# A Reality-based Framework for SRTEs: Teaching in Effectiveness

Monique T. Brodie

The following framework is presented in support of a new approach to interpreting low Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness (SRTE) and specific global comments. Based in part on perspectives found in the literature and relative to the experiences of teaching professionals, college students may use SRTEs to express opinion about a system in which they perceive themselves as passive participants[6]. Their comments may be a reflection of their expected grade[4] and not a reflection of their learning; learning which they may not realize until well after the course is over[8]. Students may also write uninhibited and potentially career damaging comments due to anonymity and the lack of accountability for inaccuracies. Unless a teaching professional can know who contributed the comment, one cannot provide a direct response and add meaningful context. The purpose of this discussion is to promote a new framework for SRTEs and advocate for improvement in how the results are utilized.

## Background

This is an attempt to reframe how SRTEs and specific global comments are interpreted and influence perceptions about how the data may be used in a multivariable model to positively support professional advancement and professional development. This is in contrast to the current punitive approach. While any discussion on SRTEs cannot ignore socially engendered racism and gender bias that is evidenced by low ratings among minority teaching faculty, such concerns are too specific for consideration here. Historically, minority teaching faculty has struggled to receive fair assessments from students[4, 6], but recently, student ratings of teaching effectiveness in general education courses may be trending downward. Thus, the reference to bias is inclusive of race, gender, age and the mismatch between student expectations of teacher personality traits and trait individuality among teaching professionals.

The variance between students' expected or desired grade and actual academic performance may be due to more students entering general education courses underprepared from prerequisites or the dissonance may be a reflection of the entitlement attitudes of Millennials. Regardless, for teaching faculty compensated opportunities and merit increases are often linked to SRTEs[10], even if only indirectly. Lecturer faculty is systemically disadvantaged professionally, as higher education (HE) fails to make adjustments to these assessment metrics to account for the known disparity between SRTEs, increased demands to use the full grade scale, and contractual measurable deliverables. Perhaps mean scores help to normalize the low ratings for certain courses, across diverse demographics; however, the shift in student attitudes towards grade outcomes in contrast to teaching effectiveness seems to demand attention from all stakeholders: administrators, lecturers, and students.

## Methodology

According to Penn State institutional research, the SRTE rating system offers a well-researched and appropriate measure of teaching effectiveness[10, 11]. The Likert-style rating offers students options for their level of agreement on a scale from one to seven. Qualitative questions allow respondents to rate their course learning outcomes and the instructor. The comment section is used to collect supplemental qualitative details via two global questions. Through the comments, students are offered an opportunity to express their opinion. Although the education system is not founded on a consumer model, SRTEs serve to assess customer satisfaction[8]. In this manner, students are asked to rate teaching effectiveness. Although students generally lack teaching experience and any training in how to provide effective feedback, the assumption is made that the student, as customer, is always right. Teaching professionals are subjected to retaliation and logical fallacies. From an educator's perspective, final course grades are not punitive; they are based on academic performance on graded assignments. SRTEs are not a reciprocal opportunity for students to grade teachers; instead, they may be used punitively by students and administrators.

## Correlation is not Causation

Students who do not do well in a course may rate the teaching professional poorly. Alternatively, students who do well may not complete the SRTE and according to the Dr. Fox effect[8], when they do, they may not attribute any aspect of their learning success to teaching effectiveness. In fact, some students may feel entitled to the effort their instructor makes to support their learning. Two additional points require further explanation, but student entitlement is the burden of teaching professionals. First, with respect to SRTEs, presently there are no consequences to students for either the ratings or specific global comments. There may be a more equitable manner in which to hold students and Lecturers accountable for SRTEs. For example, when students rate low teaching effectiveness, the respondents should be recalled to provide information to help administrators understand their concerns and what, if any professional development is warranted. During a facilitated focus group, students may be asked to validate the feedback they provided by adding meaningful context[1, 11]. This may be performed by inviting students to explain low ratings and specific global comments. SRTEs have a valuable purpose, when used appropriately; in this way, administrators may also accept some responsibility. Timing SRTEs at the end of the semester, precludes early intervention. When negative feedback is presented at the end of the course as one aspect of multivariable evidence of student dissatisfaction, punitive interpretations of negative feedback put teaching professionals in a vulnerable, if not defensive, position. This approach to SRTEs fails to provide opportunity to implement adjustment in a timely manner.

Secondly, the current constructivist model assumes that there is a direct connection between actual teaching effectiveness and student ratings[1, 10]. When SRTEs are inexplicably low or a course section requires an intervention, perhaps students should retake the course. Abductive reasoning permits that there is more to the comments than what may be interpreted by an independent observer. Sometimes, the analysis is too far removed from the actual teacher-student learning cycle or the observer may not consider the professorial maturation cycle as valid for Lecturers. Where there is less accountability to adhere to grade spread and more freedom to explore tangential topics, research professors have multiple advantages and greater opportunity to garner favorable student feedback. Their students are invested in the learning process and, assuming academic freedom, tenure-faculty is not concerned about job security during student interactions. This preferential safety zone reveals deeper systemic inequity when compared to the disenfranchisement of teaching professionals. Lecturers, those who specialize in general education courses, instruct students who may enter the classroom with the assumption that they already know the content and students harbor easy-A preoccupation. Further, maturation for professors occurs in stages[3]; this is systemically ignored or penalized when observed in teaching professionals:

*Typical stages of maturation of tenure-faculty*
1. Induction and growth – Positive feelings toward the initial teaching appointments. Strict adherence to departmental syllabi and policy. Extra effort to accommodate student pathos.
2. Growth and maturity – Develop feelings and form opinion about administration apart from feelings towards the appointment. Combine experiential knowledge and textbook theory to course curriculum.
3. Maturity and security- Provide contributions like journal articles, course revisions, presentations, lead round-tables/panel discussions, and provide mentorship. Recycle syllabi; limited prep.
4. Security and retirement – Explore new radical topics or emerging theory in the classroom, delegate classroom responsibility to others and assess student-teachers, TAs, and new entrants. Reduce course load. Increase service and committee involvement.

