The Faculty-Student Connection in the Online Classroom and Its Impact on Student Evaluations of Teaching

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Abstract

The validity of the student evaluations of teaching (SETs) is highly dependent on the number of students submitting them. Consequently, any action to increase the submission rates would improve the SET usefulness. A good connection between instructor and students, also known as immediacy, seems to enhance the student's willingness to participate in the SET process. This study hypothesized that using immediacy techniques may result in a higher quantity of SET submissions and would allow the SET to be a better teaching evaluation tool. Experiments were designed to study the effect of using immediacy practices on students' participation in the SET process. The immediacy practices included verbal and non-verbal cues for online communication in the form of personalized messages. The results obtained with the 440 students in our sample showed that there was a significant difference between survey returns when immediacy practices were used and when those practices were not used. The authors believe that this study could be extended to a larger research project, in which instructors' demographic variations could be considered. Possible uses in web-based homework management systems (W-BHMS) classes and Massive Open Online Classes (MOOCs) are also discussed.

Keywords

online education; student evaluations of teaching; immediacy; engagement; student motivation

The Problem and Its Background

In higher education, student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are important to both instructors and administrators. SETs are considered a best practice for improving instruction, understanding students' expectations, and reviewing how instructors can meet them (Standish et al., 2018). SETs

have been a college practice for a long time, nearly 100 years, as first noted by Freyd (1923). Given SETs long history in the academic environment, there is a rich history of literature not always in agreement (Macfadyen et al., 2016). This is understandable since the body of research has diverse approaches, analyses, and sometimes focus.

Student evaluations of teaching serve many uses within the institution, and many important decisions are made from the results of SETs. Faculty may use this tool to improve their curriculum and instructional methods. Administrators may use SETs to make appointments, tenure, promotion, and quality assurance decisions (Macfadyen et al., 2016; Standish et al., 2018). Beran et al. (2005) concluded that a large majority (87%) of administrators use SETs for faculty decisions about promotion and tenure while a large majority (84%) of faculty found SETs useful for improving instruction. Thus, SET information is important in shaping many institutions' faculty, instruction, and curriculum.

Initially, SETs were performed on paper and during class time. With the advent of the Internet, colleges and universities introduced the online SETs in which students could complete them at any time. Online SETs offered several advantages to the institutions and students: i) institutional standardization, ii) more flexibility to students, and iii) more confidentiality for students allowing them to be more candid with their responses (Standish et al., 2018).

As pen-and-paper SETs became obsolete and were moved online, concerns were expressed over the lower response rates that accompanied them (Goodman et al., 2015). Dommeyer et al. (2004) stated over 15 years ago, "Currently, the principal problem with online evaluations is a potentially low response rate" (p. 614). Heinert et al. (2016), in their study comparing SET returns, report an in-person rate of about 70% and an online of about 45%. Woods and Fisher (2014) report an in-person SET submission rate between 60% to 80% and the online rate of 5% to 25% for a Canadian Catholic university. Other studies comparing the rates of SET returns for both methods of administration show similar conclusions (Avery et al., 2006 (in-person, 61 to 82% and online, 43%); Layne et al., 1999 (in-person, 61% and online, 48%); Norris & Conn, 2005 (in-person, 83% and online, 42%)).

In the online classroom, the SET submission rates reported in the literature reviewed here are consistently low (19% to 40% rates). That is, less than 40% of the students submit the SETs (e.g., Dixson et al., 2017 (19%); Standish et al., 2018 (less than 40%); Young, et al., 2018 (30% to 40%). The online rates of SET returns in the online classroom seem to be comparable with the online SET returns in the physical classroom.

What are the Causes of Low SET Responses?

The causes of low SET responses appear to be numerous. The reasons for the low response could be due to student-, faculty-, and institution-driven-problems. Student-driven issues include, for example, course level, expected grade, elective vs required course, face-to-face vs online course, lab or no lab (Dawson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2013). Crews and Curtis (2011) state that students who do well in a class, often do not think it is necessary to complete the course evaluation. Ravelli (2000) reported that when students were asked why they did not provide feedback in the SETs, they indicated if they had any concerns about the course, they would contact the instructor

directly. Bennett and Nair (2010) report that students often perceive that their feedback does not elicit any actions either by the instructors or the institution; this may explain in part the low SET participation rate. Apparently, students have a limited understanding of the importance of their SET feedback.

