Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning
Report of the Sub-Committee on the Administration of the Student Ratings of Instruction in
    Distance Learning Courses

Members: Ken Dewar, Carmel French, Natasha Hurley, Robert Lanning, Peggy Watts

THE SUB-COMMITTEE

The Sub-Committee was first struck, then expanded, in fulfilment of two mandates.

First, in 1998-99 the University Review Committee (URC) asked the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning (SCOTL) to consider how to administer the Student Ratings of Instruction (SRI) more effectively in courses taught using forms of distance technology (e.g. television, on-line, or some combination of the two). Since the response rate for the SRI was very poor in such courses, the URC (and the deans and department review committees) had found that one category of evidence used in the assessment of Teaching Performance – "results of Senate-approved student evaluations" (Article 20.25.3 of the faculty collective agreement) – was often absent in the files of faculty who taught via distance technologies. In 2001-02, an on-line version of the SRI was mounted, with the assistance of Information Technology and Services (copy appended). With the 2002 transition to WebCT from the Jones e-education distance course software, however, the capacity to ensure that the form was completed only once by a student, and that the completed form went directly to the Deans' office, was lost. The form is not currently being administered online.

In response to the URC request, a graduate student in Education was hired in the spring of 2001 under the auspices of SCOTL, and under the supervision of the Vice-President (Academic), to survey methods of evaluation used in other universities employing distance technologies. The result was a "Report on Research into Evaluation of Distance Learning Courses," completed the following summer. Then, in December 2002, a sub-committee of SCOTL was struck to consider the URC's request and report back to SCOTL. The sub-committee members were Ken Dewar, Carmel French (who agreed to join the sub-committee for this purpose), and Peggy Watts. The sub-committee met on 28 January 2003, when it considered the "Report on Research" noted above, the terms of the URC request, and the possibility of using software developed for the evaluation of on-line courses by the Office of Instructional Development and Technology (OIDT) at Dalhousie University. The OIDT software ensures confidentiality and one-time access by students completing questionnaires.

Subsequently, the sub-committee was expanded in order to fulfil a second mandate, originating in the collective agreement between MSVU and CUPE Local 3912, the union representing part-time instructors, signed on 7 March 2002. By the terms of the Letter of Understanding dated 23 February 2001, in Appendix B of the agreement, a sub-committee of SCOTL, including two representatives of the union, was to be established within three months "to assess the current methodology of student evaluation for courses offered through [DLCE]." Two representatives of CUPE Local 3912, Natasha Hurley and Robert Lanning, joined the sub-committee at its meeting of 18 February.

The sub-committee carried on further discussions via telephone and e-mail, and met again on 25 February and 11 March.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

The sub-committee began by considering how to adapt the existing SRI to the needs of distance learning courses; how, that is, to administer the SRI so as to improve response rates, and how to take account of distance technologies in the questions asked of students, while retaining a questionnaire basically consistent with the existing one. In drafting and discussing revised and expanded versions of the existing questionnaire, however, sub-committee members concluded that the questionnaire itself needed replacing. Its reasons were as follows.

a) The distinction between courses using technology as a mode of "delivery" and courses using the same, or similar, technologies (e.g. WebCT) in on-campus teaching, has become blurred in recent years. Adaptation of the SRI to meet the various needs of different "delivery" modes and teaching methods threatened to become overly complicated, possibly resulting in *several* variants of the SRI.

b) Committee discussions kept returning to a variety of problems with the existing questionnaire, such as the kinds of judgments students are asked to make (e.g. "The instructor seemed genuinely concerned with students' progress and was actively helpful"), the uncertain relevance of particular questions to certain courses (e.g. "My power to think, and/or create has improved as a result of this course" to introductory French), and the personalizing of certain questions (e.g. "The instructor was able to arouse my interest in the course"). The committee thought that these were problems regardless of whether a course was offered on campus or at a distance.

c) The indicators used in the existing questionnaire (Very Strongly Agree, Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) have the potential to skew results, by inviting respondents to agree (or disagree) with an affirmative statement, rather than asking them to rank an aspect of a course (e.g. from excellent to poor). The scale also lacks a neutral mid-point.

d) A number of *ad hoc* revisions have been made administratively over the years (e.g. the removal of the category headings "Organization/Clarity" and "Fairness/Feedback", and the abandonment of a covering letter of explanation), which suggested it might be time for a more thorough-going re-assessment by a committee such as ours.

e) The research conducted in the summer of 2001 had turned up a number of alternative questionnaires that encouraged a re-thinking of the existing SRI. One of these in particular, that of the University of Waterloo, offered a solution to the problem of adaptation by *reducing* the number of questions and *rewording* them in such a way as to make them applicable to a variety of teaching modes. The committee concluded that simplifying and generalizing the questionnaire offered a better solution than adding to it in order to take account of different modes.

