

Place, Perception and “Closing the Loop” Behaviour: Academics’ Perceptions of Student Evaluations

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Past research, underpinned by statistical, pedagogical and teacher/organisational development perspectives, has argued the place and worth of student evaluations. Yet, despite extensive studies undertaken over the past 50 years +, academics’ general acceptance of student evaluations remains an issue. Barriers to acceptance include: academics’ personal and behavioural responses to evaluation; their conceptualisations of student evaluations; and the tensions felt between the monitoring role of evaluations (within promotion and review processes) and underutilisation of their potential to inform and develop teaching, student learning and courses. This study, part of which was presented at the HERDSA 2012 conference, aimed to elicit the perceptions held by academics about student evaluations. Using an interpretivist research approach, teachers across three NZ tertiary institutions responded to a questionnaire - 1,065 responses(44%) - followed by an interview with 60 volunteers. The findings included claims made by teachers about their evaluation beliefs and practices, illustrated through a series of assembled vignettes. One aspect of the questionnaire data, supported by the interviews, revealed low numbers of staff practising ‘closing the loop’ behaviours, even though most respondents thought that student evaluation is worthwhile (to varying degrees). Connections among individual beliefs/understandings and institutional policies/practices are highlighted as key to influencing and determining perceptions about evaluation. Implications are made for institutions and individual teachers concerning how to embed reflective evaluation thinking into teaching practice. Specifically, this includes

considering contextually-relevant evaluation structures, ways of thinking and ongoing support to nurture evaluation understandings and practices that reflect the research-based rationale for the worth of student evaluations.