

# What if Teaching Evaluations Happened Later?

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Welcome to Teaching, a newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This week Dan describes one reader's intriguing idea to improve course evaluations, Beckie shares how some of you make use of brain research in your teaching, and we look at the month ahead.

## The Benefit of Hindsight

The collection of student course evaluations typically follows a familiar timeline: On the last day of class, the instructor distributes evaluations for students to fill out, on paper or online. On its face, such timing seems to make sense — even if some students might be exhausted at the end of the semester, it's also when the course is fresh in their minds. And, ideally, they're just starting to make sense of their experience. But would it make more sense to wait?

Raghuveer Parthasarathy, a professor of physics at the University of Oregon, thinks so. "It's great to hear from students long after a course ends who report that a class had an impact on them," he wrote on his [blog](#). Sometimes, he hears from students who have gone on to graduate school. But others are people he just happens to run into on the streets of Eugene. "My favorite," he wrote, "was a cashier at a local natural foods store, who happily commented on topics from my 'Physics of Life' course, despite it being two or three years in the past, and despite getting a D in it."

Parthasarathy, whose course I happened to observe a few years ago for this story on [science literacy](#), contacted us to see if we'd heard of institutions that conducted evaluations well after the course has ended, perhaps even a year later. We hadn't — at least not in the way he envisioned. But we've heard versions of this argument: that the true measure of education is difficult to gauge right away. Its benefits — the habits of mind and ways of seeing the world, for example — tend to take a long time to bear fruit. This kind of thinking underscores the approach of the [Gallup/Purdue Index](#), which surveys alumni. Some research, like [this study](#), has used student performance in subsequent courses to evaluate teaching quality.



The passage of time might have some advantages, Parthasarathy said in an email. An evaluation conducted a year later might reveal how well a course prepared the student for later courses or for life, he wrote. With the benefit of hindsight, students could say whether the course spurred them to explore things they hadn't planned to, or whether particular aspects of the course, good or bad, stuck in their minds.

These sorts of questions are especially important in disciplines like his, where preparation for future courses is especially important, he wrote, and “there's little context for a student to evaluate this at the end of a term.”

What do you think? Would it be valuable to follow up with your students a year after they took your course? And if so, what would you ask? Alternatively, if you're like Parthasarathy and you've run into former students long after your course, what's the most consequential thing you learned from the encounter?

Please email me at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), and I might include your response in a future issue of the newsletter.

### Get the Teaching Newsletter

#### **Teaching the Brain**

Last week, we asked if you teach students about the brain, and if brain science has affected the way you teach. Here are two responses we received:

- Adrienne Maslin became interested in brain development while watching her son — now a college junior — grow up. As dean of students and chief student-affairs officer at Middlesex Community College in Connecticut, Maslin wrote, she talks with faculty members about how they might apply what brain science says about learning when students come to them for help. If instructors take this approach, she wrote, it could boost student success. Maslin teaches a college success course to incoming honors students, and incorporates material about the brain. “My favorite example is teaching students that two of the very best ways of studying for an exam are to teach the material to someone else and to do practice exams,” she wrote. Both strategies require retrieving information, she wrote, “which uses different neural networks than taking information into our brains.” That’s the same process they’ll rely on when taking an exam.
- Rob Schorman, a history professor at Miami University’s Middletown campus, in Ohio, wrote that he recently began devoting half a class period near the beginning of his introductory American-history course to the science of learning. Schorman teaches his students about retrieval practice, metacognition, and mind-set, and then highlights the concepts when they come up during the rest of the semester. “This semester,” he added, “I have developed some tools that I will try to use to see if students have retained any understanding of the concepts and whether they perceive them to have made any difference in their own approach to the course.”

#### **Calendar**

- The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education convenes March 1-3 in Baltimore.
- The Conference on College Composition and Communication meets March 14-17 in Kansas City, Mo.
- The Association of American Colleges & Universities' Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Democracy conference meets March 22-24 in San Diego.

## FAQ

Your comments, suggestions, and responses have helped us continue to improve the newsletter. And so have your questions! We've created a short Frequently Asked Questions document addressing some questions readers have asked us — and others we think they might be wondering. You can take a look [here](#). Have a burning question we didn't answer? Write to me at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). You might not be the only one who's wondering.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com), or [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Dan and Beckie

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