As a result, the sub-committee recommends the adoption of a new questionnaire to be used in *all* courses, whether offered on campus or at a distance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The sub-committee therefore makes the following recommendations:

1. That a new form of SRI be adopted for use in all courses, whether offered on campus or at a distance, modelled on the form used at the University of Waterloo. We emphasize that this form of evaluation maintains the original "summative" purpose of the SRI; that is, it is designed to elicit a rough, "global" picture of student opinion for use as one way of assessing teaching performance in making re-appointment, promotion, and tenure decisions. The questionnaire is explicit in asking respondents to "rate" the course, and we recommend that the instrument continue to be called the "Student Ratings of Instruction." All instructors (or DLCE) would remain free to develop and use "formative" questionnaires designed to elicit information that might be used to assess the effectiveness of teaching, service, and so on. Examples of such questionnaires addressed to distance learning technologies may be found in the "Report on Research" referred to above.

2. That the questionnaire use a modified five-point Likert scale, rating the features being assessed (e.g. "presentation of course material") on a scale from 5 to 1, where 5 is high and 1 is low. On this scale, only the high and low numbers are given specific meanings (Excellent, Poor); otherwise, the scale offers a numeric continuum from higher to lower. In this method, the numeric values are less value-laden, so to speak, than in a method that attaches a specific adjective to each number.

   The sub-committee notes that the scale used in the questionnaire changes from question #9 to question #10. While question #10 is a useful one to have answered, it is not easily formulated in a manner allowing for response on an excellent-to-poor scale, parallel to the others. By clearly separating it from the previous nine questions (by re-stating the overall "rate this course" instruction), we have sought to remove the possibility of respondents automatically moving down a particular column and missing the change in meaning (e.g. from "5" [excellent] to "Too High" [bad]).

3. That the open-ended, or "anecdotal," section of the questionnaire (overleaf from the numerical section) contain one further question in addition to the two on the existing SRI: "Other comments (gripes, suggestions, applause, etc.)." This would enable students to comment on a variety of matters, including technology.

4. That the covering letter from the Vice-President (Academic) be restored to the questionnaire package and revised in the manner recommended in the attached questionnaire. The sub-committee thinks it essential that students be informed of the purpose and use of the ratings questionnaire. We recommend that the letter be read aloud by a student prior to the administration of the questionnaire. In addition, we recommend that a note be included at the bottom of the letter as follows: "If you wish to nominate an instructor for the Alumnae Award for Teaching, information concerning the nomination procedures is available from [etc.]."

5. That IT&S be asked to develop an on-line questionnaire program, perhaps on the basis of the one developed in 2001-02, similar to that used by the Dalhousie OIDT. (Although OIDT is willing to share its on-line questionnaire program, it uses a server software called ColdFusion, which MSVU does not currently have or support.) This program would have to be located at a particular site; students would have to be informed of its location and directed to it; a period of accessibility would have to be established; and

reminders would have to be sent to students (on the instructor's course site, or during a broadcast class) urging them to complete it. The program would need to enable students to access the survey questionnaire, *once and only once*, by entering their student number. If IT&S is unable to create such a program, the sub-committee recommends that the university purchase the ColdFusion software and adapt the OIDT program.

6. That DLCE Re-Broadcast courses be exempt from the general rule that all courses be evaluated. Re-Broadcast courses present unique evaluation demands, since they may, by their nature, involve more than one instructor and the "live" instructor is constrained by the organization and format established by the "recorded" instructor. Moreover, the sub-committee notes that, under the part-time instructors' collective agreement, RB courses do not count toward precedence. If it is thought necessary that RB courses be evaluated, students could be directed to answer specific questions only (e.g. questions 5, 6, and 7). In this case some means would have to be devised of informing students of the evaluation process and directing them to the questionnaire.

The proposed new SRI questionnaire follows.

Other attachments:
  #1: MSVU current SRI
  #2: MSVU on-line SRI (2001-02)

MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

STUDENT RATING OF INSTRUCTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Students:

Teaching excellence is an important part of the Mission of Mount Saint Vincent University. The questionnaire that you are being asked to complete will play an important role in our ongoing efforts to ensure the continued quality of teaching at the University.

The results of this survey, and the comment sections that follow, will provide a basis for appraising individual faculty members and making recommendations concerning their eligibility for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. As such, it is an important document, and I ask that you complete it with a view to providing full and fair comment to your professor and to all those responsible for making appointment recommendations.

The ratings provide a general overview of how successful a course has been from the students' point of view. I would also add, however, that they are not the best means for raising specific concerns or complaints about a course. If you have a concern that requires personal attention, you should direct it to the course instructor. If this proves unsatisfactory, you should contact the department Chair.

Your response is confidential. The ratings provide useful feedback to faculty, who will be given access to the information you provide *after* final grades have been submitted to the Registrar. *At no time* will they be provided with names or student numbers.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this rating.

Sincerely,

Donna Woolcott
Vice-President (Academic)

Please note: If you wish to nominate an instructor for the Alumnae Award for Teaching, information concerning the nomination procedures is available from the Alumnae Office, Evaristus 203 (457-6470) and on the university web site: www.msvu.ca/alumnae/awards.htm.

