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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Getting Immediate Student Feedback the Plus/Delta Way

PROFESSORS TEACH in a vacuum; we enter the classroom, deliver our lessons, and leave, and rarely get any feedback on the quality of our instruction before the end of the semester when formal faculty evaluations are completed by students. Other than grades on tests and other assessments, we really don't know for sure if students are learning what we are teaching, and we often don't have a good handle on whether our instruction is working.

This semester I have one student who thanks me every time he leaves class. I'm not sure of his motivation, but the impact of his words has made me feel that he values the class and what we do there. The other 19 students leave without saying a word, which I find frustrating. I want to know more about what they experience in class and if they too find it valuable.

Kember, Leung, & Kwan, writing in Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education (2002) indicate that formal faculty questionnaires completed by students at the end of the semester are not always effective in improving faculty performance, for many different reasons. Part of this problem is that the evaluations occur after the fact, after the class is completed and the professor and students have gone their separate ways. Hesketh & Laidlaw, writing in Medical Teacher (2002), state that feedback is most effective when it is well-timed according to daily work and is as close to the event that it evaluates as possible.

That's why I like to use something called a "plus/delta" evaluation. The plus/delta is a brief, half-page form that I hand out at the beginning of class. It was first developed by Dr. Marj Davis and Dr. Helen Grady at Mercer University. I ask students during class to think of a "plus" — something they like about our class, and a "delta" — something they'd like to change. When class is over, I ask them to leave their completed forms (with no name) by the door, and I collect them and read the anonymous answers. After being sure to tell the students to give me substantive feedback, and not to mention that the room is too cold or that they are hungry after lunch — things I cannot control — I usually get good, solid comments that I can use to improve my teaching.

I conducted a plus/delta in two of my classes recently, and learned that my students liked the PowerPoint presentations I was giving, but felt I wasn't using the textbook enough. I also learned that they wanted more hands-on assignments so that they could apply what they were learning. This was immediate, timely feedback that enabled me to redirect my lesson planning to accommodate their interests.

It's not a perfect solution, of course. Not everything the students write is valuable. Sometimes they write a plus but leave the delta blank. And sometimes they comment that everything is fine the way it is. Nevertheless, the plus/delta is a quick and easy way to receive valuable feedback from students on a regular basis. It takes very little class time, keeps the responses anonymous, and points me to small changes I can make to improve the class. This in turn makes the class experience more valuable for everyone!

Susan Codone, PhD is an associate professor of technical communication in the School of Engineering at Mercer University.

Susan Codone ; Getting Immediate Student Feedback the Plus/Delta Way ; Faculty Focus ; November 2, 2011; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/getting-immediate-student-feedback-the-plusdelta-way/] , November 2, 2011

Excerpt: Tips and Thoughts On Improving The Teaching Process In College--A Personal Diary

by Joe Ben Hoyle

HERE IS ONE of my favorite exercises. It is designed to stimulate reflection--not a bad activity for a teacher. Simply consider four questions:

(1) – Think back on your entire educational experience, from kindergarten through graduate school. Who was your best teacher? Select that one person who should be placed at the absolute pinnacle. In my experience, almost everyone arrives at a single name rather quickly without much guidance. People seem to know automatically the identity of that one individual they believe qualifies as their all-time best teacher.

(2) – Spend a few moments thinking about this educator. Recall the reasons that he or she meant so much to you. Do not get sidetracked by trivial memories. Why was this teacher outstanding? What did this person do that so many others did not? Now, come up with three terms to describe your best teacher. What are three terms that best exemplify the characteristics that made this individual so special?

(3) – One at a time, apply the three descriptive terms generated in (2) to your own teaching.

see **EXERCISE**, Page 2

Classes Begin - Jan 9
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Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching
Carnel Learning Center, Suite106.
Phone: 388-8426

"Why Are We Doing This?" Establishing Relevance to Enhance Student Learning

STUDENTS FREQUENTLY wonder and sometimes ask, "Why are we doing this? Why do I need to know this? Why are we spending so much time on this? Why do we have to do this busywork?"

When students don't see the connection between the content and activities of the course and their future lives, they question what's happening and what we ask them to do. Research confirms that perceived relevance is a critical factor in maintaining student interest and motivation. It also contributes to higher student ratings on course evaluations.