Faculty-driven issues such as instructor's gender, age, race, and particular qualities like academic rank and physical appeal have been shown to affect SET scores, and probably student participation in the SET process (Johnson et al., 2013). Instructor charisma has also been reported to impact SET scores, in this case positively (Shevlin et al., 2000). Johnson et al. (2013), in their large study encompassing close to 4000 engineering courses and 550 unique instructors, report that female instructors have lower SET scores than their male counterparts. They also stated that the longer the instructor's experience and the higher their academic rank result in higher SET scores (Johnson et al., 2013).

Institution-driven issues reported include the impact of college academics on SET participation; for example, graduate schools have higher SET returns than primarily undergraduate institutions (Jacek, 2014). She also reports that institutions offering engagement in extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, Greek organizations, have higher SET returns Jacek (2014). It has been reported that the complexity and length of the SET survey negatively impact their returns (Crews & Curtis, 2011; Standish et al., 2018). Institutions providing students with mobile devices that offer easier technological access to complete the online SETs can lead to increased SET participation rates (Crews & Curtis, 2011; Standish et al., 2018). Finally, some causes of low SET response rates may be external, such as 'survey fatigue' (i.e., exposure to multiple surveys) (Bennett & Nair, 2010; Van Mol, 2017s).

Comparing and analyzing the rates of SET responses across academic institutions is challenging. Every college or university has its unique approach for the student evaluations of teaching (SET). Additionally, the student-, faculty-, and institution- driven issues discussed before may influence the SET process differently at each institution.

What are Some of the Tools and Solutions to Increase SET Returns?

Different approaches have been recommended to increase the SET response (e.g., Bennett & Nair, 2010; Crews & Curtis, 2011). Some of the most effective practices seem to be providing students with incentives or disincentives (Goodman et al., 2015; Jacek, 2014). An example of incentives would be giving extra-points to students completing the SETs (Jacek, 2014). In the case of disincentives, some institutions withhold final grades or limit course access when SETs are not submitted (Jacek, 2014). Both positive and negative incentives, but primarily the negative incentive, may bring ethical considerations that impact the validity of the SET responses. Students not allowed to enter the online classroom or have access to final grades could experience additional stress and probably would have a negative attitude toward the instructor and the course. Students offered extra points for the completion of the SET may just complete the questions without serious consideration about the course and the instructor. In some instances, good institutional communication strategies including follow-up reminders have been effective in increasing student participation with the SET process (Jacek, 2014; Van Mol, 2017; Young et al., 2018).

A close interaction between instructors and students has long been considered a good pedagogical instrument to teach college students and promote their engagement (Furlich, 2016; Roberts & Friedman, 2013; Pogue, & Ahyun, 2007; Wilson, 2006; Zhang, et al., 2007). Heinert and Roberts (2016) discuss 35 factors motivating students to complete the SETs. They concluded that among other approaches, making personal connections between instructors and students allowed the students to feel personally involved in the course and more willing to participate in the evaluations (Heinert & Roberts, 2016). Strengthening the quality of instructor-student communication was found to be an effective method in increasing SET participation for other researchers (Jacek, 2014; Woods & Fisher, 2014). Chapman and Joines (2017) report that creating the proper climate between the instructor and students is an effective approach that can be used to enhance the SET process. The instructor-student closeness is usually synonymous to trust; students trust that the instructor acts in their best interest and in turn the instructor trusts the students will do their best.

Immediacy Behaviors in the Online Classroom

The extent to which nonverbal interactions enhance closeness with another person was termed *immediacy* (Mehrabian, 1969). Examples of this behavior include touching, distance, forward lean, eye contact, and orientation. Such immediacy behaviors do not translate to the online environment. Alternatives to nonverbal cues and the use of particular verbal behaviors have been created for online education (Kim & Bonk, 2010). Regardless of the online development of these behaviors, studies have shown that engaging the online student is a greater challenge when compared to the engagement of the traditional student (e.g., Dubas et al., 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 2000).

Written communication in the online classroom (e.g., messages, discussion posts, and faculty feedback) is the substitute for oral communication in face-to-face interactions. Thus, written messages and posts are the channels for verbal immediacy in the online environment. Online instructors rely on written communications to promote closeness with students.

