In the past decade, online course evaluation (OCE) has become more commonplace in the landscape of higher education; however, empirical research on OCE is still in its infancy. At Purdue University, we have conducted a multisemester investigation of the shift in medium (from paper to online) in course evaluations. Our goal in this article is to discuss advantages and common concerns related to OCE in light of student and instructor perspectives. Moreover, we will explore the potential of using OCE for learning outcomes assessment.

Student Perspectives
Student feedback was gathered via a short survey embedded in the course evaluation itself. Review of over 12,000 responses (noting that individual students could have responded more than once if they completed OCE for more than one class) indicated that students generally had a positive attitude toward OCE: 95.9 percent agreed that it was easy to complete the course evaluations online (2.8 percent were undecided, and 1.4 percent disagreed); 77.2 percent agreed that they preferred doing the evaluations online to doing them on paper (12.4 percent were undecided, and 10.3 percent disagreed); and 81.3 percent agreed that they were confident that their responses to the OCE were confidential (13.3 percent were undecided, and 5.4 percent disagreed).

While findings from the student surveys indicate that overall, students viewed OCE positively, the results should be viewed with caution. Future research should survey students who did not complete the OCE, ask open-ended questions about likes and dislikes related to OCE, use additional methods (for example, focus groups), and investigate mitigating variables (for example, major, gender, and class standing).

Instructor Perspectives
Feedback from instructors and administrators was gathered via a survey after course evaluation results had been released. Of the 205 responses gathered over two semesters (noting that some instructors and administrators likely responded in both spring 2007 and fall 2007), 86.3 percent agreed that it was easy for them to access the course evaluation report online (5.4 percent were undecided, and 8.3 percent disagreed); 79.5 percent agreed that it was easy for them to understand the online report of the course evaluation (9.8 percent were undecided, and 10.7 percent disagreed); 68.5 percent were confident that the results of the online course evaluation were valid (19.2 percent were undecided, and 12.3 percent disagreed); and 56.6 percent preferred that students do the course evaluation online versus doing it on paper (21.0 percent were undecided, and 22.4 percent disagreed).
Written comments from instructors in spring 2007 (n = 116) suggested that instructors and administrators liked the quick access to results (27.6 percent of the participants), the ease of the process (16.4 percent), and not having to use class time for the course evaluations (11.2 percent). Their preference for quick access to results was also evidenced by the fact that 72 percent of those with access to results logged onto the Web site within forty-eight hours after results became available.

Written comments about concerns related to OCE indicated that instructors were worried primarily about low response rate (27.6 percent), validity of the results (23.3 percent), and having adequate involvement in the process (11.2 percent). Validity issues involved concerns that student evaluations might reflect extreme responses, that students might not take the evaluation seriously, and that instructors might receive lower ratings than they would with PCE. Concerns about adequate instructor involvement in the OCE process came from instructors who wanted to be involved in deciding when evaluations were administered and instructors who wanted to receive updates on response rates.

To examine instructor concerns, we decided to investigate response rates and instructor ratings. A comparison of 196 course sections (same course, same instructor, different semester) suggested that when PCE was used, the average response rates were higher than when OCE was used for classes with an enrollment of thirty or less (N = 147 courses; 80.9 percent with PCE vs. 71.3 percent with OCE) and for classes with more than thirty students (N = 49 courses; 68.0 percent with PCE vs. 64.5 percent with OCE), but only the difference for the smaller classes was statistically significant. In the same semester, the average response rate for all classes on campus using PCE was lower than the average response rate for the 296 classes using OCE (65.4 percent vs. 68.1 percent). These results, however, have to be viewed with caution because the response rate for PCE classes was based on the number of sheets ordered by instructors, whereas the response rate for OCE classes was based on the number of enrolled students. Moreover, for a significant number of OCE classes, the number of students was standardized to reflect the standard number of sheets ordered for the same classes using PCE.

