

Using Surveys to Improve Courses, Programs, and Instruction, Part 3

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Surveys are often the tool of choice for evaluating online courses and instruction because they are relatively easy to develop and administer. But this ease is truly a double-edged sword because it's very, very easy to write questions whose answers provide information of little value. For example, consider the following survey question.

Assigned readings were worthwhile.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Disagree
- d. Strongly disagree

At first, the question seems fine. But let's take this a step further and say that the question yielded the following data.

Assigned readings were worthwhile.

Selection	Number
a. Strongly agree	3
b. Agree	14
c. Disagree	8
d. Strongly disagree	2
Not answered	2

More than half of the respondents thought the readings were worthwhile. Is that an acceptable number?

Table A. Please rate each of the assigned readings on the following attributes.

Attributes (Rating scale: 1 is lowest score and 3 is highest score)		
Readings	Helpful for understanding multiple points of view (1-3)	Worthwhile extension of textbook readings (1-3)
...		
Comments:		

"Worthwhile" isn't defined, and there are no clues as to what to do to make them more worthwhile. Here's one example of a rewrite. (Table A)

This rewrite is likely to yield better information because it is more precise (the question defines "worthwhile" with two attributes) and allows respondents to rank each reading separately.

Next, I'll discuss two important guidelines to follow for writing survey questions that yield information that can help you improve your online courses and instruction.

Ask the right question(s) to get the information you need.

As we saw earlier, it's easy to write questions that provide little or no useful information—and waste everyone's time. Consider the following question:

How often do you work on assignments or other classwork (such as reading discussion postings) for this course?

- 1. Very often
- 2. Often
- 3. Sometimes
- 4. Rarely
- 5. Never

How often is "Very often"? Does it help you to know that 3 out of 35

students responded "Very often," and 12 out of 35 students responded "Often"? Not so much. It's better to offer more meaningful options, such as in the following rewrite.

How many days a week did you work on assignments or other classwork (such as reading discussion postings) for this course?

- 1. Every day
- 2. 4-6 days week
- 3. 2-3 days a week
- 4. Once a week or less

It's important to determine what you want to know and write each question so that it will yield the information you want. The last example might be asked to determine if some assignment-completion problems were due to students not allotting enough time to do the work. If that turned out to be the case, you might want to make sure that students understand the workload and what will be needed to be successful in the first week of the course.

Be clear.

What's wrong with this question?

Where do you do your schoolwork?

- a. Home
- b. Work
- c. Both home and work

Hmmm. What should a respondent answer if he does his schoolwork at the library or at school? Or what if he does his schoolwork at home, school, *and* the library? One option is to add more options. Another is to add an "Other" option with space to input another answer.

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Yet another is to provide a checklist, such as the one shown below.

I do my schoolwork at (check all that apply):

- Home
- Work
- School
- Library
- Other: _____

Make sure that each question asks one thing at a time. Yes or no answers to “Were the checklists and example assignments useful tools for completing the course assignments?” won’t tell you if the checklists and examples were both

useful, or if one was useful but not the other.

Also, make sure your language is as precise and clear as possible. I discussed earlier how the word “worthwhile” might mean very different things to different people. One student might reply no to “Was [resource name] worthwhile?” because he didn’t make time to utilize it, while another might answer similarly because he found the resource hard to use.

Also, be careful about coming to conclusions from unclear questions. For example, say that many students did poorly on the last assignment and then you asked, “Was the final assignment too hard?” Seventy-four percent said

no, so you might conclude that the assignment didn’t need fixing. But what if it wasn’t too hard, but it was too much to accomplish in the allotted time? The answers provided would not yield data to help improve the course the next time around. An open-ended question such as “How can the [assignment name] be improved?” would likely yield better improvement insights.

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