Increasing faculty-student closeness has been achieved by adding personal touches to online classroom communication. For example, writing in a friendly, conversational tone and using the student's first name (Dickinson, 2017; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). When online instructors share personal experiences, they may help students feel "personally connected with other students and the instructor" (Sung & Mayer, 2012, p. 1738). Wilson (2006) found that the instructor's positive attitude toward the students, or the student's perception of it, seems to improve students' motivation and attitudes toward the class. Immediacy behaviors have been reported to increase online students' sense of community (Sung & Mayer, 2012). This improved connectivity has been reported to positively impact instructor evaluations (Dickinson, 2017).

Nonverbal immediacy, characterized by face, hand, and body gestures in face-to-face interactions may have an online classroom equivalent (Dixson et al., 2017; Kim & Bonk, 2010). However, it does not resemble its face-to-face counterpart; it relies on visual cues, emoticons, the addition of color and images, or implicit messages (Dixson et al., 2017; Kim & Bonk (2010). The use of 'you' as often as possible and same-day communications appear to be good ways to achieve instructor-student closeness (Fahara & Castro, 2015). Kim and Bonk (2010) found that posting bios, having virtual office hours, posting an instructor's picture, and providing frequent feedback all contributed to nonverbal online immediacy.

Independent of the verbal or nonverbal behaviors used, creating the personal connection between the instructor and students is an effective approach that can be used to enhance student participation in class and in the SET process (Chapman & Joines, 2017). We could add that from our own teaching experiences when students have a positive outlook toward their education, their student experience is also positive.

Other studies have researched various tools for increasing the rate of SET returns. The use of incentives (e.g., extra-points) and disincentives (e.g., withholding final grades) to improve the SET return rates have been examined. Positive incentives seem to improve the SET response (Goodman et al., 2015; Jacek, 2014). The use of negative incentives also seemed to increase the rate of SET responses (Goodman et al., 2015; Jacek, 2014). However, the application of such methods raises ethical considerations; the validity of the student answers may be questioned. Good institutional communication through reminder messages was reported to be another effective tool to increase SET return rates (Jacek, 2014; Van Mol, 2017; Young et al., 2018). Our study focused on this communication approach in more detail. We applied immediacy techniques in the instructor's class reminders and in the individual motivation messages encouraging students to complete the SETs, hoping to develop closer bonds with the students.

The addition of immediacy behaviors to obtain better student outcomes (e.g., engagement, motivation, participation in discussion) has been studied before (Dixson et al., 2017; Roberts & Friedman, 2013). A general finding is that immediacy practices seem to improve the instructor-student connection, and potentially, also increase student participation in the SET process (Chapman & Joines, 2017). Our study is consistent with that statement; using immediacy behaviors in online written communication within the online classroom resulted in higher return rates of SETs. It is possible that improving instructor-student communication results in higher quality information from the SET process. SET response rates should be high enough so that the information gathered from them is representative of the student body. The low rate of return of online SETs raises the question—Is quality information being provided from the SETs to faculty and administration? The attainment of quality information is the motivation for studying methods to increase the submission of SETs.

This Research Study

This research focuses on determining if there is a significant difference between SET returns when immediacy practices applied to SETs are used and when those practices are not used. The instructor used immediacy behaviors in other aspects of his teaching, independent of whether the sections were in the control (no SET immediacy used) or test groups (SET immediacy used). These immediacy practices consisted of actions such as returning grades and feedback quickly, being available to students by email, text, or cell phone, using their names, engaging with students during discussions, and other immediacy behaviors reported to establish a good connection with the students. In summary, immediacy behaviors were already in use in all the sections but not in respect to the SET process. This study consisted of the instructor sending general and personalized messages applying immediacy behaviors. One strategy used was to appeal to the students' capability to empathize with the instructor's request to help him become a better teacher.

Participants

The participants of this study were the students of different sections of a 300-level critical thinking course at a major online university from 2015 to mid-2018. A single instructor taught a total of 23 sections involving 440 students. Some of these sections served as the control group, while the others were used for the test group.

