

Improving Participation in Online Evaluations

1. Objectives or purposes

Universities are increasingly turning to online evaluation techniques to gauge student opinion regarding instructor performance. Online surveys save class time, processing time, supplies costs, repair costs, and the need to hire staff with special mechanical training. However, a recurring problem in the implementation of online instructor evaluation has been its low participation levels by students (Nulty, 2008).

When there are low response rates, scores can become less representative of the ideas of the students who attended the course. This is problematic because evaluation of teaching is increasingly playing an important role in faculty promotion, hiring, and renewal decisions.

Evaluation literature is typically pragmatic and aimed at improving the quality of data collected (Nulty, 2008; Bennett, & Nair, 2009). When put into practice, certain techniques have resulted in 10-27% higher levels of student participation (Nulty, 2008, 303-304). These approaches are:

- Making the survey available for a longer period of time.
- Asking instructors to encourage participation.
- Reminding students to participate.

The objective of this presentation is to explore the influence of these practices on participation rates at our university with the goal of ultimately increasing student participation in online evaluation of teaching.

2. Perspective(s) or 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).

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

Student participation levels in online evaluation of teaching were measured retrospectively by noting response rates to online evaluation of teaching in relationship to historical changes over the years.

Two independent variables were measured:

1. Number of reminders emailed to a student (0, 1, 2)
2. Student class and level in the university (1000-2000 level, 3000-4000 level, graduate level)
3. Course type(Liberal Arts, Sciences, Fine Arts, Nursing, Social Work, Business, Education)

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 other groups with reminders.

During the winter semester in three subsequent years, different numbers of reminders were sent for each class. Each reminder for the students of the class was also emailed to the appropriate instructor. In the first year, no reminder was used. In the second year, one reminder was used. In the third year, two reminders were used.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects or materials

The data source was retrospective, publically available, reports regarding student response rates for online courses.

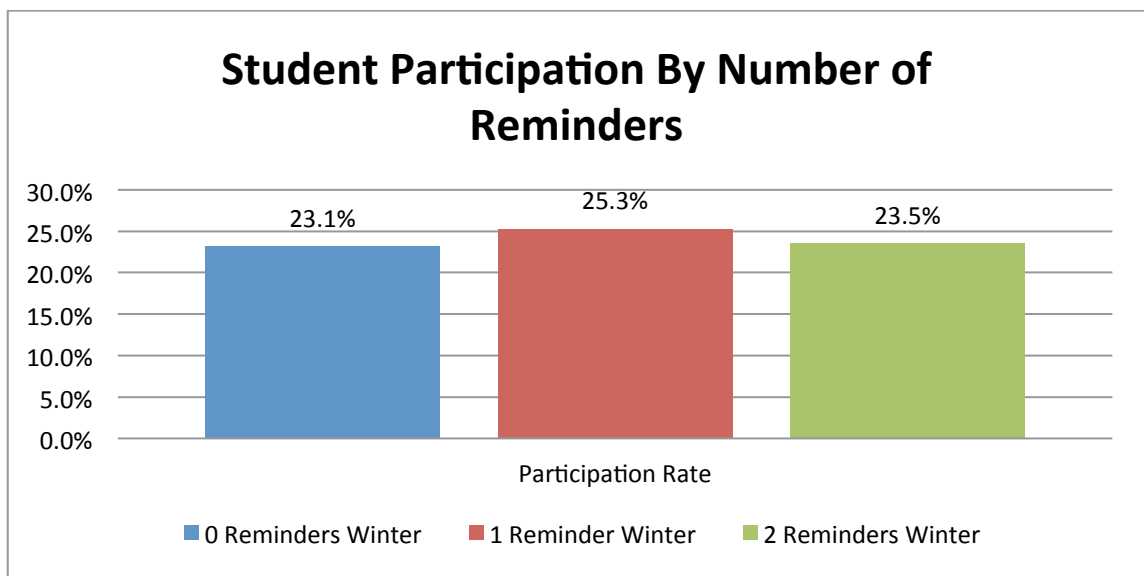
Our colleges combine arts with sciences, but for the purposes of this study, we separated them because the class structures and requirements are inherently different. Our colleges also separate engineering from science. For the purposes of this study, we combined them to increase our

participation level. Furthermore, in nursing, many courses are distance education courses. Those are different from simple online courses, and were excluded from the analysis.

