Gaining and responding to feedback on your teaching

Ideas for gaining feedback from your students

Considerable research evidence suggests that student evaluations provide a reliable, valid assessment of teaching effectiveness, particularly if they reflect the views of many students in several iterations of teaching a particular course (Felder, 1992).

Classroom assessment techniques that involve asking our students what they are learning are useful ways to gather information on the effectiveness of our teaching. Examples include the following (see Angelo & Cross, 1993; Ramsden & Dodds, 1989).

• A minute paper or a brief reflection that asks for feedback on a particular learning and teaching session. Students may be asked to respond anonymously to the following questions: What is the most important thing you learned today? What question remains uppermost in your mind?

• The “muddiest point” – a technique similar to the minute paper that asks students to write an anonymous response to the question: What was the “muddiest point” for you today?

• The one-sentence summary is a technique that involves asking students to consider the topic you are discussing in terms of Who Does/Did What to Whom, How, When, Where and Why, and then to synthesise those answers into a single informative, grammatical sentence. These sentences can then be analysed to determine strengths and weaknesses in students’ understanding of the topic.

• Concept maps may be used to show students’ understanding of how concepts are linked. Students list the key concepts of a topic area. These are transferred to a page and arrows are used to show links between the concepts. A brief explanation of the link is written alongside the arrows. Concept maps can be modified at various stages during the course to show development in understanding.

• The application card technique involves handing out index cards to students after they have heard or read about an important principle, theory or procedure. Students are then asked to write down at least one possible real-life application for what they have just learned.

• The Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1995) is a simple technique that involves asking students to respond to five questions, which focus on critical moments of their learning, either in a specific learning and teaching session or a section of a course:

  o At what moment were you most engaged as a learner?
  o At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
  o What action or contribution taken by anyone in the course did you find most affirming and helpful?
  o What action or contribution taken by anyone in the course did you find most puzzling or confusing?
  o What surprised you most?

Critical Incident Questionnaires provide significant feedback on student engagement and the dynamics of the student experience in the learning environment in which you are teaching.
Nominal group techniques can be useful to identify key issues to explore by other methods of gaining feedback, particularly in a small group. Begin by asking students to think individually and note reflections about the learning and teaching session or course – for example, list three best and three worst aspects of this course. Collect responses and make a list with similar items clustered together. Allow students to vote on the issues that are the most important to them, and then discuss significant items. This is a useful technique for formative evaluation or review as it might help to identify issues to consider early in a particular series of learning and teaching sessions or a course. It can also help to give students a sense of ownership in the improvement process because the views of everyone are clearly considered.

Questionnaires can be a useful method to obtain feedback from students about different aspects of your learning and teaching practice. As well as finding out whether students enjoy the course and what they are satisfied or dissatisfied with, questionnaires can be used to explore more complex and perhaps more relevant issues such as what students are learning, what aspects of your teaching are most useful, and what could be adapted or modified. In developing a questionnaire, it is important to clarify your objectives, and to decide how you will obtain the feedback – that is, from an entire class or a smaller sample, during class time or online, at what point during a course of teaching and so on. Design the questionnaire with an introduction, clear instructions, and simple and unambiguous questions. Questionnaires can be constructed with open-ended questions, closed questions, or a mixture of both question types.

- **Open-ended questions** - for example, "What helped you to learn in this session?", "If I could change one thing about this class, it would be....."

- **Closed questions** - for example, questions that use a fixed set of items that may be scored on a Likert scale, such as "The structure of this lecture was clear to me" (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, no opinion).

Checklists can be used as a rapid way of gathering information from students about your teaching – for example, “Which of the following elements of the session did you find useful? Please tick all that apply.”. Although checklists might not provide detailed information about the impact of your teaching, they can be easier to assess and analyse than involved questionnaires.

Confidence logs can be used to judge how confident students are with a specific activity or concept that you are teaching. Identify a key area of interest – for example, the general principal of a session or a specific area where you suspect a weakness in student understanding. Construct and present statements to use for student ratings, such as "very confident", "confident", "some confidence", "little confidence", "no confidence". Confidence logs can be applied to get a simple snapshot of student confidence or to compare changes in confidence before and after a learning and teaching session or sessions. It might also be informative to compare the results with your own expectations.

