Differences between paper and online student surveys

There are lots of potential benefits for schools and colleges completing a survey online:

- Greater student access: All students in a year group can take part, not just a sample.
- Instant access to results at the end of the survey period.
- Faster results for instant printing of results in different formats for presentations, e.g. graphs.
- Own school and college figures can be compared with national norms and international institutions who complete online surveys.
- It is an intelligent questionnaire, so that students only see questions relevant to them.
- Graphics are more friendly.
- Option for personal health feedback for students.
- Websites links for students who finish early.

There are also costs:

- Training teachers in how to talk with students about how to log on and use the online survey.
- Booking IT suites and organizing classes to ensure there is less significant down time than handing out booklets.
- Technical problems and system crashes are easier to solve when using pen and paper.

This all assumes that the answers will come out pretty well the same, regardless of whether classes fill in a paper or a web-based survey. We have looked at this in some detail throughout the last few years, and this assumption is well-supported. We have had many thousands of students complete parallel versions, and printed a list of significantly different items.

Most differences that we found initially were due to differences in the design of questions. It’s very tempting when designing a school form for the web to use this format:

1. Who would you like to talk to about drugs?
   - Parent Carers
   - Teachers in school lessons
   - Visitors or speakers in school lessons
   - School Nurse
   - Doctor

On paper, we usually adopt the following format, which typically leads to higher numbers responding to each option.

2. Who would you like to talk to about drugs?

   - Please circle ONE answer on each line.

   Parent Carers
   Yes No

   Teachers in school lessons
   Yes No

   Visitors or speakers in school lessons
   Yes No

   School Nurse
   Yes No

   Doctor
   Yes No

A design for a web-based form that is much more compact which we find yields more similar results;

3. Who would you like to talk to about drugs?

   - Please choose one answer for each item.

   Parent Carers
   Yes No

   Teachers in school lessons
   Yes No

   Visitors or speakers in school lessons
   Yes No

   School Nurse
   Yes No

   Doctor
   Yes No

Other differences that we have found over the years have the included the influence of graphics: a picture of a cute baby elephant and calf seemed to have a marked influence on how families replied to a question about their own mother.

There is one other class of question that is influenced by the medium: questions concerning surveys! Items like the following often show marked differences, depending on whether the question was answered on paper or online.

Do you think students will be more honest if a survey is done on paper or online?

Paper: Yes

Online: Yes

How would you like to be consulted about your views and opinions?

a. Paper questionnaire
   Yes No

b. Questionnaire on the Internet
   Yes No

c. A special event, e.g. a conference
   Yes No

d. Discussion group in school
   Yes No

In each case, answering online produced responses favouring online completion, and answering paper yielded more pro-paper responses. However, for the overwhelming majority of questions where questions are asked in the same way on paper and online, pupils seem to respond equally honestly and figure from each medium seem very similar.

One last source of difference in pupil’s propensity to use open-ended test boxes: on paper, a question might look like this:

4. What did you eat or drink before lessons this morning?

   - Please circle an answer on each line.

   Nothing to eat or drink
   Yes No

   A drink
   Yes No

   Cereal (e.g. Ready Brek, Weetabix)
   Yes No

   Toast or bread
   Yes No

   Cooked breakfast
   Yes No

   Other (please write below)
   Yes No

In contrast, online it seems some pupils enjoy the experience of typing into text boxes so much that they may rush past the options given and start answering the question by typing. So, we might find “Ready Brek” neatly entered in full, when they might more easily have used the “yes” button for “Cereal”. If our teachers do not review pupils’ open-ended responses and correct such answers, the tables of figures may be more complicated to use.

Sex education lessons

In 1997, three years into a teaching career, I found myself head of social studies in a girls’ comprehensive school in Hackney. The teacher difficult class was the number of pupils who were getting pregnant, and she suggested that I should include sex education lessons in the social studies curriculum.

