Three Steps to Better Course Evaluations

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With the semester’s end comes the often-dreaded course evaluation process. Will the students be gentle and offer constructive criticism, or will their comments be harsh and punitive? What do students really want out of a course, anyway? A better time to think about course evaluations is at the beginning of the semester. At that point, an instructor can be proactive in three areas that I have found lead to better course evaluations.

Understand and accept today’s college students

First and foremost, students want us to know who they are. They want us to know their names and to know about their world. Today’s students are busy, technologically savvy, and multitaskers. Some are prepared for college work; others are not. Regardless of their backgrounds, all students have lofty ambitions and want to succeed. To help them, we can provide background knowledge in our subject areas. They want to know exactly how to get those grades. College students today have experienced criteria sheets and rubrics since elementary school, and they want the same in college. They want to know where they stand on any given day in the semester.

After 20 years of college teaching, I have learned that telling students that their grades are based on percentages (20 percent homework, 25 percent quizzes, etc.) does not have meaning for them. They cannot figure their grades with a percentage system. A total point grading scale provides that clarity. Each assignment, quiz, lab paper, project, or exam has a certain number of points. These point values can be listed in the syllabus as well as the total points needed for the final grade. To help students keep track of their points, I give them a worksheet and explain that if they record their points, they will know exactly how many they have and how many they still need to earn.

I get rave reviews about my “no-mystery” approach to grading on course evaluations, and I believe that the good reviews are due to the clarity and ease of the total point system. I re-explain the grading system after the first assignments/quizzes/tests are returned. On the first day of classes, students are overloaded with information. They are ready to understand how the grading system works after an assignment has been graded.

Get formative feedback early

The end-of-course evaluation is a summative one. Although it aims to help us improve future courses, it does not enable us to respond to the needs of the students currently enrolled in the course. Formative feedback collected early in the course accomplishes that goal.

The first major paper or exam is a great time to collect formative feedback. I recommend attaching a page to the back of the exam, or asking students to respond to questions like these the day the papers are due:

1. How long did you study for this exam or work on preparing this paper?
2. How/where did you study/write?
3. Which class activities (lectures, discussions, reviews, online notes) helped you the most in learning this material? Why?
4. Which class activities helped you the least? Why?
5. Which topics remain the most difficult for you?
6. What has a professor done in the past that helped you learn?
An Assignment that Prevents Plagiarism

A qualitative study of plagiarism (which was highlighted in the February 2010 issue of the newsletter) reported that although students know that plagiarism is wrong, most are quite confused about what actually constitutes plagiarism. The availability of so many online resources has exacerbated the problem. Cut-and-paste features expedite using the material of others. Studies are also showing that students do not think the principles of ownership apply to online resources the same way they do to published material. Finally, many faculty are still struggling to master the rules of referencing that apply to Web-based resources, which does not excuse but certainly explains why students find referencing these materials so confusing.

McGowan and Lightbody, authors of the article referenced below, explain how they arrived at the conclusion that there is a need for a different kind of assignment to deal with plagiarism issues. Currently, most students are taught the principles of referencing using detailed guidelines that include examples of how the principles should be applied to individual sources. Most of the time, students are taught about using the material of others and crediting those sources in some sort of composition course. Then students are expected to apply what they’ve learned when they prepare written materials in subsequent courses. McGowan and Lightbody felt that students needed instruction beyond the guidelines and that they needed repeated instruction in subsequent courses.

McGowan and Lightbody teach accounting, and so their assignment deals with accounting content. They wanted to increase students’ understanding of plagiarism in the accounting field and they wanted to use the assignment to develop students’ knowledge of a particular accounting issue.

Because they didn’t want to devote class time to covering the plagiarism content, they had students complete an online workshop that described the nature of plagiarism, the consequences of plagiarizing, and how students could avoid doing it. Students also read a referencing guide.

Students were then given a short (900-word) faculty-prepared essay. It included arguments and evidence relating to the accounting topic. It also included references to a variety of sources. The essay contained 10 examples of plagiarism. Some were copied word for word from the resource. Others paraphrased sentences and paragraphs, and still others used author ideas and research data without acknowledgment. Students had to consult the original sources and use them to identify the plagiarized content in the essay. Then they had to resubmit the essay with those instances of plagiarism corrected and appropriately referenced. They also had to prepare a correctly referenced, 250-word conclusion to the essay.