The control sample consisted of 16 sections and 276 students; only the standard university online message alerted these students that the SET was available to be completed. The test sample involved seven sections and 164 students. For these sections, in addition to the university message, the instructor posted a general class message at the beginning of the last week of the course. Afterward, he followed up with a similar but personalized, private message to each student in which immediacy practices were used. In the messages, he pointed out to students the importance of the SETs to him and the university and requested that they complete it. Samples of all messages can be found in Appendix 1.

Survey

The data source consisted of archived summary reports of student evaluations of teaching (SETs) provided by the university administration to the instructor after each class was concluded. The SETs consist of a list of students' numerical responses (on a scale of 1 to 10) to each of three statements and free-form written comments about the instructor and class. Students are asked to respond to the following statements: i) "How likely are you to recommend this instructor to other students?" ii) "My faculty provided instructional feedback that identified strengths and weaknesses throughout the course." iii) "My instructor provided additional resources to aid in student understanding." The university makes available a summary report of the SETs withholding student identities so that only scores and comments are provided to the instructor.

Data Collection

For each course, we tallied the evaluations submitted with and without comments. These SET responses were observed under two conditions: i) when there was no instructor-personalized encouragement about completing the SETs (termed as no-immediacy) and ii) when there was instructor encouragement (termed as with-immediacy). There were three distinct types of responses: i) numerical score only, ii) numerical score and written comments, and iii) no submission. In the control sample, immediacy practices were not applied, while the test sample was subjected to immediacy practices. It should be noted that immediacy was only manipulated in terms of the communication about SETs, and the instructor did not manipulate his day-to-day teaching behaviors in terms of immediacy practices for students in these classes.

Considering the population of students to be very large, we used Cochran's formula for proportions to estimate the minimum size for a representative sample (Israel, 2003). For a 95% confidence and a level of precision of \pm -5%, we needed a sample size of at least 384 students to be representative. The sample of 440 students in the study surpasses this limit.

Data Analysis

This research focuses on determining if there is a significant difference between SET returns when immediacy practices are used and when those practices are not used. The use of SET immediacy practices is the independent variable, which can take the values of yes-immediacy was used and no-immediacy was not used. There are three dependent variables: i) proportion of students submitting SETs with a numerical score but without feedback comments; ii) proportion of students submitting SETs with a numerical score and with feedback comments; and iii) proportion of students not submitting SETs. Analysis of the results obtained determined the effectiveness of immediacy practices in increasing the number of students participating in the SET process. The study results consisted of the SET responses of all the students enrolled in all the classes, regardless of the SET numerical score or the students' comments on the SET.

Table 1 shows the number of students submitting and not submitting SETs. It also shows the number of students submitting SETs with and without written comments. A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between the use of immediacy practices and the submission of SETs with and without written comments. Results indicate that the relationship between these variables was significant, Chi-square = 22.9, p < 0.001 (df = 2, N = 440). A proportion z-test confirms that the differences between samples with and without immediacy practices were significant (proportions z-test, p < 0.001). Students in sections where immediacy practices were used were more likely to submit their SETs and include feedback comments than those students in classes where no immediacy practices were used. As shown in Table 1, the increase in submissions when SET immediacy practices were applied represents an almost doubling of the rate observed in sections without SET immediacy practices.

Table 1

The number of classes and total students and the percentage of students who submitted SETs with and without comments, and those who did not submit SETs, in the presence and absence of immediacy practices.

Immediacy	Number of Classes	Total Students	SETs with Comments	SETs w/o Comments	Subtotal SETs	SETs not Submitted	Grand Total
No	16	276	8.7%	18.1%	26.8%	73.2%	100.0%
Yes	7	164	23.8%	25.6%	49.4%	50.6%	100.0%
Total	23	440	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Discussion

Low student participation in SETs is pervasive in the online classroom—both from a literature review perspective and in our own experiences. In this study, we explored actions to strengthen the instructor-student closeness so that the number of SETs returned is increased. We hypothesized that using immediacy behaviors or practices in the online classroom would lead to increased numbers of SET responses from students. Our study showed a strong relationship between the use of SET immediacy practices and an increase in the number of SETs submitted. When SET immediacy practices were not used (i.e., the control group), only about a quarter of the class was submitting the SETs (~ 27%) (Table 1).

