

focus

on university teaching and learning

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Student Perspectives on Teaching

As a teaching professor, you are constantly evaluating students and giving them feedback on their work. However, when you think of evaluation of your teaching, you probably think of year-end or end-of-term questionnaires which are distributed to all the students in the class. The main purpose of these summative ratings of instruction is to provide information about your performance as a teacher, the students' impression of the whole course, and their learning. Feedback from these questionnaires—which usually ask very general questions—will contribute to the overall record of your teaching and may help you in subsequent classes you teach.

However, there is a real advantage to receiving regular feedback from your students throughout the semester. Mid-term evaluations from students enable you to modify your courses, make mid-course adjustments, and keep in closer touch with your students' progress. This formative evaluation is used for teaching improvement; the teacher controls how and when the evaluation occurs, and the method of acquiring feedback can be tailored to the individual course.

You can gather valuable feedback from your students quickly and easily by simply asking them to jot down on a piece of paper their comments on the class and submit their responses to you. Further, with minimal preparation time you can collect more specific information from your students by compiling and distributing short forms which focus on certain aspects of your teaching or on how well the students are understanding the content.

This issue of *Focus* presents examples of three such forms which have in common their simplicity, their adaptability, and their usefulness in a variety of teaching environments. To make it easy for you to copy the forms for use in your classes, we have included two of them as inserts.

Teacher-Designed Feedback Forms

Patricia Cross and Thomas Angelo (1993) have developed a technique called the **Teacher-Designed Feedback Form** which allows instructors to ask students focused questions about the course at regular intervals. (See insert for a sample form.) For example, you may want to learn more about a new teaching strategy you have been trying or about the value of the comments you write on students' assignments.

This form is especially useful for acquiring input about your teaching behaviour, approach, and the classroom environment you create. Best of all, the form is easy to compile and can be tailored to meet your own needs:

- Compile three to five questions which relate to general instructional objectives or a specific issue about which you want feedback.
- Develop an appropriate answer format: scale, multiple choice, or short fill-ins.
- Allow the students about 10 minutes at the end of class to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

Disclose the results in summary to the students, preferably at the following class. Tell the students

what changes you can make based on their feedback; explain your reasons if you are unable to change something.

This adaptable form will give you important feedback from your students and provide you with the opportunity to make changes and adjustments in a timely way. Furthermore, the data can be easily and quickly analyzed.

Cross and Angelo caution that this feedback form not be used more than two or three times a semester; that you ask questions only about elements of your teaching that you can and are willing to alter; and that you don't promise changes you cannot effect.

Further Questions to Elicit Student Feedback
Dalhousie Nursing faculty recently compiled feedback forms at an Instructional Development work-

shop. Their questions may help you as you think about devising your own feedback form:

- How useful do you find classroom content in relation to your clinical practice?
- How helpful was the textbook in achieving course objectives?
- From your perspective, how successful am I at providing information in a clear and understandable manner?
- In your opinion, how successful am I at presenting theory that is readily applicable in a practical setting?
- How successful am I at choosing readings that help you achieve the course/class objectives?
- How successful am I at providing a non-threatening, comfortable environment for learning?
- From your perspective, how stimulating/thought-provoking was today's class? What are your suggestions for improvement?

The One-Minute Paper

This technique (Cross and Angelo, 1993) is quick and easy to implement. It can give valuable information regarding what students are getting out of a class. From the sample One-Minute Paper form included on the insert, you can see that the procedure is simple; however, you should probably end class more than one minute early! Give students sufficient time to write thoughtful, anonymous responses.

Minute Papers can be used frequently during the semester. They are especially useful for classes in which students are presented with a lot of new information on a regular basis, e.g. introductory courses. In addition, they offer a practical way of acquiring feedback in large classes.

Source: Cross, K.P. & T.A. Angelo. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (Second Edition), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The "Muddiest" Point

This simple technique allows you to obtain immediate information from students about what they have found least clear or most confusing in the day's lecture, the chapter they have just read for homework, or in a classroom discussion. The students' responses allow teachers to discover which aspects of the course are giving students most difficulty; as a result, review classes, extra assignments, or more time can be devoted to the troublesome issues. An added benefit of this technique is that students who may be shy or reluctant to ask questions in class will have their voices heard.

Leave a few minutes at the end of class and ask students to write an answer to the following question: *What was the "muddiest" point in today's class? (In other words, what was least clear to you?)* This technique is especially useful in large classes in which it may be difficult for a teacher to gauge the students' comprehension of material.

