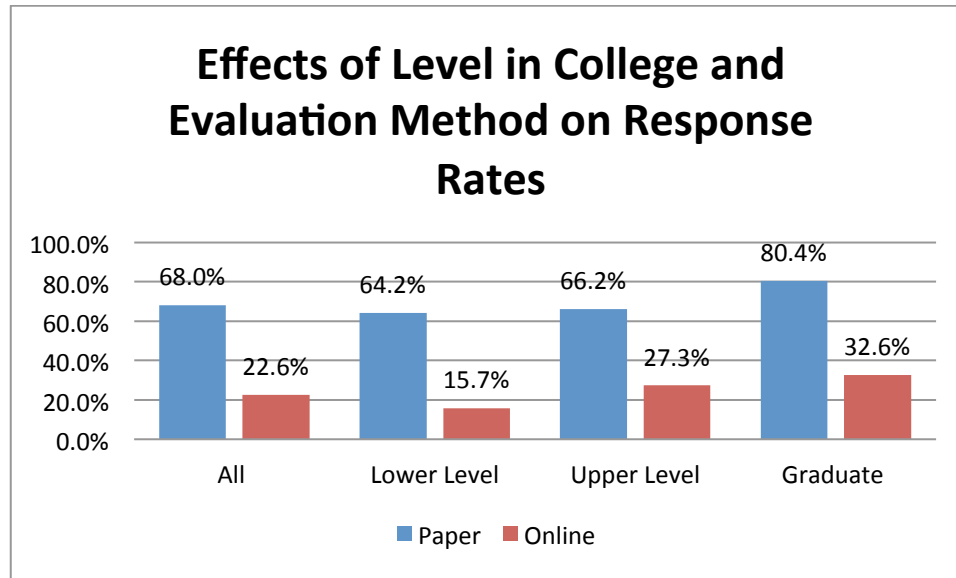


Figure 1. Percentage responding to the evaluation was measured across level in college and evaluation method for the Winter 2012 semester. In this sample, students were 45% more likely to participate in paper compared to online evaluations. First/second year students (lower level) were compared to third/fourth year students (upper level) and graduate students. As students progressed in the program, higher participation rates were evident for both paper and online evaluation methods.

Table 1

Number of Students Asked to Participate

	Paper	Online
All	44615	14239
Graduate	9695	5115
Upper Level	4502	477
Lower Level	18045	4085

Secondly, response rates were measured over time. Results are noted in Figure 2. Response rates were measured after one email, and later after one reminder. Results suggest that reminders have an effect on response rates. Specifically, our results suggest that response rates increase with reminders.

