

Analysis of SOTE Written Comments: Online vs. Paper Teaching Evaluations

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Executive Summary

In previous studies, there are usually more written comments for classes evaluated online than by paper (Heath, Lawyer & Rasmussen, 2007; Liu, 2006; Lovric, 2006; Donovan, Mader & Shinsky, 2006; Laubsch, 2006). Furthermore, the online written comments have more words and are longer for online evaluations than for paper evaluations in many studies (Heath, Lawyer & Rasmussen, 2007; Liu, 2006; Lovric, 2006; Donovan, Mader & Shinsky, 2006; Laubsch, 2006). Many times written comments have more words and have more detail for online evaluations than for paper evaluations. The greater feedback could be due to various factors. For online evaluations, students have more time to think and write a more thoughtful response than for paper evaluations in the classroom. Students can take as much time as they wish to complete the evaluations on their own computer and on their own time. The instructors can use the greater feedback to improve instruction in the classroom. Additionally, online evaluations have a quicker turn-around time and have lower administration and material costs associated with the collection and processing of the evaluations.

In spring 2009, San Jose State University (SJSU) conducted a pilot project of “online” evaluation (OE) of teaching effectiveness. To allow the comparison of written comments, the traditional paper evaluations (PE) in spring 2010 were used. In both paper evaluations and online evaluations at SJSU, students are given the opportunity to provide written evaluations of their instructor’s strengths, weaknesses, and other helpful comments. To examine the differences between delivery modes, courses were matched by instructor and class between the online evaluations (spring 2009) and their paper evaluations counterparts (spring 2010). A word count was conducted for each of the three questions (strengths, weaknesses, and other helpful comments) in each type of survey. The results of the present study indicate that the written comments have more words and are longer for online evaluations than for paper evaluations which support many other studies. Another finding was that there were actually more written comments for classes evaluated by paper than online which is not similar to the findings of other studies. The key findings below highlight the comparisons between the written comments of online evaluations and paper evaluations.

Key Findings:

Analyses of the entire population:

- Total of 77 courses that matched between online and paper evaluations were used in this study.

Comparison of Response Rates per Question

	Paper Evaluation	Online Evaluation
Strengths of Instructor’s Teaching	95%	70%
Weaknesses and/or areas in need of improvement	53%	44%
Other Comments	30%	34%
Overall	59%	49%

- Table above suggests that students provided more written comments by paper evaluation about strengths and weaknesses of instructor’s teaching than online counterpart (Overall: 59% for paper; 49% for online).
- Response rates for strength and weaknesses of instructor’s teaching by paper were 95% and 53%, respectively. However, students provided less comments by paper for the “Other Comments” question (30% for paper; 34% for online).

Comparison of Word Length (Average Words per Comment):

	Paper Evaluation			Online Evaluation			t-test
	Number of Comments	Average Words per Comment	Standard Deviation	Number of Comments	Average Words per Comment	Standard Deviation	
Strengths	1,177	14.86	10.71	610	21.94	18.43	-10.25 ¹
Weaknesses	653	14.25	12.65	378	25.22	32.02	-7.78 ¹
Other	369	13.61	12.53	298	24.51	21.11	-8.28 ¹
Overall	1,243	25.60	20.17	868	34.82	34.15	-7.77¹

¹ Significant Difference at $p < .0001$

- Students provided more written comments by paper evaluation than online (Overall: 1,243 comments for paper, 868 comments for online).
- Average words per comment by online evaluation were significantly longer than paper for all three questions (overall: 25.60 words for paper; 34.15 words for online).

Analyses broken down by course level:

- Significantly greater length of online written comments for lower and upper division courses than for paper comments; there were too few graduate courses to include in the analyses

Conclusion: Students who responded by paper evaluations are more likely to write a written comment about an instructor's teaching ability or about the class than those with online evaluations. However, students who type a comment on online evaluations are more likely to provide a longer and more thoughtful remark about the class or instructor.