Chapter 9
Feedback from Students

Feedback from students, while it can be rewarding, also can be one of the more frightening parts of teaching. A good student is one who seeks out feedback, listens to it, and uses that knowledge to improve their performance. The same holds true for a good instructor. And while it can be stressful to ask students for feedback about the class, it is better for you to know their responses along the way rather than to wait until the end of term. Also remember that in the same way paper grades are about the student’s work, not about the student, student feedback is about the course, not about your value as a person. This chapter will discuss ways to make student feedback as useful and constructive as possible.

General Informal Feedback from Students

At the beginning of the semester, tell your students that you would like them to keep you informed of their thoughts about the course throughout the term. Feedback always needs to be a two-way street. Encourage them to share their thoughts about the assignments, course discussions, lectures, readings, lab experiments, and class format. Sometimes it can feel like open-firing season when you create this space for feedback but remember you feel no more vulnerable than the students do when they turn in a paper to be graded.

Do not view this as a time to share your own anxieties about the course or to apologize for inexperience, workload, and so on. Simply tell students that you are interested in their feedback so that you can be sure they are learning effectively. This move (and your willingness to make it) will reinforce your authority in the classroom.

How Students Should Contact You

Let students know how they can give you feedback about all aspects of the course. You might encourage them to use e-mail, to drop a note in your box in the department, to stop by your office hours, or to bend
your ear after class. If you would like students to be able to give you anonymous feedback, be sure there is a place where they can leave written notes for you throughout the semester.

Specific Informal Feedback from Students

It is not enough for you to tell students that you would like their feedback and to make the routes of communication available. You also need to solicit specific feedback throughout the semester.

Responses to Your Written Comments

Some teaching assistants have had success asking students to respond in writing to the teaching assistant’s comments on a given essay or other assignment. If nothing else, this forces students to read the comments, and, at best, it helps them to process the critique and ask questions about comments that they do not understand. It can be a time-consuming process but often a worthwhile one.

If all your students have e-mail, you can require them to e-mail you within twenty-four or forty-eight hours with a paragraph response to your comments on their paper. In this way, you open up a dialogue about the paper and their writing. Be sure to give them some guidelines (e.g., they must ask at least one question or describe their plan for revision), or else you may get mostly praise for your insight (a.k.a. brown-nosing in hopes that the next grade you give them will be better).

You also can ask students to write responses below yours on the papers themselves and turn them in at the next class meeting. You then will briefly respond to their comments and return the papers at the following meeting. You probably will want to keep notes in your files on their responses or ask them to turn in all previous work with each assignment so that you can target your comments more effectively on the next graded assignment.

Responses to a Discussion Section

It is not necessary (or feasible) to ask your students to respond to every discussion held in your class. However, there may be times when you have nagging concerns about a particular class discussion. If you feel uncomfortable with the way a discussion went, there is a good chance that several of your students also were aware that things did not go
well. It is up to you to solicit feedback about what happened. At these times, “meta-teaching” strategies can be invaluable; see the following section for more details.

“Meta-teaching”

Meta-teaching means talking with your students about the teaching in your course as a way to teach them more. For example, if you felt that the last class meeting was marked by an unusually stilted discussion, have your students help you figure out why. While you may have to set aside your pride and admit that your class is no longer going as perfectly as planned, these are almost always fruitful discussions. In broaching the topic, you are reassuring your students that a bad class is not all their responsibility. It puts all of you on the “same team” in figuring out what might have stifled discussion and what can be done to improve the class dynamics.

**Example**  “Last week we talked about the role of the voter in dictating international policy. Many of you seemed confused about how this discussion was relevant to the course. How can we relate it to the larger goals and topics of the course? What could we, or I, have done differently to facilitate a broader consideration of that topic?”

Some teaching assistants worry that meta-teaching will undermine their authority. In fact, the ability to use meta-teaching can demonstrate comfort with your authority in the classroom. Students respect teachers who are aware of and willing to address obvious problems.

**Don’t** Use meta-teaching as a way of displacing responsibility for the success of the class (e.g. “I don’t understand why you all won’t talk in section. I’ve never had a group as uninterested as yours.”).

**Do** Use meta-teaching when it will be educational for the students to talk about what is happening in the classroom (e.g., “What does it mean that on Monday you all seemed uncomfortable talking about discrepancies in SAT scores along race and gender lines?”).
DON’T  Use meta-teaching to make the course about your insecurities or frustration with teaching; students should feel they are taking a well-planned course, not that they are part of an ongoing experiment (e.g., “I think I’ve figured out how to make all the groups more talkative. Last week I tried . . .”).

Do  Use meta-teaching to address issues that seem to be particular to the material or to the students taking the class (e.g., recognize the complexity of a concept before trying to explain it, respond to unusually low exam grades).

Use meta-teaching to help students understand lesson plans and how they fit into the broader structure of the course (e.g., “In the last class, we talked about Kant’s theories generally as a class. Today I’d like to begin by breaking you into smaller groups and having you dive into the text itself to look at the language Kant uses. I will give you some questions . . .”).

Use meta-teaching freely.

You do not have to wait for a difficult discussion to use meta-teaching. The more that both you and your students participate in and reflect upon the teaching process as it unfolds, the more you will be able to involve students in learning. While it may feel a bit awkward for you and your students at first, feel free to recognize explicitly many of the dynamics of the class. Do not hesitate to introduce difficult material as difficult and challenge students to rise to the occasion. Do not hesitate to tell students when you are trying a new kind of class activity for them. Do not hesitate to recognize that a discussion may be sensitive or that students may be disappointed with their grades on a given assignment. As a general rule, you can legitimately and effectively give yourself the option of talking about and asking students about what they think is happening in the room as it is happening.