Student scores on the corrected essay indicated their understanding of plagiarism. They were able to identify it and make the necessary corrections. The authors also asked students for their perceptions of how well they understood plagiarism before and after the assignment. In the two years when the assignment was first used, 32 percent and 40 percent, respectively, rated their initial knowledge of plagiarism as good. That percentage jumped to 85 for both cohorts after they had completed the assignment. A number of student comments in the article speak to the effectiveness of the assignment. Even more telling, no further cases of plagiarism were detected in that course, and the instructor of a subsequent course taken by these students “noted a substantial decline in the number of cases of plagiarism.” (p. 281)

Role Reversal: Learning from a Master Teacher

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I had a most interesting experience last summer. I have taught college composition for many years, but I had not participated in a writing workshop as a writer for a long time. Of course, I had regularly run workshops in my classroom. But this time, I had written a short, 600-word essay, and it was workshoped (which to those of us in composition means reviewed and critiqued) by my peers as part of a larger in-service on curiosity and writing.

When the workshop was finished, I turned to a fellow English professor and said, “So that’s how it’s supposed to be done!”

Here’s what I learned:

Attitude matters. At the beginning of the workshop, the facilitator took the time to remind us that writing critique demands a safe environment: no one can be fearful that his ideas or her manner of expression will be put down or devalued. “Our job is to help one another say what we have to say as effectively as possible,” said our leader, looking us all in the eyes.

Implicit was the message that everyone was already a writer, and a good one. The purpose of the workshop was to help everyone become the best writer possible. Despite all this, and despite my professional credentials as a writer, I still was nervous. Imagine how students in my classes must feel!

The setup is crucial. “In this workshop,” our facilitator said, “we will make I statements only, no judgmental pronouncements. Say, ‘I was confused by the wording in paragraph two,’ not ‘paragraph two is confusing.’ The difference is one of tone: the first statement places the fault with the reader, not the writer. Further, before we writers read our pieces aloud, we were asked to describe the audience for whom we were writing, and to state any particular concerns we had about our essays. Then, the listeners were to try to be that audience, as well as to be themselves. When the reading was finished, the listeners were to converse about the paper while the writer, silent, took copious notes on everything that was said. No rebuttals, clarifications, explanations, or apologies on the part of the writer were allowed. She could, at the very end, ask the reviewers to clarify any comment that had confused or puzzled her. Most important, at the end of the workshop, when all papers had been discussed, we were to thank one another “for the incredibly hard work” we had done for each other. The facilitator’s careful directions articulated her expectations, and that shaped our behavior.

Acting is important. I knew the woman who facilitated this workshop. And I knew that for her, like for me, the process was old hat. Nonetheless, I watched her perform the setup and debriefing of this activity as though she had never done anything like it ever before in her professional career. She had us convinced that the work we were about to do was fresh, new, absolutely cutting-edge. She was so completely in the moment and so committed to this work herself that the rest of us could not help but be so as well.

Finally, I learned this: placing myself (and my little essay) in the hands of a master teacher reminded me that one of the differences between a ho-hum classroom performance and a really effective one is the degree to which we throw ourselves into the role.

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If I have students answer these questions on a page attached to the exam, they can tear that page off and submit it anonymously when they turn in the exam.

You can also ask for feedback once that first exam or paper has been graded and returned. I like to ask questions then about improvement goals—what the student wants to do better and what else could be done in class to support their efforts to improve. If you don’t want to deal with open-ended questions, students can rate declarative statements such as “I would prefer more discussion of assigned readings.”

If you ask for their input, students will want to see that you listened to them. They may expect some changes. A short report back to them can be used to explain what you are willing and not willing to change. If students tell you they don’t want essay exams, you may still have good educational reasons for using them. You can explain those reasons and ask what students need to better prepare for essay exams.

Students aren’t qualified to comment about all aspects of instruction, but they can rate how they feel about the classroom climate. They are good evaluators of what helps them learn and what confuses them. Getting their feedback early in the semester enables you to tailor the course to their learning needs.

It helps so much to talk about your evaluation results with a trusted colleague. Sharing student responses can help us see patterns in evaluations and sort out the “outliers” or just plain wacky comments. Knowing what our students need helps us teach in ways that promote their learning, and that means better results on the end-of-course evaluations.
Expediting Feedback to Students

I hope you won’t stop reading once you find out the idea being proposed here involves automating the feedback provided to students on papers, projects, and presentations. If you were to look at a graded set of papers and make a list of the comments offered as feedback, how many of those comments have you written more than once? Is the answer many? If so, you should read on.

The author proposing this idea points out how rubrics have expedited the grading process for many faculty and also clarify expectations for students, but when the paper is returned, the student gets the rubric with a check next to quality level attained and maybe a few brief remarks squeezed into a small space provided for comments. What this assumes is that students will look at their paper and see why it merited that particular quality rating. That assumption is questionable, based on student levels of skill and their motivation to attend to feedback.

What the author has done is create a large collection of detailed comments that he imports into the grading rubric. He doesn’t show students all the levels—they see those when the rubric is distributed at the time the assignment is made. They see the level their assignment has been given and then a detailed set of comments that explain why that level was earned and how the student can improve for a higher level on the next assignment.