General education material is foundational and the typical student is between zero and the fourth semester[7, 9]. In some cases, however, a student who has deferred taking a writing course until their junior or senior year may be well beyond the threshold where a teaching professional can influence their cognitive skills

without first addressing biases and then deconstructing bad habits. Upper classmen may categorically resist instructor feedback. College students may be considered adultish[8], individuals who straddle the divide between intellectual maturity with social independence and emotional adolescence with social dependence. In fact, the purpose and nature of higher education is to bridge this gap and prepare students to move from consumer to contributor. Within the dynamics of the classroom this can be a traumatic experience for young adults. Teaching professionals assess students' learning outcomes with a handicapped metric: the current alpha (+/-) grading system in HE does not allow the course instructor to provide comments relative to behavioral observations or attitudinal and personality trait factors as do some commonly used primary education models[2].

**Implications of this theoretical discussion**
College students are no longer passive participants in the learning process, unaware of themselves within a given rhetorical situation; however, they are not quite aware of or are ill informed about their role responsibilities in the classroom. This framing may also be applied to post-secondary education at-large. For example, some students seem unaware that the college learning environment, including the campus, the dorms, the classrooms, extracurriculars, and the surrounding community is reality. College students are consenting adults whose actions on and off campus have explicit consequences. They may be considered social actors according to the systems model, even if HE as a thriving business industry is difficult to discuss. The consequences of their words and actions bear upon them as adults - even across international judiciary systems. Likewise, undergraduate academic performance may be correlated to determinants of future credit worthiness and post-graduate success factors. The college world is the real world and perhaps students need to be better informed.

Students may be commended for offering low ratings and leaving comments on their SRTEs, but an individual instructor cannot be expected to interpret what they mean without adding contextual details. Students' willingness to express themselves through negative comments coupled with low ratings is meaningful. The act is an indication that they are finding their voice and their confidence in effective written communication. Now, they must learn the consequences of such actions, especially when they are detrimental to the educators who are providing them with the tools and resources to find their voice. Administrators may help in this phase of the learning process by introducing organizational psychology into the classroom as a foundation for informing student respondents of double loop learning. Students are no longer consumers of information, but co-contributors of meaning making, learning acquisition, and creating deliverables.

The problem with SRTEs is that students in distress habitually utilize the evaluation as a means to express their internalized frustration with a system that they believe has failed them. Their comments may be submitted in connection with a particular course and course instructor, but their frustration is not necessarily about that instructor's effectiveness. For example, students may verbally admit that they lack the skills that are assessed in writing courses, but when given an opportunity to rate teaching effectiveness, they do not know how to separate the grade they earned in the course from whether or not the teacher accomplished the departmental requirements: a syllabus, weekly instruction, maintenance of office hours, routine assessment of prescribed assignments with feedback. For teaching professionals, achieving these contractual duties is effective. Understandably, students do not believe that they should be held accountable for acquiring the skills associated with the learning outcomes and demonstrating proficiency, concurrently; however, this double loop process is learning and is graded.

In other contexts, making false, misleading or defamatory comments that are career damaging or personally slanderous is considered libel. There is little recourse for the instructor who is denied advancement or stripped of their promotion as a result of interpretations of negative feedback or other institutional use of the data beyond research purposes. In business, organizational psychologists collect data, analyze the information, and introduce change through management to improve outcomes. Student ratings of teaching effectiveness are interpreted

explicitly and this may be problematic for instructors who receive low scores and negative comments. Advocated here is the assertion that such skewed data must also be assumed problematic for those institutional researchers who use the data to make generalizations.

### Recommendations for further research

As discussed here, there is a significant body of research to support the use of SRTEs and an equally as impressive body of research which explores ineffectiveness of student rater bias. In this regard, further research is required to better understand how the SRTE data can be utilized to improve double loop learning within the education system, from a critical theory perspective, under a constructivist model. For starters, SRTEs should not be used to justify punitive decisions against non-tenure teaching professionals. Further research may also reveal how data are interpreted and the validity of those interpretations.

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In a confidential consultation with Schreyer's Institute for Teaching Excellence (SITE), the instructional unit behind the development and deployment of the survey instrument, a Research Associate explained that, to date, no adjustments have been made to account for racial and gender bias in the results. This suggests that the institution is aware of what may be considered a flaw in the SRTE instrument, but their website provides detailed guidance in how to interpret and utilize the feedback in a multivariable assessment model. Regardless, results from any correlational analysis, with respect to minority groups, may be statistically insignificant due to low response rates and inadequate representation within a given sample. This point advances concern regarding socially engendered microaggressions against the underrepresented - which was not the focus of this discussion, but may be considered for future research.

## References

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### Electronic Resources

7. bulletins.psu.edu/bulletins/bluebook/university_course_descriptions.cfm?letter=E&courselong=ENGL%7C202d%7C199596S1.
8. edutopia.org/blog/student-evaluation-teachers-ben-johnson.
9. handbook.psu.edu/content/general-education.
10. onwardstate.com/2011/12/05/reminder-online-srtes-available/
11. schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/srte