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Giving feedback is a skill that can be learned. What are the conditions that foster that learning and the later use of that skill for feedback to instructors?

Encouraging Your Students to Give Feedback

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“This class was great!” “This class was horrible.” “The instructor was so disorganized.” “The tests were soooo unfair.”

Are there any instructors who have received these kinds of vague comments from students and have not wondered, “What does this mean?” Even more frustrating is receiving no comments at all from students, just the results from the typical scaled student evaluation survey. This volume is about what to do with such results, but perhaps the best thing to do would be to improve the quality of student comments and prevent the frustration in the first place. This article provides instructors with the kinds of suggestions that will help them help students be better evaluators of instruction.

In the mid-1980s, my university decided to revamp its student evaluation of the teaching process. At that time, the system consisted of a large number of Likert scale items pointing at different aspects of the course and instructor, and a free-response section where students could write whatever their muse inspired them to write. In good assessment methodology, we polled the various users of the form to identify their needs and their preferences. The faculty who responded gave a resounding endorsement to the written comments from the students in comparison to the scaled items. As a result, we proposed doing away with the scaled items altogether and concentrating on encouraging student written comments, but there were too many individuals at various levels of decision making who would be lost without numbers, so both parts of the survey were retained. The revealing part of this story is the solid preference for student written comments exhibited by those faculty who responded, despite the common confusion that the comments sometimes elicit. This finding has been reported in other

work (Ory and Braskamp, 1981; Tiberius, Sackin, and Cappe, 1987). Because this is the preferred mode for faculty to receive feedback, it is worthwhile to think about ways of encouraging more and better student comments.

Why Don't Students Give More Feedback?

Although there are many possible reasons for the frequent lack of student open-ended comments, I believe that two general areas account for the bulk of this problem: student beliefs about feedback and their lack of understanding and practice in giving it.

Student Beliefs About Feedback. The general literature on motivation problems says that an individual who believes that his efforts will not result in any change in the situation is less motivated to make any effort. Taken to its extreme, this phenomenon has been referred to as learned helplessness (Peterson, Maier, and Seligman, 1993). One frequent characteristic of someone experiencing learned helplessness is passivity, that is, a failure to respond at all. If we translate that into the problem with student feedback, we might say that students are not inclined to give extensive feedback because they believe it will have no effect on the ultimate target of teaching. Certainly, they have seen enough examples of continuing poor teaching in the face of student evaluation of teaching to make them skeptical about whether anyone actually reads the feedback. Without evidence of attention to this feedback, students could well conclude that the effort necessary to give feedback is not worth putting forth.

In less psychological terms, we could observe that the same experience of no effect can result in cynicism about the process altogether, another posture that institutions do not wish to foster in students. Cynicism is often followed by withdrawal from the process, as seen when students write nothing at all or leave before the evaluation is completed.

Another student belief about giving feedback revolves around the notion of retribution on the part of the instructor. This has been one of the arguments for making the student evaluations anonymous (Gordon and Stuecher, 1992). Students often feel that if they give negative feedback, it will somehow come back to haunt them. These worries make them less likely to provide extensive comments, particularly if those comments are negative and would suggest "better" ways of teaching.

Lack of Understanding or Practice. This second source of problems with student feedback is both attitudinal and practical. Motivation theory again tells us that if someone does not think he or she can successfully accomplish a task, motivation to engage in it falls. In this case, faced with the request for feedback and a lack of a clear understanding about how to give it, students may choose to say nothing at all or make very general statements that could not be criticized.

Indeed, there has been little opportunity for students to learn the skill of giving feedback to teachers. Learning this skill would require some sort of feedback on the feedback, and the typical student evaluation of teaching usually disappears from students' thoughts once it has been completed. Students have no opportunity to see models of good feedback or receive any feedback on whether what they wrote was helpful or useless. The rise of collaborative learning models is starting to make some inroads into teaching students how to respond to the work of others, but it would be a stretch to assume that students could translate those skills into feedback to their instructors.

Improving Student Written Feedback

Learning to give good feedback is much like learning any other skill: it requires motivation, direct teaching, and optimal conditions for practice.

Motivation. The motivation level that students bring to their giving of feedback is an important determinant of the amount of feedback they will give. The learners must believe that what they are doing will make a difference in a class. How can we convince students that giving feedback is worth their time and energy? One easy first strategy rests on the principle of early success: if the students are given an opportunity to provide early feedback and they see that their feedback is acted on in a positive way, that early success signals to them that this particular instructor is serious about feedback and uses what the class has said in modifying the course. All of the work on midsemester evaluations has shown that gathering feedback early in the semester allows an instructor to turn around even very difficult classes.

