

How Student Evaluations Can Help You Most

Adapted from the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence at Carnegie Mellon University

Asking students for feedback about your teaching early in a course can be one of the most valuable steps toward improving your effectiveness because it allows you to respond to the feedback while the course is still in progress. The best time for administering such early evaluations is usually after the first few weeks of the semester and while still early enough to act on your feedback.

The early evaluation process can help you to identify potential problems more quickly, solicit excellent student suggestions, and build students' confidence in you as a responsive teacher who cares about their learning.

How to Begin

Choose and/or create the form you intend to use. There are many forms – from very short “what do you like most/what do you like least types of questionnaires to those much more detailed (see below).¹ Get the maximum benefit from early evaluations. Ask if your department has a standard form for collecting feedback from students early in a course. The CTL can also help you create an evaluation to fit your situation. An effective form can have just a few questions with numerical responses and/or 2-3 open ended questions.

Preparing Your Class

Allow 10-15 minutes at the beginning of a class for students to complete the forms. If you distribute the forms at the end of a class, many students may have to hurry and you may receive much less information from the open-ended questions. Ask students to please write comments! Emphasize that even a few words or a sentence can give you valuable information.

Tell students you want candid and constructive responses. Stress that the only purpose of the form is to help you improve. Suggest that students write to you rather than about you. If you will be sharing the feedback with a faculty member, you may want to tell students so that they can phrase their comments appropriately.

Let students know that you will talk with them about the main points of the feedback you receive. This shows them that you are genuinely interested in responding to their comments. Telling students what you learned from their feedback is essential to ensure that students put a good effort into the evaluation process.

Preparing and Interpreting the Feedback

Ratings and Checklist Items:

Tabulate students' comments to find recurring themes and suggestions. Remember that the distribution of responses and related comments are more important than the averages when you are looking for areas for possible improvements. The areas of consensus will usually be your highest priorities in reporting back to students. Inputting this data into a spreadsheet or statistical program will not take long (e.g., 20 minutes per section) but then makes subsequent analysis easy.

¹ See the forms available from the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University at <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k1985&pageid=icb.page29688> as well as the form available from the Eberly Center for Teaching and Learning at Carnegie Mellon University at <http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/Teaching/Assessment/3Qinst.pdf>

Comments and Suggestions:

Create a list of reduced versions of students' comments. Note frequent or related comments, either marking the number of students making each comment or connecting common issues.

Identify ratings questions that identify areas of strength and needs for improvement. Consider both the average rating and the number of students rating particularly high or low.

Read students' answers to open-ended questions carefully to find recurring themes and suggestions.

Keep your focus on potentially constructive changes. Many of us tend to dwell on a few criticisms or impractical suggestions. You can avoid this difficulty more easily if you cluster students' comments into groups such as "strengths," "ideas for change," and "issues beyond my control." If there are items you aren't sure how to interpret, consider consulting the Center for Teaching and Learning or a faculty member to get an additional perspective.

Look at the combination of ratings questions and the summary of students' comments to identify comments and suggestions that seem to have the most consensus.

Consider discussing common themes with CTL staff or a colleague who can help you to gain perspective on the comments and give you suggestions as to how to respond.

Discussing the Feedback with the Class

A critical part of the early evaluation process is discussing the feedback you receive with your students. Thanking students for their effort and input and attempting to respond to their feedback will set a positive tone for the class regardless of all else and shows fundamental respect for students' role in making the class work.

Select 3-5 issues on which to report to the class. Plan your response so that you balance positive feedback from students and areas where you hope to address their needs more effectively. If you plan to make changes based on the student feedback, explain the changes and the rationale behind them. If a few students requested a change you don't plan to make, help them to understand why it isn't possible.

Frame your discussion so that you maintain a positive tone. It is important not to come across as defensive, angry, or overly apologetic because these reactions can undermine students' trust and respect for you. Sometimes just a few negative comments can make it difficult to stay positive so feel free to contact the Center for Teaching and Learning if you want talk about the feedback with someone before responding to the class.

Consider ways in which you can enlist students' support for your efforts to improve the class. For example, if students report that you talk too fast or too softly, ask them to let you know nicely (perhaps via a hand signal) so that you can adjust quickly. Or, if students report difficulty understanding the material, you might propose some ideas such as pausing longer, summarizing the main points more often, or encouraging them to ask more questions and discuss what seems most helpful.

Additional selected reading from the library of the CTL:

Seldin, P. (2004). *The teaching portfolio : a practical guide to improved performance and promotion/tenure decisions*. Bolton, Mass.: Anker Pub. Co.: 20-21.

Wehlburg, C. (2006). *Meaningful course revision : enhancing academic engagement using student learning data*. Bolton, Mass.: Anker.: 112-123.

Davis, B. G. "Fast Feedback" <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/feedback.html> (accessed February 23, 2010).