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Issue 2, 2009: Survey fatigue.
Improving the accuracy of your CES scores.

This series of papers will target key areas of interest to explain concepts, diffuse myths and offer tips on how you can get the most out of the CES.

Surveys are a part of life these days, but does exposure to an increasing number of them affect our concentration levels or our motivation to complete them? This concept is sometimes referred to as survey fatigue. We investigate whether this phenomenon has an effect on student responses to the CES and if so, how we might be able to prevent future outbreaks.

First signs
Some students seem to fill in the CES so quickly, that you might wonder if they are reading the questions properly. Chatter in the classroom shortly follows.

Symptoms
Two such examples of survey fatigue are shown on the right. A: The Blanket, found in approx 4% of cases in 2008. B: the Zigzag with just 15 sightings (0.04% of cases) per semester across the University.

Another sign of survey fatigue is the shading of questions 22, 23 and 24, the additional items. Although difficult to pinpoint, this occurs at a rate of about 12% where some or all three circles were shaded when no additional question was asked.

Researching of condition
The final question on the SES (Student Experience Survey) asks: “Do you think RMIT will act on these responses?” In fact, the average result for this question increases in agreement as the semesters progress. This trend may indicate that students are becoming more aware that changes are being made according to the feedback they give.

Over time on the CES, a positive shift in the average score of blanket surveys has been seen. i.e. If a student submits a blanket survey, in 2008 they were 4 times more likely to fill it in all agreement (all 4s or all 5s) than a blanket disagreement. This is compared to twice as likely in 2006.

Example. Dr. Dorean was concerned one semester when he received a fairly ordinary GTS score. Upon inspection of the barchart breakdown of each question on pgs 2 & 3 of his summary, he found that for every question, a consistent proportion of his students responded with a “3”.

In addition to this, some students had answered the additional items 1, 2 and 3 when he had not asked any additional questions. Dr. Dorean felt that some of his students weren’t giving their responses to the CES questions much thought.
Understanding the condition

How many surveys do you think students will have to fill in during any one year within the University? Compare this to how many surveys they might complete outside of University.

Students complete surveys: in magazines to see how good they are at Aussie/movie/sporting trivia; to see how at risk of a medical condition they are, or to tell the shop assistant where they live in the form of a postcode.

Do these surveys all contribute to Survey Fatigue? Why would students be more willing to complete these types of surveys and more grudgingly complete the CES? We would have to design and distribute a survey to find that out, but we can hypothesise from the examples listed above.

- They get an instant result from their responses;
- The results of the survey benefit them;
- It is quick and not too taxing to respond to.

Well, its not too much of a stretch to apply these three rules to the CES:

- Instead of an instant result, students get instant satisfaction in that they have their say about the course, and can be as specific as they like in the written responses. This is the Gen Y-ers chance to have their say.
- The results entirely benefit them. If positive changes are made to a course, this directly affects their University experience.
- By third year after completing approx 16 CES forms, the process should be quite quick for the average full time student.

Next time students complain about having to fill it in, or if you consider your CES forms to be competed to a less than satisfactory standard, remind them of these few points.

Example. Dr. Turk was curious to know how the students felt about doing worksheets in the lectures, a technique he uses in his larger class to encourage participation and discussion.

From past semesters experience, Dr. Turk knew that students favour clarity in order to understand content and instruction. From this, during the semester and again the week before the forthcoming CES, Dr. Turk informed students that there would be an additional question about the worksheets in the CES, and that he would be available after class for consultation to make up for CES time. This informed the students that he is both interested in the results of the CES and understands that it does occupy class time and will do what he can to be accommodating.

Dr. Turk received some useful feedback that he would not have otherwise obtained and knew that the additional item had been answered appropriately.

Preventative action

Tips: How to avoid survey fatigue in your course

- When appropriate, mention where you have incorporated CES feedback from previous years. This demonstrates to students that you use and value their feedback, and lecturers who teach their courses next semester do too.
- Highlight to students that the CES is an opportunity for them to have their say about the course, anonymously.
- Include an additional question in the survey which can emphasise your interest in the results and alert students that there is a change to the survey. A change can awaken even the most fatigued student.
- Acknowledge that the CES is conducted during class time, sometimes even exam preparation time, but that it is an important tool and worth 10mins to complete. Perhaps suggest the class runs 15 mins overtime that day to make up time from the CES.