A second major concern for instructors and administrators was the validity of the ratings themselves. To examine this concern more closely, a comparison of average course (Core 1 = Overall, I would rate this course as) and instructor (Core 2 = Overall, I would rate this instructor as) ratings (5 = excellent; 1 = very poor) for 178 classes (same course, same instructor, and different semester) was made. Results showed no statistically significant difference between ratings with PCE and with OCE. Average ratings for PCE and OCE, respectively, were 4.07, 4.07 for Core 1 and 4.30, 4.32 for Core 2. A course-by-course comparison of average ratings with PCE and OCE showed that for Core 1, the number of classes with higher average ratings was the same for PCE and OCE (81 each; 16 had the same rating) and for Core 2, more OCE than PCE classes had higher average ratings (86 vs. 72; 20 had the same rating). The standard deviation was lower for PCE classes (Core 1: 0.413 vs. 0.462; Core 2: 0.540 vs. 0.592) indicating more variance in average ratings with OCE.

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**Potential Use of OCE for Indirect Assessment of Learning Outcomes**

As reported in the preceding section, one of the main advantages of OCE is the nearly instant access to evaluation results. While it can take months for the results from PCE to be available, results from OCE can be available the day after grades have been released. This is an important feature of OCE. As some instructors in our study pointed out, the quick turnaround allows them to incorporate students’ feedback as they plan for the next semester’s courses. PCE results, on the other hand, are often not available until the next semester is well under way, making it harder for instructors to use the results for improvement of student learning.

While the timely feedback available through OCE presents a potential avenue for assessment of student learning, implementation of OCE does not ensure the use of course evaluations for assessment purposes. A change in instructors’ perceptions may be needed in order to harness course evaluation results for the purpose of improving students’ achievement of learning outcomes. It appears that course evaluations are often associated with students’ making a value
judgment about the instructor and the course. This notion is supported by at least three factors. First, the word evaluation itself communicates a summative rather than formative purpose for course evaluations. Second, course evaluations are frequently used for promotion and tenure decisions. Finally, students typically do not get to see whether and how their feedback is used for course improvement.

In our opinion, a few things can be done to help instructors see the value of course evaluations for assessment purposes. One would be to recontextualize the term course evaluation to denote the intended goal: to focus students and instructors more on the assessment aspect of the course evaluations. In addition, given that assessment of learning outcomes seems to be gaining more and more relevance in higher education, instructors can be led to recognize the value of course feedback as a means of embedded assessment. For example, one of our programs has added learning outcomes to course evaluations, thus allowing students to indicate how well a given course has helped them achieve the program’s and the college’s learning outcomes. Other programs have used open-ended questions to ask students specifically what aspects of the course went well and in what specific ways the instructor can improve the course.

Summary
OCE is on the rise. Our study suggests that students generally have a positive attitude toward OCE, whereas instructors and administrators appear to have mixed feelings about it. Students at Purdue appreciated that OCE was easy, quick, and convenient. For the most part, students thought their responses were confidential and preferred OCE to PCE. Still, confidentiality and anonymity of online course evaluations was an area of concern for some students. Instructors and administrators liked having quick access to results, the fact that the process was easy, and not having to use class time for course evaluations. At the same time, they were concerned about low response rates, validity of results, and having sufficient involvement in the process. Only slightly more than half of the responding instructors and administrators preferred OCE to PCE.

Given the timely feedback available through OCE, instructors and administrators should look more closely at using OCE for assessment of student learning. This, however, might require a paradigm shift from an undue focus on the evaluative nature of course evaluations to a greater focus on their assessment potential.

While the results of our study have to be viewed with caution due to the limitations mentioned, they can nonetheless serve as another piece in the OCE puzzle, and they provide direction for future research. The use of longitudinal data and the consideration of mitigating variables are two of the research areas that can help advance knowledge in regard to OCE. Moreover, future research should explore how instructors and administrators are using and can use OCE for assessment of student learning.

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