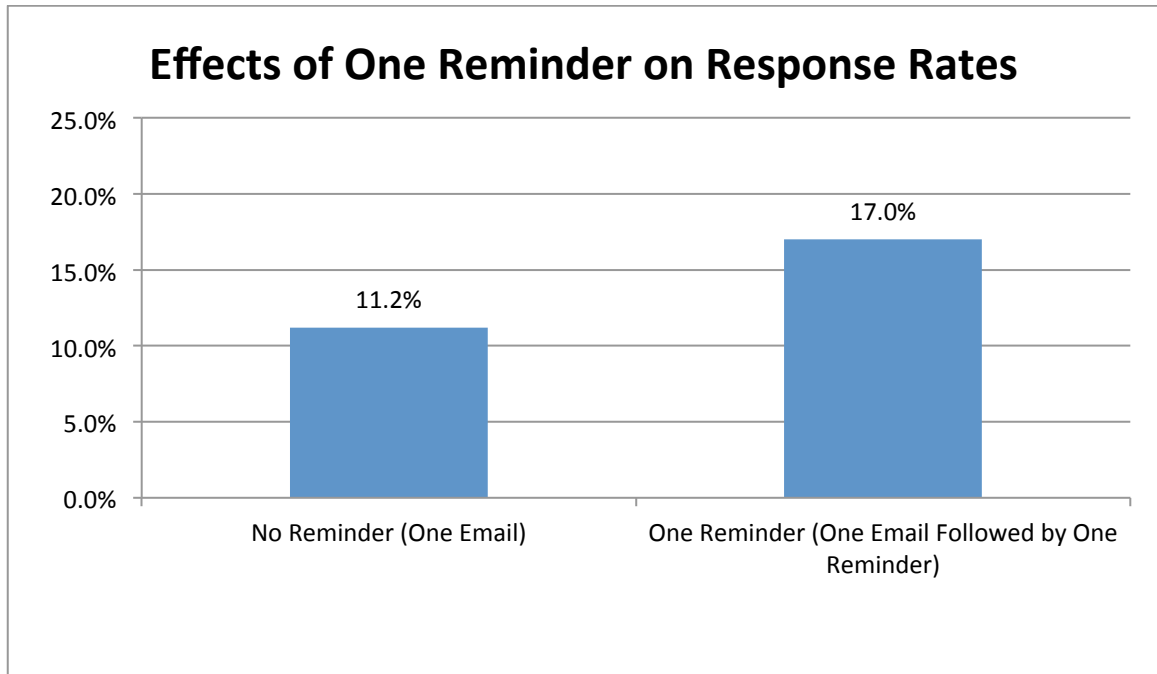


Figure 2. Percentage responding to the evaluation was measured across reminder conditions for the Winter 2012 semester. N=19 sections, N=1130 students asked to participate. The sample was largely graduate students. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the response rate in the reminder and no reminder conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for reminders (M=19.3, SD=8.1) and no reminders (M=12.7, SD=5.9) conditions. $t(18) = 10.3, p < .001$.

Finally, although a significant relationship was found, the increase in response rate could be due to timing - students waiting until the last minute to complete the survey, rather than responding to reminders. For the last analysis, response rates were measured in the same group of students for two separate surveys:

Student Evaluation of Teaching survey was administered at the end of the semester, while a learning outcome survey with reminders went out two(2) days earlier in the semester. Results suggest that reminders have an effect on response rates. Specifically, our results suggest that response rates increase if a reminder is used.

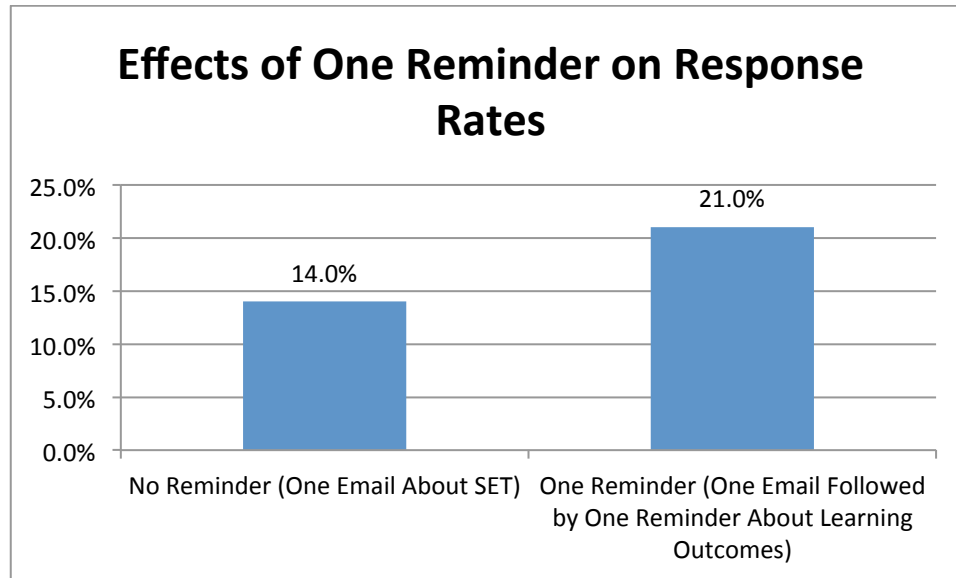


Figure 3. Percentage responding to the evaluation was measured across reminder conditions. N=29 sections, N=2329 students asked to participate. The sample was largely lower level students. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the response rate in the reminder and no reminder conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores for reminder (M=16.97, SD=19.6) and no reminder (M=11.9, SD=16.1) conditions. $t(28) = -4.0, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

It was surprising what a profound effect the simple intervention of reminders had on response rates. Although the difference between online and paper response rates in our data was lower than other studies in the literature, it was a significant, and in practice would make the difference between adequate and inadequate sample sizes. Future research can investigate the usefulness of multiple reminders over time.

In evaluation, cost constraints can sometimes result in low sample sizes. However, by utilizing good design principles, costs can be kept low, while minimum sample sizes are maintained.

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