It may take a while to develop the collection of comments, but you can start using them before the collection is complete. The quality of these comments can be significantly higher than those we dash off. Once the collection gets large enough, comments can be categorized, and any given comment may exist in several different versions. The author categorizes according the levels that appear on the rubric. So, if the assignment meets the top criteria, he has a collection of top-criteria comments he can make. The author recommends storing comments in an Excel spreadsheet.

What if students figure out they are getting “canned” feedback? Many are already inclined not to pay much attention to our careful comments. Wouldn’t the fact the comments aren’t written exclusively for them give them an excuse to ignore the feedback even more thoroughly? Technology makes it easy to personalize any comment. You can use the student’s name, insert an example pulled from their assignment, or think of the comment as a canned shell that you can slightly revise as you use it. All of a sudden, the feedback is personal.

This approach may not be for everyone, but with so much on our plates, we need to be open to time-saving possibilities. The author of the article referenced below was able to document some positive impacts on student work and attitudes with the system of automated comments he developed.


An Interesting Group Work Model

It has a long, not-easy-to-remember name: Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning. It usually goes by its acronym: POGIL. It’s a model designed to replace lectures. Students discuss course material in teams, and they use carefully designed material that involves sequenced sets of questions—that’s the guided-inquiry part of the model. The process part relates to what is generally a three-phase learning cycle that involves exploration, invention, and application. It is derived from Piaget’s work on mental functioning.

In the exploration phase, students usually start with a model and the questions help them see patterns within the model. “Often, the questions lead students to test hypotheses or explain the patterns and relationships found in the model.” (p. 263) The invention phase involves introduction of a concept or relationship. In the application phase, students are challenged to extend and apply the concept to new situations. “The sequence of questions in POGIL materials are carefully devised to help students progress properly through the phases, to guide them toward appropriate conclusions, and to develop desired process skills, such as problem solving, deductive reasoning, communication and self-assessment.” (p. 236)

The POGIL model was developed for use in the sciences and has been used successfully in a variety of courses. The website (http://pogil.org) shows sample materials. For those interested in the model, the website contains much useful information, including a detailed instructor’s guide that can be downloaded for free.

In this model, the instructor functions as a facilitator who’s available to assist the groups. However, instructors do not answer questions that students should be able to figure out for themselves. Rather than answering student questions, instructors opt to ask the group questions that lead them to the answer. Students are assigned roles in this model. There might be a manager who keeps the group on task, a scribe who is the group’s office.
Better Writing in Lab Reports

One of the messages of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement is that writing skills can be developed in any course and that often the best place to start is with current assignments that involve writing. That’s where chemists Gragson and Hagen started. They were disappointed in the quality of student writing in their “journal-style” lab reports. Despite giving students a sample lab, a writing manual, and lots of good feedback, the quality of the lab reports was low and did not improve across the 10 to 15 lab reports students prepared.

They undertook a major redesign of the lab report assignment. First, they decided less might be better. Rather than 10 to 15 lab reports they reduced the number to four, reasoning that by requiring fewer they could set the quality standard much higher. Second, they decided that they would give lots of initial guidance on the writing and their expectations for it, but then they would gradually reduce that guidance and have students work more autonomously. Finally, they decided that their redesigned assignment needed to give students experience with both the review and revision processes.

For the first experiment, each student wrote an abstract and a materials and methods section according to the formal journal-style lab report protocols. These were peer reviewed using a Calibrated Peer Review approach. For experiments 1–4, two-to-three-member student groups wrote the journal lab reports using a writing-cycle process. Each individual student produced a one-page Excel report with tables, figures, conclusion, and references that conveyed the essential aspects of experiments 5–10. Each individual then selected one of these experiments and wrote a complete journal-style lab report for it.

The authors prepared an Integrated Writing Guide that included a sample lab report. Each section was accompanied with a grading checklist, which made it clear exactly what the instructors were looking for when they graded each section. For experiments 2–4 they posted detailed grading rubrics on the course website. For the final lab report, students were on their own.

The review and revision process used the Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) model, which includes writing, calibration, peer review, self-assessment, and then revision. Here’s how that worked with the first lab assignment. Students uploaded their written abstract to the CPR website (http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu). Then they read three instructor-written abstracts of varying quality that they graded. Next, they were randomly assigned three abstracts written by their classmates, which they also read and graded online. Finally, they returned to their own abstract, which they read and graded. When students graded the work online, they were guided by questions. Once they completed the CPR process, they were given access to the reviews of their peers, and that’s when they revised their work.

In preparing the group reports for experiments 2–4, students prepared one report for each group. They were assigned roles: lead author, reviewer, and editor. The roles rotated each week so that students had the opportunity to complete the tasks associated with each role.

The authors summarize their description of the project with these comments:

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A professional record keeper, a spokesperson who may be called upon to share the group’s solution, and a librarian who may be the only person in the group permitted to have the textbook open.