Source: Mosteller, Frank. (1989). "The 'Muddiest' Point in the Lecture as a Feedback Device." *On Teaching and Learning: The Journal of the Harvard-Danforth Center*. (Vol. 3) pp. 10-21.

Effective University Teaching

A focus group of six students from a variety of disciplines and professional schools recently shared with OI DT staff their perspectives on teaching and learning at Dalhousie University. No professor was referred to by name in this process.

The students said they learn best from professors who:

- show respect and concern for students
- develop rapport with students
- stimulate learning in the classroom
- provide timely and useful feedback on student work.

The following are effective and ineffective teaching practices as gleaned from the group interview.

Effective Teachers

Pause during a lecture to ask if there are any questions – and mean it.

Write key words, phrases, and important names on the board.

Prepare classes thoroughly, using humour, fostering debate, giving practical, current examples.

Welcome students to “drop in” to their offices.

Meet and interact informally with students outside class in a relaxed atmosphere.

Show interest in students as individuals by engaging in “personal-level conversations” with them; thus students are motivated to do well in the course to please the teacher.

Show respect for student opinion to the point of asking the class for suggestions to improve an article in the works, reporting when the article was accepted for publication.

Show concern for student achievement by going out of the way to contact a student to deal with a potential problem.

Provide ample comments and a full explanation of how a mark was determined, prompting students to report “we know where we’re going.”

Ineffective Teachers

Make class a “note-taking race.”

Use overheads crammed with too much text.

Lecture by reading aloud from the textbook without permitting questions or interruption.

Refuse to see students without an appointment.

Communicate with students outside class exclusively by electronic mail, unnecessarily limiting student-teacher interaction.

Convey a sense of superiority to students with the message “Because I have a Ph.D., I am always right.”

Show little respect for students, to the point of getting “kicks” from a position of power, proudly claiming to be “the prof from hell.”

Appear to lack commitment to the class by accumulating frequent, unannounced absences.

Provide little comment and feedback, even limiting remarks on an A+ paper to “Not bad.”

Recognize that students have other classes and responsibilities and show some flexibility in assignment deadlines.

Accept major assignments in draft form, give feedback (including a grade), and allow students to re-submit an improved version for a higher grade.

Employ a strict, unyielding policy about deadlines for student work while returning graded assignments to students months after they're submitted.

Administer mid-term exams without having returned any previous assignments, prompting a student to observe that "You need to know how you're doing along the way. Otherwise, you're just floating."

Thanks to the students who shared their comments with us: Lee Toner, Peter Corbeil, Paul Riley, Lindsay Chase, Kate Decker, and Karen Jesseau. Special thanks to Carol O'Neil for her assistance in preparing this issue.

Reader Contributions

Would you like to contribute to *Focus*?

The editors welcome submissions for inclusion in future editions of *Focus*.
Have you successfully tried a new technique in your class?
Is there an issue related to university teaching and learning which you would like to address?

We would like to hear what you have to say!

Please send your contribution to the Office of Instructional Development and Technology at the address below.



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One-Minute Paper

Please answer the following two questions honestly. Your responses will let me see whether I am meeting my teaching objectives.

What was the most useful or meaningful thing you learned during this class?

What question(s) remain uppermost in your mind as we end this class?

(These questions will be addressed in subsequent classes.)

Thank you for completing this form.

Source: Cross, K.P. & Thomas A. Angelo, *Classroom Assessment Techniques; A Handbook for College Teachers* (Second Edition), San Francisco: Jossey Bass. 1993.

Teacher-Designed Feedback Form

Instructions: Please answer the following questions by circling the response you agree with most and adding your comments. Do not write your name on this form.

1. How useful are class discussions in helping you understand the concepts we are covering in class?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never Useful					Always Useful

Suggestions for improving class discussion periods

2. How helpful are the outlines I put on the overhead at the beginning of each class?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never Helpful					Always Helpful

Any comments on how I could use these outlines more effectively?

3. How effective are my comments on your papers and lab reports in improving your understanding of the course material?

0	1	2	3	4	5
Never Effective					Always Effective

Suggestions for improving the effectiveness of my written comments.

Thank you for completing this form. Your answers will help me measure my teaching effectiveness, and your comments will help me improve.

Source: Cross, K.P. & Thomas A. Angelo, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (Second Edition), San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993.