This early feedback success can have an impact on the students as well. A common feedback strategy is the use of the one-minute paper. At the end of the class, students are asked to spend one minute commenting on what helped them the most to learn the day's target content or what is still confusing to them. Regular use of such questions can cause the students to engage in the class differently. If they are constantly being asked to give examples of good and poor practice in the class, they eventually begin asking themselves on a regular basis what has been good and what has not helped. They become more critical, reflective observers of their own learning, which is the first step toward becoming a self-regulated learner. What teacher would not want a classroom full of highly reflective, engaged, self-regulated students?

That point aside, the original value of this early feedback is encouraging and improving later feedback. Students learn that their feedback to the instructor makes a difference; they do have an effect. This success then changes their belief that nothing they say matters; they have proof it does.

A second source of motivation to provide feedback can come from the instructor. A persuasively delivered monologue on the degree to which

the instructor values student input and how he or she has used it can influence student attitudes as well. It is particularly effective to relate the feedback from previous semesters to the changes students have seen in the current semester. In the course of this inspirational narrative, the instructor can even acknowledge the problems that students have had in the past trying to give feedback to other instructors. Communicating expectations about the feedback is often enough to influence the amounts and kinds of information the students think to give.

Direct Teaching of Giving Feedback. Because the skill of giving feedback is becoming a more and more important one as we move toward teamwork in classes as well as the workplace, one possible solution to the problem of desultory student feedback is to take the time in class to teach students how to give feedback.

According to the literature on learning, one of the best ways to learn a skill (and giving feedback is a skill) is to observe a model (Bandura, 1986). It is likely that students have not seen many good models of feedback for improvement, so one solid instructional strategy would be to provide good models of giving feedback. For example, when giving feedback to students on their own work, an instructor can follow the same guidelines that he or she wants the students to follow in any other feedback situation. No definitive list of guidelines that cuts across all fields stands out, but some of the qualities of effective feedback are frequently mentioned:

- Feedback should be specific, using examples familiar to the individual to make the point. For example, feedback on a student's writing should not simply say something vague like, "Good logic," but instead should point out the characteristics of the writing that contribute to the logic, such as, "A good hierarchical structure of the main points with nice examples and supporting citations for each level; also a good use of relational phrases as transitions between points, which makes the meaning and structure much clearer." Given this level of feedback, a student who was looking to rewrite his paper would have some clear guidelines to follow in the revision process.

The same would hold true for teaching feedback. Rather than saying that the instructor was "so disorganized," students can learn to enumerate the observations that led to such a label—for example, "The instructor frequently forgets where he is in the logic of the lecture and has to retrace his steps, which wastes everyone's time," or "On two occasions, the instructor brought the wrong notes to class for the topic listed on the syllabus."

- Feedback should concentrate on observable behavior rather than inferring what the individual is thinking or feeling. For example, it would be counterproductive to say, "Jim doesn't get his work done because he is irresponsible." It is sufficient simply to observe that his work is not being done and to give a few examples to support that observation. In the same way, student feedback should not make inferences about the instructor's level of caring, because that is not directly observable. Students should

instead point out the behaviors that the instructor engages in that make them feel that he does not care. For example, it is much more helpful to say, “I visited his office during office hours at least three times, and he was not there for any of them.”

- Feedback should avoid personalization or emotionally charged wording (“This instructor is worthless” or “This instructor doesn’t like students”). Sticking to descriptions of actual incidents is much more helpful as feedback.

- Feedback should describe the effect the behavior has on the giver so that the receiver can experience it from a different perspective (“When the instructor uses jargon that we don’t know yet, I have trouble taking good notes because I don’t understand the words enough to write them down accurately”). Feedback of this type often points toward a solution. In this example, the instructor could stop after the use of jargon and clarify its meaning or give the students time to pause and write it down without breaking the information flow.

- Feedback should offer alternatives to the behavior being criticized. In the previous example, the student might append to that description, “If you could write the technical terms on the board beforehand, I could check my spelling against yours to be sure I had written the words down correctly.”

- Feedback should point out good and bad aspects of the instruction. Sprinkling a little praise or understanding throughout feedback helps a receiver be less defensive about negative comments. For example, a student could say, “Although the students who have had more than one prerequisite course probably get a lot out of the more complex examples that you use, I have had a problem understanding the main point because I can’t see a good connection. Maybe you could invite us to try to summarize the key ideas, and then go over them briefly to be sure everyone is on the same page.”

If the instructor provided that level of feedback to students on their work, it would be an excellent model for their providing feedback too. Spending class time in going over these qualities before asking the students to do any critical feedback, either of the instructor or their peers, would be worthwhile.

Another possibility for modeling can come in peer feedback groups, particularly those associated with editing. When students are asked to give one another feedback, they often find themselves facing the same dilemmas as in giving feedback to instructors: they do not know how to be helpful or want to avoid being perceived as too critical. As a result, they often end up with bland feedback that neither offends nor assists the author. A little time spent as a group in constructing feedback norms or expectations can give the students more confidence in their own ability to handle the situation effectively.