When SET immediacy practices were used, we found that 49% of the class participated in the process, representing an almost doubling in participation from the control group (Table 1). Increased SET participation rates have also been reported by others when the interventions used were immediacy practices or similar approaches (e.g., Goodman et al., 2015; Layne et al., 1999). Obtaining more SETs increases the sample size, thus, improving the quality and consequently the usefulness of SET information for both instructors and university administration.

While many researchers have reported low SET returns for online higher education (Dickinson 2017 (14%), Dixson et al., 2017 (19%), and Woods & Fisher, 2014 (5-25%)), the institution type and overall educational conditions are sometimes quite different, which may prevent direct comparison. For example, Dickinson (2017) reports SET returns as low as 14%; however, her research was set on a large traditional public university that was at the time developing an online presence. In our study, students came from a large private university with well-established online programs and well-trained online instructors. The impact of different educational factors on SET scores was investigated by Johnson et al. (2013) in a large study in a college of engineering. They concluded that the characteristics of the course and instructors affected positively or negatively the SET scores. A few of the factors in the Johnson et al. (2013) study were whether i) the course was required or elective, ii) the students came from year one to year four, iii) the instructor was male or female, and iv) the instructor was new or experienced. Our research was set up with a single instructor teaching multiple sections of the same course over multiple years so that course characteristics and instructor demographics remained constant.

The immediacy practices used here were expected to help students grasp the importance of SETs, develop empathy, and improve their connection with the instructor. In this study, we did not measure levels of the instructor-student connection (i.e., immediacy), student's empathy, and their understanding of the importance of SETs. Our results suggest that the use of immediacy behaviors increased participation in the SET process. What this investigation indicates is the need to use and study immediacy practices in the online classroom-oriented to SETs or maybe to other learning activities.

Conclusion

The rationale for this research project was to improve the low response rate on student evaluations of teaching (SET). We discovered the topic of immediacy in our research when seeking ways to increase the student response rate. We learned that immediacy is necessary for establishing close

human connections, even in the online learning environment. According to our experience, when immediacy practices are considered and employed, the online classroom, which often appears to be distant and impersonal, becomes somewhat more like a face-to-face classroom. For example, more students seem to take time writing well-thought-out comments on their student evaluations of teaching, and in general, showing a positive attitude toward the instructor and the overall student experience. We recommend teaching faculty in all instruction modes to include immediacy behaviors in their practice.

Limitations

Studies like the one presented here are not designed as inferential studies that can be extrapolated to other academic environments. This research was based on multiple sections of a single course, taught by one instructor at a large online university. This fact may limit studying other aspects that may influence SETs. In a larger study with multiple instructors, multiple courses, and a longer timeframe, we would have the opportunity to measure other relevant parameters. As presented before, some characteristics of both the instructor and the student influence the outcome of the SETs (e.g., instructor's age, gender, and status in the university; student's major and academic performance).

While having a single instructor and class has its benefits, some factors cannot be measured. This is the case of instructors' experience using immediacy practices. Most likely, the application of those practices would improve as instructors gain experience and further learn about immediacy. Instead of the dichotomy of immediacy/no immediacy presented here, it would be possible to have gradations (e.g., immediacy level 1, for instructors using immediacy for a short time; level 5, for instructors experienced in using immediacy behaviors). In our study, the gradual improvement of the practice is not measured; we used the same immediacy practices and the same instructor for all test sections. However, not having instructors with different levels of application of immediacy practices allows us to concentrate on measuring how including immediacy practices affects the SET process.

The use of external surveys to obtain the student perception and opinion over the SET- immediacy project could provide a wealth of information. For example, we could ask students to differentiate what prompted their SET response between the email sent to the students or the message within. This way, it would be possible to determine if the students reacted to i) receiving the personalized email reminder from the instructor, or ii) the immediacy behaviors exhibited in the written message of the email, or iii) a combination of the email and the immediacy behaviors in the message. However, as noted in the earlier literature review, both the use of personalized email and writing a warm message have been considered to be immediacy behaviors. The email and the message, in this case, are used to communicate trust and help develop closeness toward the instructor. These approaches have been successful in positively affecting the SET response rates (Dickinson, 2017). The focus of this study was to test whether the use of immediacy practices were effective or not for increasing student participation in the SET process. Limiting other variables such as those from a more complex study, helped us evaluate the usefulness of the immediacy approach without including additional variables. We understand that there is much to learn about the causes of both the low SET returns and the observed increase in SET returns after the immediacy intervention.