Three straightforward practices can help faculty establish the relevance of course content and activities: faculty should 1) regularly share and discuss the learning outcomes of the course; 2) clearly tie those learning outcomes to the required activities and assignments; and 3) orient students at the beginning of each class period by discussing the "What, Why, and How" of that day.

Learning outcomes–in the syllabus and during class discussions. Clear learning outcomes are the foundation of a learning-centered syllabus and a basic tenet of all instructional design. Many faculty now include course learning outcomes in their syllabi. Outcomes help clarify what students will know and do when they complete the course. Moreover, faculty should do more than just list the learning outcomes. They should also clearly and frequently discuss the relevance of the outcomes with students. Students need to know why the knowledge and skills identified in the learning outcomes are important in their future lives.

Link assignment descriptions and learning outcomes. Most faculty do not regularly tie the assignments described in the syllabus to the learning outcomes. Faculty may think that the links are obvious to students, but that's not always a valid assumption. Every assignment should be clearly defined in terms of how it should be done, and each assignment should be clearly justified by answering questions such as "How does this assignment relate to the course outcomes? How will this assignment help fulfill them? What should the student be able to know or do better after completing the assignment? Why was this assignment chosen to achieve the learning outcomes?" When students understand what the assignments are helping them accomplish, they see the assignments' utility and find the work more meaningful.

Establish relevance at the start of every class period. Some faculty members present an outline of the day's material on the board or in a PowerPoint. This is a useful practice that can aid student note taking, but students are even more motivated when the day's content and activities are placed in the context of the course and their lives. Kicking off class with a simple orientation that answers three questions—What? Why? and How?—can get students on track, motivate them, and help them put the day's content and activities into context.

- What? What are we doing in class today? What questions will we try to answer? What concepts will we address? What questions will we answer? What activities will we do?
- Why? Why are we studying this? How are today's content and activities tied to the course learning outcomes? What should I know or be able to do after today's class? How can the information and skills be used in everyday life?
- How? How are we going to address the content? Will we use lectures? Activities? Discussions? How will different learning styles be accommodated?

When students understand clearly the value, purpose, and procedures for course activities and the logic by which teachers arrived at their design, they are more likely to see the value of what they are being asked to learn and consequently will participate more fully in the course.

Excerpted from "Establishing Relevance." The Teaching Professor, 24.5 (2010): 1.

Jeff Fox; "Why are We Doing This?" Establishing Relevance to Enhance Student Learning; Faculty Focus; May 24, 2011; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/why-are-we-doing-this-establishing-relevance-to-enhance-student-learning/] ; December 7, 2011.

EXERCISE

Continued from Page 1

Score yourself on each. As an example, if one of the descriptive terms was "highly organized" or "enthusiastic" or "genuinely caring," what grade is appropriate for your teaching? For each of these, as a teacher, are you outstanding, good, average, poor, or failing? Most people have a general understanding as to how well they teach. That is not the purpose of this exercise. I want a separate and personal evaluation for the three descriptive terms that you identified as being significant.

(4) – Do not consider the grades in (3) as permanent. They are not tattoos. For each of these three terms, come up with one action that you can attempt to raise the score. How can your grades be improved? Think about the kinds of activities that your own best teacher utilized. Let your imagination run wild; people talk a lot about thinking outside of the box but rarely do so. If this outstanding educator was now standing in your shoes, how would he or she go about achieving improvement?

These four questions are not designed to guide readers toward some universal descriptor of good teachers because there probably is none. I simply want you to consider the traits that you associate with high-quality education. Many individuals have taught for decades without thinking seriously about the fundamental question of what specific attributes cause a teacher to be judged outstanding--not just good but truly exceptional. Improvement is always difficult if a person does not understand the essence of the quest. In the simplest terms: As an educator, what does it take to be good and what can you possibly do to get better?

This exercise has one other purpose: The reader is placed in the student position. It is difficult to comprehend fully the essential importance of education and the key role played by effective teachers without vividly recalling the timorous days of being a student. Remembering how significant such individuals have been to our development is a good way to start contemplating actions that might spark a personal teaching evolution.

Joe Ben Hoyle; Tips and Thoughts on Improving the Teaching Process in College -- A Personal Diary; University of Richmond; [https://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~jhoyle/documents/Book-Teaching-X.doc.pdf]; December 7, 2011