What to Do About Those Negative Comments on Course Evaluations

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If there's a downside to another academic year coming to a successful close, it's reading course evaluations. This post explores how we respond to those one or two low evaluations and the occasional negative comments found in answers to the open-ended questions. Do we have a tendency to over-react? I know I did.

I remember one of the last times I taught my graduate course on college teaching. It was a great class from beginning to end. I was at my best and the students were fantastic. We had these amazing discussions. I looked forward to reading their papers. Oh, it was so good and I just knew the evaluations would reflect my brilliance. Sure enough, the first couple I looked at were straight 7's, the walks-on-water rating. The next couple were mostly 7's and a few 6's. I was right! What a class! Then a few more into the stack, there's a bubble sheet with straight 1's, the no-redeeming-social-value rating. What? I couldn't believe it! How could anyone be that unhappy with the course? Who was it? On the way home, I ran through the roster trying to imagine which student would dish out those paltry ratings. I discussed it at length during dinner. I laid awake in bed, still mystified, dismayed, and just a bit angry. If the student was that upset, why did I have to find out about it this way? These were graduate students, surely they knew they could come to me.

It was not until the next morning that the irony dawned on me. Two weeks earlier, in response to a colleague who was upset about a student's comment, I had written a piece for *The Teaching Professor* newsletter admonishing faculty for over-reacting to negative feedback. And there I was, obsessing over one negative comment in a sea of positive ones.

How do you know if you are over-reacting? You're fixated on the negative comments. There may be only three stinkers, never mind there are 34 positive comments, it's those three negative ones that run around in your mind on a seemingly endless track. And your thinking is colored with emotion, feelings bubble up and around as you consider and reconsider the comments. There's hurt, frustration, anger, confusion, dismay, doubt—not the kind of emotions that fill you with hope and joy. After a while, the rationalizations start. You're pretty sure you know who made the comments and this is not a student who put one bit of effort into the course. Then there's these open-ended questions that essentially give students license so say whatever they will. How fair is that? What would happen if you noted on a paper that it "sucked"? And with the forms now filled out online, half the class isn't providing feedback and those that do are likely the ones with the axes to grind. And you know how much time and thought students put into filling out the evaluations—they run through them as quickly as possible and mark the task completed.

Most of us know when we're over-reacting, the more challenging question is **how do we stop?** It requires concerted effort and the application of some self-discipline. Be welcome to add your suggestions to these.

- **Step back.** For the moment, let it go and move on to something else. Read every positive comment three times and smile.
- **Look again later, but with objectivity.** How many negative comments were there, versus no comments and positive ones? Try deleting the emotional language in the comment. Make it sound like constructive feedback and then consider what happened in the course that might have generated the response. Does the student have a point?
- **Decide what you're going to do.** And doing nothing might be a perfectly appropriate response. Students have been known to offer criticism that is neither fair nor legitimate. If that's the case, forget it. But don't let this be the automatic response to every critical comment. Do you need more information? How might you get it? Are you considering making a change based on the feedback? How about some input before you do?
- **Talk to a trusted colleague.** Yes, you can start the conversation by venting. Then ask the colleague to help you put the student's comment into perspective. Ask how they'd interpret the comment. Ask if they think changes are in order. Ask if they have any good ideas that prevent over-reacting to negative comments.
- **Talk to a few students.** Students are good at clarifying what other students mean. They can venture some guesses as to how representative the comment might be. They can offer feedback on proposed changes and/or suggest possible changes. This conversation is safest and most likely to be productive if it occurs between teachers and students who know and trust each other.
- **Recognize that you are not alone.** Don't in your wildest dreams imagine you are the

only teacher who's gotten a blistering comment.

And if you'd like to read something really helpful, here's classic.

Hodges, L. C., and Stanton, K. (2007). Translating comments on student evaluations into the language of learning. *Innovative Higher Education, 31,* 279-286.