Future Research

Online classes continue to be the fastest-growing sector of higher education (Seaman et al., 2018). We believe that there are plenty of opportunities for additional research for immediacy in teaching and learning for the online classroom. A logical follow-up research would be to expand this study to include multiple instructors teaching different sections of the same class or different classes. The effect of the instructor's learning curve described in the Limitations section could be investigated. This research could also be expanded to study multiple institutions to assess their response to immediacy practices and possibly determine whether the type of university or college has an impact on such a response.

Additional research could expand our study. This research may help differentiate what prompted the student to participate in the SET process. In our study, we cannot discern whether just receiving an email from the instructor or reading the personalized message was the factor that motivated the student to participate. Inclusion of a third condition, email without SET immediacy, may help understand the students' motivation.

Another avenue of research could focus on investigating the impact of immediacy practices on other measurable performance variables besides SET returns. Examples of such student performance variables are students' final grades, student participation in discussions, and completion of assignments.

Two trends in online education are worthy of further study concerning immediacy practices. One trend is about the enhancement of online education through web-based homework management systems (W-BHMS). The second trend is the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) with taped lectures that have very large class sizes and the students attend from all over the world.

Web-based homework management systems (e.g., Pearson's MyLab and Mastering systems) have become more popular and are increasing significantly (Sherhan, 2019). In the classes without this type of system, the instructor's principal task is to provide feedback to the students' homework, which can be used for implementing formative assessments and immediacy practices. In classes using the W-BHMS, most student assignments are automatically graded by a computer, and thus the instructor misses the opportunity to build closeness through assignment feedback. Alternative venues must be considered to build closeness and apply immediacy behaviors in classes where these systems are used.

The second trend is the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) with taped lectures, very large class sizes, and where the students attend from all over the world. MOOCs student completion rates are disappointedly low—below 10% (Jordan, 2014). Thus, it may be possible that the use of immediacy behaviors would have a positive impact on student retention rates. Immediacy behaviors applicable to MOOCs may not resemble those from traditional online classrooms. In the discussion section where questions are regularly asked, the instructor or assistants may be able to implement a few immediacy practices such as the use of emoticons. However, it is not clear whether emoticons or other immediacy practices would be effective in MOOCs.

There are many opportunities for research in these two areas. Both these learning environments—W-BHMS courses, and MOOCs—are candidates for further immediacy studies and their impact on student participation, motivation, learning, satisfaction, and completion of student evaluations of teaching.

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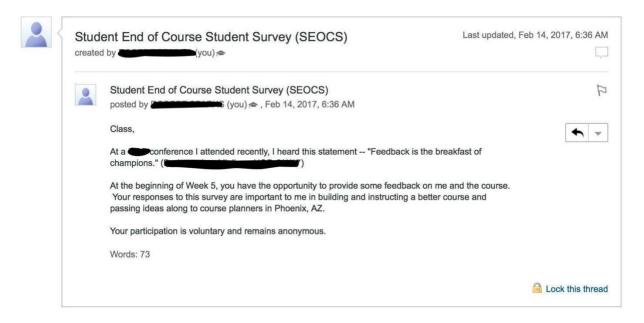
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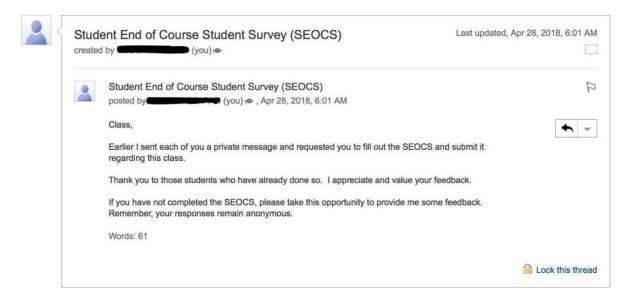
Appendix 1

Sample of General Class Messages and Personalized Individual Messages

Sample of the general class message sent to all students, test and control groups, regarding student evaluations of teaching (SET).



Sample of the general class message sent to students in the test group regarding student evaluations of teaching (SET).



Sample of the personalized individual message sent to students in the test group regarding student evaluations of teaching (SET).

