A curious case of the phantom professor: mindless teaching evaluations by medical students

Reference:
Uijtdehaage S¹, O'Neal C¹. A curious case of the phantom professor: mindless teaching evaluations by medical students. Medical Education. 2015 Sept;49(9): 928-32.

Author Institutions:
¹Center for Educational Development and Research, David Geffen School of Medicine, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA

Tags

Clinical domain
Medical Expert
Communicator
Collaborator
Manager
Health Advocate

Scholar
Professional
General

Educational domain
Program Evaluation
undergraduate
(medical students)

Background

Evaluations of faculty by students are ubiquitous and considered an important component of evaluating educational programs. Student evaluations are supposed to help improve curricula, provide feedback to teachers and in some cases inform faculty promotions. There has been long standing questions about the quality and utility of student evaluations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine whether students “mindlessly” complete evaluations of faculty. To study this question, the authors investigated whether students would provide evaluations for a fictitious faculty lecture.

Type of paper

Research: student evaluations
Key Points on the Methods

1) The authors over a two year period inserted a fictitious faculty lecture into the evaluations for pre-clinical courses completed by students. In the first year just a fictitious name was used, in the second year a picture of a model was included.

2) Students were asked to provide an evaluation of all faculty within 2 weeks of the close of the course. The numbers of lectures students had to rate ranged from 23 to 52.

3) It is not clear how many questions the student had to answer about the faculty member’s teaching. It may had been as few as one.

4) No information is given about how students are prepared to complete the evaluations and what they are told about how the evaluations are used in the program and for faculty.

Key Conclusions

In the faculty name only case, 66% (183 of 277) students did provide a rating for the fictitious faculty member. In the case where a picture of an “attractive model” (ouch guys…) is included the percentage of students rating the fictitious faculty member dropped to 49% (140 of 285).

While this article raises important and legitimate questions around the utility of student evaluations, my initial visceral reaction was negative. The framing felt particularly pejorative toward students (“mindless” can carry a judgment). There are a number of other possible reasons for the findings. First, students may be under pressure to provide evaluations by the medical school, among other cultural factors. Second, recall and cognitive load is a substantial problem in this study. For example, trying to rate 52 (!) lectures weeks after they occurred is really difficult. Furthermore, the student has likely engaged the material outside of class (if they even went to class) and that alone will confound their ratings of the lecture experience. Third, we know of many cognitive limitations and ways we as humans import fictitious data into our reality (See the book Invisible Gorilla). Thus the student behavior may not be all nefarious here as implied early in the paper (but later walked back a bit in the discussion). While I understand catchy titles can be titillating and fun, I see this article more as a call to caution on how we frame challenges.

Spare Keys – other take home points for clinician educators

The article demonstrates the Batalden dictum, “every system is perfectly designed to get the results it generates.” While there are likely issues at the individual student level, there also appear to be major limitations in the evaluation system studied in this paper.
Shout Out

None