Because we are trying to teach the students to give better feedback, we should not wait until the end of the semester to institute the process. It

would be most beneficial to schedule periodic feedback sessions early in the semester. For example, after about the first third of the course or around a critical initial assessment like the first test, conducting a teaching feedback session would make a lot of sense.

The instructor would discuss the rationale for asking for feedback so that the students understood why they were being asked for input and what the possible consequences might be. He or she would also describe the characteristics of good feedback, as outlined in this article, and show some examples of student comments that followed the guidelines. In the initial session, the instructor might make the task a little easier by giving specific prompts to guide student thinking. In later sessions, those prompts could be removed as the students learned the kinds of comments that are the most useful.

Students might work initially in groups to create a set of feedback comments. This would have the benefit of peer modeling as well as alleviating some of the anxiety associated with being the sole evaluator.

Once feedback has been received, it is important for the instructor to respond in a positive way with his or her own reactions, both responding to the specific comments and suggestions made and commenting on the characteristics of the feedback that were most helpful. This would then help shape the students' feedback-giving skills, as well as increase their motivation to respond again next time.

Optimal Conditions for Practice. Once students have learned how to give useful feedback, the instructor needs to establish the conditions under which they can both practice and perform that skill. The practice part of this suggestion simply means that once is not enough; providing students multiple opportunities to practice giving feedback is a necessary supplement to the direct teaching of it. The multiple practice opportunities also provide a good mechanism for an instructor to keep up with students' progress and opinions, an important aspect of responsive teaching.

Perhaps even more important, however, is providing the optimal conditions for giving feedback. There are several ways to improve the conditions under which students give feedback and as a result improve the chances of their providing more thoughtful and useful information. The first of these is giving adequate notice. To elicit carefully considered comments from students requires giving them time beforehand to think about the questions. It is very difficult to come up with coherent, thoughtful feedback with only five minutes' notice. Students will be able to provide much better information if the instructor tells them before class that he or she will be asking for their input at the following session. While it is naive to think that all the students will take the opportunity to ruminate over their responses during that time, it is reasonable to think that enough of them will to make it worthwhile. Certainly, nothing is lost as a result. I have even had students come to the next class period with an essay assessing the various components of the class.

The second way that an instructor can improve the conditions under which feedback is given is to provide adequate instructions, especially the first time: a description of the purpose of the feedback and how it will be handled, how the instructor intends to respond to it, and thanks to the students beforehand. It is also quite useful for the instructor to provide some specific prompts appropriate to the time of the semester. For example, a feedback session early in the semester prior to any exam might have prompts that focus on student understanding of what is being done in class, the nature of the reading assignments, procedural questions, and other things that would indicate that students were adjusting to the flow of the course. A feedback session scheduled on the heels of an exam would have prompts that focused on the difficulty of the exam, what the instructor did that helped or interfered with exam performance, and suggestions for how the instructor could provide more help for the next exam. It would probably also be interesting always to include a prompt that says, "What question should I have asked about the class, and what would your response have been?"

Another condition that might help students give better feedback would be to assign one or more students in the class to be the administrators and summarizers of the feedback. Spence and Lenze discuss this team concept in more detail in their article in this volume. I reinforce it here because of the concern that some students have about retaliation. Having a team of students serve as the go-between should address those concerns. Of course, it is more likely the case that instructors who engage in this kind of ongoing feedback gathering will have a good rapport with the class, such that these concerns are minimized. Nevertheless, the interjection of a third party between the critic and the critiqued can benefit both parties.

A final condition that increases the quality of feedback is providing adequate time for students to think and write. Too often, student feedback is solicited as an afterthought during the last few minutes of the class, when students and instructor are more concerned about getting to their next appointment than doing a thorough job of analyzing the class. Instructors who ask students for their feedback must be sure to give it the time it deserves. Their willingness to take class time to gather feedback makes a statement to the students about its importance. This activity should be treated with the same level of commitment and attention as any other learning activity in the class. And if the instructor has prepared the students and is giving them good prompts to guide their thinking, they should be able to put the time to good use without needing the whole class period.

The Final Step: Be Prepared to Receive the Feedback

Once instructors have high-quality feedback from the students, they must respond to it. Certainly the other articles in this volume provide lots of ways to gather and respond to student feedback. To their suggestions I add my own caution: these efforts will come to naught if the feedback falls on deaf

ears or a defensive ego. Teaching is a very personal act, and it is hard to accept criticism of something so close to our essence. But if we cannot or if we react defensively, we destroy all hope of getting honest and useful student feedback from that class again.

I have found that the suggestions discussed in this article decrease the possibility of offensive or useless feedback and increase the quality and instructional value of the comments students will make. We must remember that none of us is so good that we cannot be better.

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