[NB: *PLEASE NOTE* THAT THE QUESTIONNAIRE AS SET OUT BELOW IS SUBJECT TO CHANGES IN LAYOUT AND DESIGN OF COLUMNS, ETC. WHEN TRANSFERRED TO A SCANNER SHEET]

[Directions for identifying course and filling out questionnaire to be inserted here.]

Rate the course on a scale from 5 to 1, where 5 is EXCELLENT and 1 is POOR, with respect to ...

1. presentation of course material	5	4	3	2	1
2. ability to maintain student interest	5	4	3	2	1
3. course organization and planning	5	4	3	2	1
4. readings and assigned work	5	4	3	2	1
5. objectivity and fairness in grading	5	4	3	2	1
6. feedback on assignments	5	4	3	2	1
7. instructor's availability for consultation	5	4	3	2	1
8. overall evaluation of the instructor	5	4	3	2	1
9. overall evaluation of the course	5	4	3	2	1

Rate the course with respect to ...

[Change indicators: Too High (in 5 column), About Right (3 column), Too Low (1 column), others blank]

	Too High		About Right		Too Low	
10. workload demands on the student	5	4	3	2	1	

[OTHER SIDE OF PAGE - Open-ended, or "anecdotal" questions]

1.   What, in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this course?

2.   What, in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this instructor/professor?

3.   Other comments (gripes, suggestions, applause, etc.).

Student Rating of Instruction Questionnaire

MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

Excellence · Innovation · Discovery

Please complete the following information:

Instructor/Professor: _____

Course Name: _____

Term: _____

Course ID

MARKING INSTRUCTIONS

- Use number 2 pencil only.
- Make dark marks that fill the circle completely.
- Erase cleanly any mark you wish to change.
- Make no stray marks.

Correct Mark ⬤

Incorrect Marks ⊘ ⊗ ◖ ⊙

	Very Strongly Agree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The instructor organized the course and the individual classes well.	①	②	③	④	⑤
2. The instructor's language and speech were clear and comprehensible.	①	②	③	④	⑤
3. The course was successful in meeting its stated goals and objectives.	①	②	③	④	⑤
4. The instructor was fair and reasonable in evaluating and marking student work.	①	②	③	④	⑤
5. Students were given meaningful, adequate, and reasonably prompt feedback on tests, laboratory work, and assignments.	①	②	③	④	⑤
6. The instructor was able to arouse my interest in the course.	①	②	③	④	⑤
7. My powers to think, criticize and/or create have been improved as a result of this course.	①	②	③	④	⑤
8. Assignments, quizzes, and examinations assisted in achieving the objectives of this course.	①	②	③	④	⑤
9. The course improved my knowledge and understanding of the subject.	①	②	③	④	⑤
10. The instructor showed interest and enthusiasm for the subject matter of the course.	①	②	③	④	⑤
11. The instructor seemed genuinely concerned with students' progress and was actively helpful.	①	②	③	④	⑤

	Excellent	Above Average	Average	Below Average	Very Poor
12. Compared with other university instructors I have had, I would rate the instructor's overall teaching effectiveness as:	①	②	③	④	⑤

Please answer the questions on the reverse side as well.

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What, in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this course?

What, in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this instructor/professor?

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**Mount Saint Vincent University
Faculty Evaluations**

Please fill out the below course evaluation, and select the "submit" icon.

Instructor's Name and course:

[------Select Instructor and Course Name------ ▼]

The instructor organized the course and the individual classes well.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

The instructor's language and speech were clear and comprehensible.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

The course was successful in meeting its stated goals and objectives.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

The instructor was fair and reasonable in evaluating and marking student work.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

Students were given meaningful, adequate, and reasonably prompt feedback on tests, laboratory work, and assignments.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

The instructor was able to arouse my interest in the course.

◉ No Comment   ○ Very Strongly Agree   ○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree

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My power to think, and/or create has improved as a result of this course.

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Very Strongly Agree | ○ Strongly Agree | ○ Agree | ○ Disagree | ○ Strongly Disagree |

Assignments, quizzes, and examinations assisted in achieving the objectives of this course.

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Very Strongly Agree | ○ Strongly Agree | ○ Agree | ○ Disagree | ○ Strongly Disagree |

The course improved my knowledge and understanding of the subject.

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Very Strongly Agree | ○ Strongly Agree | ○ Agree | ○ Disagree | ○ Strongly Disagree |

The instructor showed interest and enthusiasm for the subject matter of the course.

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Very Strongly Agree | ○ Strongly Agree | ○ Agree | ○ Disagree | ○ Strongly Disagree |

The instructor seemed genuinely concerned with students' progress and was actively helpful.

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Very Strongly Agree | ○ Strongly Agree | ○ Agree | ○ Disagree | ○ Strongly Disagree |

Compared with other university instructors I have had, I would rate the instructor's overall teaching effectiveness as:

| ◉ No Comment | ○ Excellent | ○ Above Average | ○ Average | ○ Below Average | ○ Very Poor |

What in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this course?

What in your view, are the strengths and weaknesses of this instructor/professor?

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Submit | Reset

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