Hawai‘i Community College

FIVE TIPS FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN eCAFE

Because, for many of us, student participation in our Electronic Course and Faculty Evaluation (eCAFE) has been unsatisfactory, I have been asked by the Executive Committee of the Academic Senate to compile a list of tips, things we can do to make eCAFE work better. These tips have come from talking to other faculty members, from reading what some experts had to say on the subject, and from my own failures. The tips are intended to be read as part of a discussion. My hope is that the list will grow and change as we all learn to use this tool more effectively. If you have stories of success or failure with eCAFE, please share them with me so that I can add to these suggestions.

In working on the problem, it has become clear to me that we as teachers need to plan for this evaluation, to methodically scaffold it into our semester. No longer can we think of it as a small event we can squeeze in when the opportunity presents itself toward the end of the semester, for this approach has been demonstrated to be ineffective, no matter how charismatic we are, or how emphatically we implore.

1) FORECAST eCAFE AS ONE OF SEVERAL WAYS YOU WILL GATHER STUDENT INPUT.
In your syllabus include the fact that student perception of your teaching is important. List methods you intend to use during the semester, including eCAFE, to evaluate your effectiveness. Include eCAFE in your course calendar.

2) BUILD UP TO IT.
Students who monitor their own learning are more cognizant of their instructor’s teaching, and perhaps more likely to complete eCAFE.

There are many ways to encourage students to more actively monitor their own learning. One educational researcher’s list of 50 techniques for this can be found online at:


The list includes the “Minute Paper” for which students at the end of a class period write what they think was the most important thing they learned in class, and what questions they still have. An instructor can respond to these in a number of ways, and for both instructor and students a better understanding of what is being learned is achieved. Another technique included is a “Memory Matrix.” For this, students complete a table about what course content was covered. The rows and column headings are written for them, ahead of time, but the students are responsible for filling in the cells. eCAFE could be included in a matrix made for the entire course. Such activities teach students to think about their own learning and their instructor’s teaching. They seem likely to have a positive influence on end of semester evaluations, both in terms of participation and quality.

3) HAVE A SIMILAR EVALUATION IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TERM.
Before mid semester, make a point of gathering specific formal feedback in writing about your course goals and your teaching. Review the feedback with the class. Respond to it. This is a practice run for eCAFE, but also will give you time to make adjustments, if need be. This may improve your effectiveness and increase response rates.

According to McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers, 12th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), be sure to seek student responses not only on course material, but also on your behavior. Studies have shown that “(Your) improvement is much more likely to occur when
behavioral items are used rather than more generic abstract items.” For eCAFE, half of the standard 18 questions begin with “The instructor...”; this indicates the question directly addresses behavior.

McKeachie’s behavior questions include:
- “The Instructor knew students’ names.”
- “The instructor gestures with hands and arms.”
- “The instructor gives multiple examples.”
- “The instructor points out practical applications.”
- “The instructor encourages student questions and student comments.”

Open-ended questions, which are also an aspect of eCAFE, can be the most useful. Some open ended questions that McKeachie includes which could be effective on a mid semester evaluation are:
- “What have you liked about the course so far?” or “What aspects of the course have been valuable for your learning so far?”
- “What suggestions do you have for improvement?”
- “What have you done that has helped you learn effectively in this course?”
- “What do you need to do to improve your learning in this course?”
- “What have you don to help other students in the course to learn?”

4) REQUIRE STUDENTS TO USE COMPUTERS DURING THE SEMESTER.
Have assignments and responses to assignments that require students to access their email and use the internet during the semester. I include “responses,” because if the only thing students find in their email from us is more work, they are likely to stop checking their email. Some faculty members are reporting positive results in student performance from using the Laulima Grade Book application. Grade Book allows students to access their grades for class whenever they want. Students who know how to access course-relevant materials online, and are in the habit of doing so, will probably be more likely to complete an end of semester online evaluation.

5) TALK TO OTHER FACULTY; SHARE STORIES OF SUCCESS & FAILURE.
So far, in talking to other faculty, I have heard three stories of success. These include taking students to a lab to do eCAFE, awarding extra credit points as an incentive, and making evaluation and discussion of effectiveness a routine exercise.

5.1) TAKE STUDENTS TO A LAB TO DO eCAFE.
Take your students to a lab to do eCAFE; have the computers turned on and the web browser open to the sign-in page for eCAFE before students arrive.

While it has been reported that at some colleges a mobile laptop computer lab has been brought around to classrooms to effectively collect student observations, we do not have that option at this time.

Bringing students to the lab does not guarantee success. I brought one class to a computer lab and asked them to do eCAFE. I assumed they would be able to turn the computers on and access the website. I was wrong. Only 60% of that class responded. When I later asked them what happened, they said they didn’t know the startup password for the computers, so they left.

Another teacher reported that the students she brought to the lab used the computer access to do things other than eCAFE.

5.2) GIVE CONCRETE INCENTIVES.
While the survey is open to students, faculty can access information on how many students have completed the survey. Some faculty award points to all of their class members if some certain percentage of respondents is
It is a simple truth that students are more likely to do those things for which they will be rewarded. In one of my classes that was working periodically in a computer lab, I walked around during our final lab day, which happened to be the last day that eCAFE was open, and I asked each student if they had completed the survey. I had in my hand slips of paper with a happy face and the website, in case they wanted to get to it later. Each one of them assured me he or she had already completed the survey, and that they didn’t need the smiley reminder. I later discovered that fewer than half of them had completed the survey. In retrospect, I imagine they were more concerned with completing their lab work, for that is what was being assessed, and their assessment of me had not been built in to the course in any significant or formal way, and so they did not value it.

5.3) BUILD HABITS.
One of our departments that gives students a lot of opportunities during the semester to reflect on their learning and the effectiveness of their courses reports that student participation in eCAFE is high.

This seems clear evidence in support of my thesis, my hypothesis, that if we are to have successful student participation in eCAFE, we must integrate it into our courses, into the planning stages and into our syllabi and into our lessons in a clear and deliberate fashion. In addition to this, take them to a lab if we are able, and award points in some way.

Developed by Eric Mecklenburg, HawCC Academic Senate Vice-Chair (2008/09)