The POGIL model has been studied empirically in a number of courses. Here’s a sample of the findings. In organic chemistry, less than 8 percent of more than 1,000 students were negative about the method. The same cohort had 30 percent registering negative attitudes about traditional lectures. In an anatomy and physiology course (see reference at the end of this article), grades improved at statistically significant levels. In a medicinal chemistry course taken by pharmacy students, exam scores for students in the POGIL section were higher, as was the final grade distribution (see reference at the end of this article).

This not a method that can be undertaken without significant planning and preparation. The anatomy and physiology professor writes, “Although POGIL requires a great deal of effort and a careful introduction to students who might be skeptical of a novel and unfamiliar classroom experience, its benefits cannot be easily disputed.”


(Note: This excellent article contains information on problem-based learning, POGIL, and peer-led team learning (PLTL), which was the subject of an article in our March issue.)


Failure and Learning

One of my retirement goals has been to finally get good at knitting. I learned how when I was a child, but I've never had the time to really master the craft. Retirement is when you're supposed to realize some of these lifelong ambitions because you're running out of time. And so I've been knitting—lots of different things, using lots of different techniques. My current quest is cables—a technique that involves putting a small group of stitches in front of or behind another group of stitches, with the result looking, not surprisingly, like a cable. It's not a difficult technique, except when you tackle a project that involves a variety of different kinds of cables. I'm not very visual, and so often rather than looking at the pattern that is emerging as I knit, I'm reading the instructions. The written instructions tell you when to put the stitches in the back or front, but they don't help you see what you should be doing. If you put the stitches behind when they should be in front, the error isn't immediately obvious. In my case, it was five rows later on a vest project that is knit in one piece—that means lots of stitches on the needle and lots of time involved in correcting the mistake. I was angry with myself, but all that ripping and reknitting was what it took to finally get me looking at the cable and figuring out once and for all when the stitches needed to go in back or in front. Now I know.

I thought about all that this morning when I was rereading a research article and ran across a very old piece by John Chiodo, titled “Professors Who Fail May Be Our Best Teachers.” Chiodo wrote that he was in the process of developing a “philosophy of failure to help ensure the improvement of my teaching.” (p. 79) His piece is really about teachers needing to take risks, as in the need to try new and different approaches even though there is a risk they might not work. Teachers avoid failure by not taking risks and always doing what they know works. Ironically, this approach usually fails over time, but it’s not the kind of failure that is as easily noticed by the teacher.

Failure in the classroom is frequently a very private affair. The norm in collegial conversation and in published pedagogical scholarship is to share success stories. We do need to learn about what does work, but often there is more learning potential when we try something and it doesn’t work. The problem, of course, is that learning from failure is rarely a pleasant experience.

In addition to not talking about the failure, teachers frequently rely on Freud’s pain/pleasure principle and ignore the failure. Lest you think I write not knowing whereof I speak, I had a dismal failure in an upper-division business course on conflict resolution and negotiation. It was the first time I had taught the course, and the students balked at everything I asked them to do. We got to study conflict up close and personal. The problem was, I couldn’t get any of the theories and research that we were studying to successfully resolve the conflict we were experiencing. My failure was made worse by the fact that I won a prestigious teaching award that semester. I lived in fear that students in this class would find out and either laugh or protest. When the semester ended, I walked away from that course. I never taught it again, and I never faced the lessons that were there to be learned. Thinking about my failure to confront this failure is now a source of regret and embarrassment.

We also deal with failure a bit like our students do. We respond personally, with lots of emotion and grand generalizations. The failure becomes a measure of our inherent worth as human beings, not the case of one activity, class session, or course poorly executed. To learn from failure, you have to be able to put it in perspective. That may be difficult at the moment, but a bit of distance and a good colleague can put a context around what happened and enable us to start thinking about what we might learn from the experience.

Most of us regularly work with students who experience failure. I hear us giving them a whole variety of strategies they can use to deal with and learn from the failure. It is good and compassionate advice. Maybe the place to begin dealing with our own instructional failures is by listening to how we discuss failure with our students.

As for my knitting, now I’m trying to knit an I-cord. I read and reread the instructions, but I still don’t understand how to do it. At this point, I’ve spent more time criticizing the way the instructions are written than I’ve spent trying to figure out how this technique works. It’s a failure in progress and, so far, one with scant learning.

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LAB REPORTS

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“We found that improving writing did not require giving the students more time to write, providing more specific guidance on both the form and content of their reports, and including opportunities for them to gain experience with the review and revision process.” (p. 65)

Even though your students may not do lab reports, this article is instructive because it demonstrates the careful planning that goes into designing assignments that develop skills and foster understanding. As students prepared these reports, they learned about physical chemistry, but they also learned about technical writing and how much good writing depends on feedback and revision.


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