

# BLACK INKS GIVE WAY TO BLUE LINKS



*by Dr Colin McLeay, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences*

A recent e-mail from the Teaching Development Unit reminded me of one of the reasons why I am a fan of the online evaluation system - BLUE. I could select the standard evaluation form or even personalise it through a few clicks of the mouse. I did not have to request paper templates, wait for the documents to arrive, make 150 copies of a multiple page document for distribution to students in the 100-level paper I coordinate, carry the pile of papers to the final lecture, and get them distributed by student reps. And, I did not have to repeat this process for the other two papers on which I am teaching this semester.

I recognise that the steps required to organise hard-copy paper evaluations were not terribly onerous but they remain a factor in why I am in favour of the BLUE system. Not only has BLUE saved me time and effort in terms of preparation, but it has also freed-up time for staff in TDU who used to prepare hundreds of hard-copy evaluation forms every semester.

In addition to saving time and money, BLUE also saves paper. As my 100-level paper has three contributing staff there would be four pages per evaluation and these would be copied for 150 students, meaning there would be around 600 pages copied. Even with a full cohort of students, some of the forms would not be completed, which means that there was a lot of paper that would need to be recycled or would end up as waste.

Another practical advantage of BLUE is the speed of processing. I appreciate the prompt response that comes once appraisals have been processed through BLUE. It is nice to get feedback sooner rather than later so I can use the information to make improvements to the paper. I suspect colleagues in TDU enjoy the storage space that is created by not having to store an ever-increasing number of paper forms – digital files take up less physical space than umpteen piles of paper. Additionally, digital files are much easier to search for and reprint than paper files kept in storage.

I am also a fan of BLUE because it has the potential to connect with other University of Waikato systems, and thereby offer many opportunities for further analysis of the evaluation data. One type of analysis that I think would be useful is to examine the influence of enrolment numbers on student grades. Some research suggests there may be differences in appraisal results between large and small classes because of the influence of outlying results on the paper average. Imbalance may be understood through awareness of class size and its relationship to the evaluation data. Perhaps linking the results to student grades would also show some interesting results. Analysis could look at issues such as whether a teacher receives good appraisal results because they allocate 'A' grades to all students.

My main current concern with BLUE is the lower response rates that I receive when compared to hard-copy evaluations. When BLUE was first implemented in 2014, it was new to both staff and students. With increased familiarity I am optimistic that response rates will increase over time. Outcomes from other institutions indicate that response rates increase significantly as users become familiar with a new system.

While I am concerned about the number of students who complete evaluations through BLUE, I am aware that response rates for papers in which I teach is in part a reflection of my promotion of online teaching evaluations. If I want my response rates to increase, I have to build on the work done by the TDU and actively encourage students to give feedback. Indeed, I think if I want students to give good quality and useful feedback outside of a classroom setting, then I need to take an active role in promoting online engagement with evaluations.

Amongst my colleagues the low number of responses is also a source of unease. There are worries that BLUE allows students to ignore the evaluation (as indicated by low response rates) or that students who have not attended lectures are able to complete an evaluation. In both cases there is a sense that the evaluation will be devalued by uninformed feedback or by a lack of student responses. My understanding is that this issue is not a result of the BLUE system itself. Under the previous system many teachers would set aside time for the evaluation to be completed in the final lecture of a paper. They would encourage students to attend the final lecture by discussing an upcoming exam or organising a quiz where students would be rewarded with candy. Despite these enticements there were still students who did not fill in the evaluation so the data set was often incomplete. There would also be students in the final lecture who had avoided previous lectures but were attending the final class in order to find out more about the exam. These issues are therefore not unique to BLUE or the University's move to online evaluations.

Finally, I think that an online system such as BLUE is well-suited to changing teaching environments and different student cohorts. BLUE is beneficial for students for whom English is a second language. Rather than being required to complete the evaluation within a given time frame, students can take time to understand the questions and consider appropriate responses. Taking the time to reflect on the paper and provide useful feedback would also be beneficial for domestic students as well.

An increasing number of papers are being offered online and often these papers do not provide an opportunity for face-to-face student interaction which would allow for the completion of paper and teaching evaluations. BLUE gives these students the opportunity to provide feedback which can enable staff to determine how the paper might be improved. As an online version of many more papers is offered, online evaluations will become increasingly important especially as students enrolled in these papers could be based anywhere throughout New Zealand or internationally.

I am not blinkered to uncertainty around the use of an online evaluation system, nor am I comfortable with lower-than-hoped response rates. I am confident, however, that BLUE provides a positive step towards increasingly robust appraisal information. Such information will benefit my teaching and, by associations, my students.

---

<sup>1</sup>With a nod to Jerry Cantrell and Alice in Chains (Virgin/EMI Records, 2009)