Apart from being married (and, presumably, in those days being the only partner in which many of us learnt about sex) and the product of fairly enlightened parents who were willing to talk about sexual matters, I had no training in how to undertake such a task. I had some support and guidance and very few resources.

So it was that I began my career as a sex education teacher a few weeks before the inspector sat on my lesson about contraception – he lasted about five minutes, then made his excuses and left.

I also remember the lesson where a fairly mature young woman pulled a scrawny piece of paper out of her bag and said “I’m pregnant”. I’ve been reading this book with lots of long words that I don’t understand. Will you tell me what they mean? Carnulations… I realised how much I didn’t know, and instinctively said “Come and see me at the end of the lesson and I will tell you what I can do”. I went home that night to the dictionary and some sex education of my own. My first two pupil lessons told the girl the words the words meant.

Gradually resources were produced and once or twice I gave a highly successful serialised ‘soup’ about a teenage girl who got pregnant. After the first episode girls would queue up at the staff room and get into the classroom for the next episode and the discussion which followed.

Family Planning Association

A few years later, as a result of a chance conversation with the Family Planning Association (fpa), I was offered a job as Training and Development Officer. I had always enjoyed “talking science” to a teacher and almost turned the job down because I couldn’t imagine myself working 40 weeks a year in an office in central London whilst being the single parent of a five-year-old.

The move to the fpa was a significant one. Not only did I receive high-quality training and feedback, but I was asked to help a newly married member of staff who found herself pregnant. During my first course as an assistant trainer to an experienced colleague, I slid with a partner in a difficult discussion. Afterwards my mentor left me in no doubt that my loyalties should always be to my co-trainer. That was the first of a series of lessons well learnt.

I remember too a very challenging training-for-trainers course where, again, I was an assistant. The participants rebelled – yes, in the jargon of training, “stormed”. I was raged, having no idea how to deal with such anger and distress. Then, over the next couple of hours I observed how the course leaders analysed what was going on, listened calmly and respectfully to participants’ views and challenged constructively. Slowly the group calmed itself, stronger and more confident. I learnt to train teachers to deliver sex education; I learnt to work with staff in the learning and disability field, helping them to acknowledge and support their clients’ sexual health and relationship needs; and I learnt to run my own training-for-trainers courses.

AIDS Education

When HIV and AIDS became a major issue in the late 1980s, I moved on to manage the AIDS Education Unit in Cambridge. The challenges of management fascinated me and I quickly recognised the links between sexual health and relationships training, and personal and professional relationships. I found myself just managing a broad spectrum of sexual health and relationships courses, but also running management courses focusing on processes such as team-building, managing change and handling difficult situations. Many of my trainee staff include the teachers of the summer schools and certificated courses I ran for the Faculty of Education in Cambridge.

Freelance

By the early 1990s the NHS was staring the new familiar cycle of review, reorganisation, bureaucracy and make over, and I was finding less and less joy in the job. This was the opportunity to launch a freelance career. I gradually built up an extensive toolkit of activities, theories and models that worked for me and my participants over the years. Many activities were my own; some of the models were other people’s used in their original form; and others were modified to suit me.

There is one very well-known groupwork model developed over time by Jane (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977). It describes the stages of group life in terms of forming, storming, norming, performing and mourning. But I have reinvented it in a new form because it does not match my experiences.

Training Manual

I selected from my toolkit and produced a training manual for a new generation of sexual health and relationships trainees. The manual includes guidance for trainers on negotiating and planning training space and safe environment; managing group effectively and how to end a course. There are also forty practical activities on getting started, sexual health information, exploring values and attitudes, skills for sexual health, groupwork, sex and relationships education and endings.

The manual is on CD so that activities can be printed as needed and the material shared easily within an organisation.

Workshops

I will also be leading a series of practical two-day workshops to launch the manual. These will provide an opportunity for participants (from health, education, social services, youth services and the voluntary sector) to familiarise themselves with the content and processes of quality training in sexual health and sex and relationships education. A copy of the manual will be provided free of charge to all participants.

References