Formal Feedback from Students

Student conferences and written evaluations are ways to ensure that you will get student feedback. They can be very helpful for your teaching if you set them up effectively. If you will be using evaluations in the course, tell your students at the beginning of the semester; they can then prepare thoughtful feedback as the course progresses.
Midterm Conferences

Midterm can be a useful time to meet with each student individually to discuss their progress in the class and to get their feedback on the course. Bring a sign-up sheet to class with appointments scheduled fifteen or twenty minutes apart for each student to sign up for a convenient time.

At the conference, you need to be prepared with topics to discuss or to have asked students to prepare topics; you have asked the students to come see you, so you must try to make the conference productive. You can have notes ready on each student’s work in the class and have a few questions to ask them about their experience in the class so far; these questions can be similar to those on a written midterm evaluation (see the following).

Written Midterm Feedback

Written midterm feedback is remarkably helpful in running a successful class or section. The feedback form can be fairly short (a half page, taking only ten minutes of class time); it still allows students to have some say in the content and direction of the course. Very few instructors ask their students what they want in a course, and students are generally appreciative and constructive when given this opportunity. These forms should be anonymous.

Writing the Questions

Ask questions that encourage students to be honest and take an active part in the shape of the course. Ask open-ended questions that require a response longer than “yes” or “no.” You probably do not need more than four or five questions.

Examples

“I would like to see more/less time spent on __________.”

“In the second half of the term, I would like to talk about __________.”

“Written comments on my paper would be more helpful if __________.”

See appendix H for sample midterm feedback forms.
Preparing the Students

Many students do not focus on the fact that you are going to read these feedback forms and that you have feelings too. Before you hand out forms, you may want to tell students that you will be reading them and that you take them seriously; you would appreciate all suggestions and constructive feedback they can provide. To encourage them to be honest, try to time the evaluation so that you are not holding papers or exams at the time. You do not want to “butter them up” so that they will only praise you and the course—you need to hear about what can be improved. But it is fair to remind students that you, a fellow human being, will be reading their comments so that they focus on being constructive instead of destructive if they have concerns to voice.

Talking About the Feedback

You must be sure to talk briefly about the feedback in the next class, after you have read the forms. The students need to hear you respond to their concerns and suggestions.

Examples

“Many of you said that you found it useful when I put an outline of the lecture on the board, so I will try to do that consistently.”

“A few students commented that we need to slow down when going over problems on the homework. I will try to ask if we’re all on the same page as we go, but please let me know if I’m going too fast.”

“A couple of students wrote that they wanted to read more poetry. I’m afraid that I cannot work extra reading into the syllabus, but I would be happy to give any of you recommendations on outside reading if you’re interested.”

Written Final Evaluations

Standardized Evaluations

At almost all universities, you will be asked to have students fill out a standardized evaluation form at the end of the term. Many of these ask students to rate aspects of the course and the instructor on a numerical scale; while there are bureaucratic and pedagogical reasons for these
evaluations, numerical ratings will not necessarily help you improve your teaching or the course. Tell students that you are looking for feedback specific to your course and you would appreciate their taking the time to write comments on the back of the evaluation.

Supplemental Evaluations

If it is at all feasible, you should write your own evaluation form to enhance the standardized process. Such an evaluation will be particularly useful if you will be teaching the same or a similar course again. Write questions similar to those on the midterm evaluation.

Reading Your Evaluations

Prepare yourself for the fact that reading evaluations can be anywhere from exhilarating to devastating—or both. There almost always will be some negative evaluations in the stack (often from students not doing well in the course), and any number of positive evaluations does little to ease the immediate sting of a student’s criticisms. Students may even bypass the course content and go straight for your feelings; students have been known to tell instructors to get new haircuts, buy new clothes, and/or “get a life.” These students are usually venting academic frustration in destructive ways; do not let their anger make you question your teaching abilities.

However, you should take consistent negative feedback on a particular aspect of the course very seriously. While your feelings may be hurt, you need to use the students’ comments as a way to improve your teaching and/or the course.

Here are a few ways to keep the negative evaluations in perspective.

• Reread the positive ones and remember that not every student is going to like your course or teaching style.

• Tell a friend or family member about the bad ones so that they can reassure you that these evaluations happen to everyone and you are still a wonderful person, even if parts of your teaching need to be improved.

• Remember that one course does not make or break your teaching career. Learning to teach effectively is an ongoing process, and there is no reason to expect yourself to be perfect every step of the way.
• Try to see the negative but constructive comments in the perspective of the comments that you write on students’ work. You are trying to help them improve and do not intend the comments to be hurtful or personal.

• Remember that even the best teachers have had students criticize their teaching, their grading, their clothes, and even their hairstyles!

Before reading the evaluations, set up your day appropriately.

**DON’T**  Read them right before teaching or even going to a class of your own.

**Do**  Read them in the comfort of your home or with a friend, if you want moral support.

   Read them with a cup of your favorite coffee, a bag of chips, or a box of cookies, depending on your comfort food of choice.

   Read them.

Read your evaluations because you will learn a lot and you will improve the course. But be nice to yourself too.

“When I got back my evaluations after my first semester of teaching, I ripped open the envelope and started reading. I read through twenty-one fine, good, and even wonderful evaluations, and then I got to the last one: there were low scores in every category, and on the back, the student had written, “I think Joanna is annoying. And it would help if she understood the material.” I was devastated. And I couldn’t imagine how I was going to walk into the classroom and start teaching . . . in five minutes!”

**Further Reading**


