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HOW TO REACT TO STUDENT EVALUATIONS

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Abstract If most students comment that the course was too fast, a natural idea is to slow it down. If most students comment that the course was too slow, a natural idea is to speed it up. But what if half the students think the speed was too fast and half that the speed was too slow? A frequent reaction to such a situation is to conclude that the speed was just right and not change the speed the next time, but this may not be the right reaction: under the same speed, half of the students will struggle and may fail. A better reaction is to provide additional help to struggling students, e.g., in the form of extra practice assignments. How can we do it without adding more work to instructors – who are usually already overworked? A natural idea is to explicitly make some assignments required only for those who did not do well on the last test or quiz – this way, good students will have fewer required tasks and thus, we can keep the same amount of grading.

Keywords: *Student evaluations, special assignments for struggling students, special assignments for advanced students.*

FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

What are student evaluations: reminder. At the end of a course – and sometimes, also in the middle of a course – students fill anonymous course evaluation forms: they grade different aspects of the course, and they also provide comments.

Students' comments are, in our opinion, the most important part of student evaluations: if students are not fully happy with the course, it is only from the comments that we can understand what exactly needs improvement.

How instructors usually react to student evaluations. Many of the students' comment are opposite to each other: some students may complain that the course contained too many homeworks, others may complain that there were not enough homeworks to practice for the test. Some students complain that the course was too fast, some complain that the course was too slow.

In some cases, it is very clear how to react to the students' comment. If the majority of students believe that the course was too fast, then it may be a good idea to go slower next time. If the majority of the students believe that the course was too slow, then it is probably a good idea to go faster next time.

But what if approximately half of the class comments that the class was too fast, and the other half comments that the class was too slow? In this case, the frequent usual reaction is to believe that in this aspect, the course speed is just right, so there is no need to change this aspect next time this course is taught.

Why this is a problem. In some cases, such a do-nothing reaction is appropriate, but sometimes, it leads to a disaster: the fact that that the course speed is too fast for half of the students may indicate that half of the class is unable to catch up and thus, have a big chance of failing.

So what can we do? In this paper, we discuss this problem and propose better ways to react to such student evaluations.

ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM AND THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

Analysis of the problem. The problem is that if next time, we teach this course at the same speed (and do nothing else), we will encounter the same problem – and thus, risk failing half of the class. So, a proper reaction is to change the speed and/or to do something extra.

What is we simply change the speed. There are only two ways to change the speed: teach the course faster or teach the course slower.

If we teach the course faster (and do nothing else), we will make the situation even worse: now, even students who could barely survive the previous speed will start

failing, so we may end up failing even a larger portion of the class.

If we teach the course slower (and do nothing else), we decrease the number of potential fails, but we may have to skip some important topics required by accreditation or by the needs of following courses – and we also make the course too slow and thus, boring for almost half of the students, the half for which the course was already too slow. So, we cannot get too slow: if we get too slow, we may not have enough time for some topics that students absolutely need to learn.

This simple analysis shows that it is not enough to change the speed, we also need to do something extra. What can we do?

What else can we do. Since, as we have mentioned, we usually cannot slow down so as to accommodate all the students, we need to do something additional to help students who are struggling with the course speed. These students need extra materials, more examples, more exercises, maybe extra sessions to go over the material. Of course, this requires extra grading, and instructors are often already overwhelmed, how can we do it? There is a straightforward solution to this. Indeed, at present, usually, all students have to turn in the same number of homework assignments. These assignments are needed so that the students practice before the exams and get a feedback. And herein lies the solution.

- Students who are doing well in class usually do not need as many practice assignments as the rest of the class, so to them, we can assign fewer assignments.
- On the other hand, for students who are not doing well at all, the current number of assignments may be too low, they need extra assignments.

So, a natural solution is to assign more homeworks than now, but make most of these assignments explicitly required only to those students who do not do well in class. This may depend on the grade on the last test or quiz: there may be some assignments required only for those whose grade was satisfactory or who failed the last test, and yet other assignments for those who failed the last test. This way, the overall number of assignment is larger than usual, but since not all the students turn in all assignments, we can balance it in such a way that the overall number of student works that need grading remains the same. Yes, this requires coming up with more assignments, but usually – especially in big classes – the most time-consuming aspect of the instructor's

job is not so much coming up with assignments – skilled instructors do it relatively fast – but grading numerous homeworks.

To some extent, this idea of different number of assignments to different students is already practiced – e.g., in high schools, students often get extra tasks (e.g., extra tasks during the break) to solve a large number of practice problems. Our idea is to make this practice institutionalized and routine.

Additional possibility. So far, we have been talking about how to help students who are not doing well in the class. But the students' comments indicate that the other half of the class – the one for whom the speed is too slow – are also not very happy in this class. How can we help these students?

Since we are making assignments somewhat individualized, we can also make some assignments more challenging than others. To some extent, this is done – some such challenging assignments are usually proposed for extra credit – but we can make it institutionalized.

We hope that these simple ideas will help more students excel in classes and reveal their full potential.



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