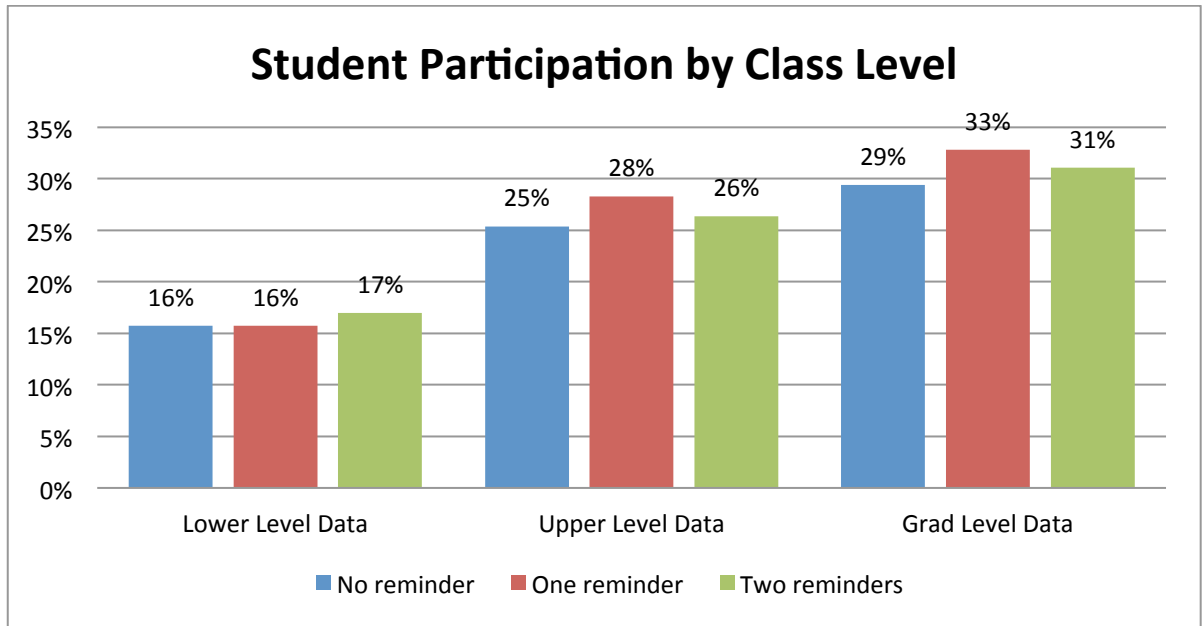
5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view,

Use of reminders improves participation. However, different numbers of reminders are more effective than others,

Participation rates were highest in the one reminder scenario. Anecdotal comments from faculty indicated that students who received more than one reminder were irritated by multiple reminders and blocked our email address as spam. This was an unexpected result.



Increased participation with reminders varied by class level. Among lower level students, more reminders led to higher participation rates. However, for upper and graduate level classes, the best participation rates were evident in the one reminder scenario.



In addition, some colleges/departments have greater levels of participation than others, particularly at a graduate level.

The culture of these areas may be part of the difference. Some departments have participants who are less influenced by reminders than others. Perhaps communication students who receive regular feedback about their oral communications are more aware of the important of feedback than students in more esoteric fields.

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

Increasing survey participation levels is something that all researchers grapple with. It is especially timely in the recent climate of online surveying. Results of this survey indicate situations in which multiple reminders are most effective.

REFERENCES

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