Having a **suggestion box or envelope** available to students, either in your learning space or on your office door, can be a useful way for students to provide you with anonymous suggestions regarding the impact of your teaching on their learning in the course.

Consult regularly with an elected student liaison group. Such a group might be useful in improving communication between teachers and students, in helping identify and respond to problems quickly, and in improving student morale.

References


Ideas for gaining feedback from your peers

Peer observation can offer critical insights into your learning and teaching practice and can complement other forms of evaluation to provide a broader and more accurate representation of your overall teaching quality. Peer observation can also encourage collegiality and reflection on teaching practice that promotes improvements in student learning.

• Peer observation through a classroom visit is the best way for your colleagues to provide feedback on both your teaching and your students’ reaction to it. It is important to remember that your peers can give you valuable feedback on your practice whether they are new or experienced teachers. To help peers frame their observations and to ensure that you receive feedback on the areas of your learning and teaching practice that you are most concerned about, it might be helpful to meet with your colleague in advance and discuss what you hope the visit will accomplish. It might be particularly useful to devise a checklist for your colleague to use during the observation session and to arrange a meeting for a time as soon as possible following the session in order to debrief and receive feedback.

• An alternative method to peer observation involves having your class videotaped and subsequently reviewed. You might wish to review the videotape yourself as a method of self-evaluation; however, if possible, it might be even more useful to review the tape with a colleague. As with peer observation of a classroom visit, the review process may be more helpful if you and your colleague use a checklist or some specific prompts to guide your discussion. Please inform your students about the purpose of this exercise, and seek their (informal) consent for the teaching session to be recorded.

Ideas for gaining feedback through self-reflection

Although it might not be the most obvious method of gaining feedback on your learning and teaching practice, evaluation through self-reflection is often an ideal place to start. Evaluation of your own teaching is a logical and appropriate enhancement of feedback obtained from students and peers. We also encourage you to engage in critical reflection as part of your ongoing professional development as an educator.

Keeping a reflective log or journal can be a useful way to engage in consistent and regular critical reflection. Following each class or each week of learning and teaching practice, try making a note of the following:

• what you did in your learning/teaching session(s)
• what you felt worked well and what perhaps did not work well
• how you would make changes for next time.

Try out on yourself any techniques that you use to obtain feedback from students and colleagues, including questionnaires, checklists, classroom assessment techniques, and so on. Analysis of the similarities and differences between your responses and theirs can be remarkably informative.

If you feel that you would like guidance and structure for your reflection, then try starting with a self-evaluation tool, such as the UNSW Guidelines on Learning that Inform Teaching Checklist, or resources available on the Teaching evaluation at Flinders, Resources links and references webpage.

Ideas for responding to feedback

Having collected feedback on your learning and teaching practice, and analysed and interpreted your results, you might wish to:

• consult with colleagues in your school or faculty to share ideas in areas of your learning and teaching practice that you have identified as concerning or having potential for improvement. If you are finding this difficult to arrange, then you might wish to think about joining or helping to establish a learning and teaching interest group within your school or faculty.
• **seek individual support** from relevant staff for issues relating to curriculum development and design, teaching, and student learning

• **read more information** about responding to student feedback on our pages designed to support you in learning from the Course and Teaching Evaluation and Improvement (CATEI) process.

On the basis of your own reflections and consultations, you might then develop an action plan to provide you with a structured approach to implementing changes to your learning and teaching practice. Please remember to initiate small and sustainable changes consistently and gradually over time.

**Online resources**

University of Canberra, Teaching and Learning Centre, *Evaluation for continuous improvement*.

University of Tasmania, Teaching & Learning, *Course, Unit and Teaching Evaluation*.

Flinders University Teaching for Learning, *Teaching evaluation at Flinders*.


University of Waterloo, Centre for Teaching Excellence, *Receiving and Giving Effective Feedback*.

Penn State, Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence, *An Introduction to Classroom Assessment Techniques*.


Australian National University, Centre for Higher Education, Learning & Teaching, *Gathering Students' Views of Teaching and Learning*.

Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Generic Centre, *Peer Observation of Teaching in Australia*.

Australian National University Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods, *Peer Review and Self-Evaluation Toolkit*. 