

Subject Online Survey (SOS): An Online Tool to Support Improvement in Teaching and Learning.

Robert M. Corderoy¹, Ray Stace¹, Sandra Wills¹ and Albert Ip²

¹Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources.

University of Wollongong. Australia.

bob_corderoy@uow.edu.au, ray_stace@uow.edu.au, sandra_wills@uow.edu.au

²Multimedia Education Unit.

University of Melbourne. Australia

a.ip@meu.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Traditionally, data relating to the conduct of subjects at the University of Wollongong has been collected for teachers with one main purpose in mind: to provide the teacher with supporting information as to their teaching ability for the purposes of promotion. Currently this data is collected using 'prescribed Teaching Surveys'. The process is a formal, highly regulated mechanism and is administered independently on request. The promotion process requires that the teacher provide between 4 and 6 recent survey reports in their application for promotion. These surveys are seen as an imposition by many rather than a tool for improving the process of teaching and learning at the university. Three major difficulties have been identified. Firstly, the prescribed question set is not always appropriate to that teacher's discipline and context. Secondly the questions are too heavily weighted towards the academic's performance as a teacher to provide useful information about the subject as a whole. Third, the previous compulsory Subject Survey system was too expensive.

SOS is a web-based system through which teachers can design and author customised surveys to collect information about the success or otherwise of the subject they teach. These surveys may be completed anonymously by the students via the web (using randomly generated, survey specific numeric tokens) and the data is automatically collated and returned to the teacher. The teacher may also produce the surveys in hard copy, for manual distribution and collation.

The system provides a 'non-threatening' and 'informal' mechanism by which teachers can obtain useful information about the subjects they develop and teach in terms of subject-based criteria rather than the 'lecturer based criteria' of the formal Teaching Surveys. This information can be used to 'test out' new approaches to teaching and learning as well as new approaches to subject delivery.

This paper provides a background to the development of SOS in the context of the needs of the University of Wollongong and its teachers. It presents an overview of the development of the system from the exploration of possible pre-existing systems, to the development of a specification, the evolution of a database of suitable questions and the trialing of Version 1. The system has been widely adopted by teachers across all faculties and is being used to survey groups ranging from small postgraduate classes to large first and second year cohorts. We report on the outcomes for these early adopters and note that the costs of providing the service have been reduced by a factor of 60! Further, we outline new features being added to Version 2 including; faculty specific databases, on-line teacher feedback and the provision of 'standard' survey sets.