

Reevaluating Teaching Evaluations

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With the usual mixture of eagerness and trepidation, I waited for student evaluations. As I ended my second semester as an assistant professor last spring, I was acutely aware of the role these evaluations might play in my third-year review and, around the corner, my application for tenure.

My anxiety was tempered, however, by the fact that I had been hearing from my students throughout the semester and had a pretty good sense of how the course worked for them. And because I had my own goals for the course (integrating more student reflection and guiding a research paper with a new process), I was already able to start assessing how successful the course was and what I might try next time.

Over the course of the past academic year, I tried to approach evaluation differently. I drew from a decade of varied teaching experiences -- from teaching over 400 writing students in southwest China to a discussion group of 16 students at Stanford University -- and learned from countless others in conversation and [in print](#). I found that rethinking evaluation opens up more options than simply ignoring student feedback or fretting over negative responses.

Talk to any instructor about student evaluations, and our shared unease is almost universally immediate. Course evaluations have become distressingly high stakes in [the current "customer service" education context](#) -- despite numerous studies that document how students [privilege male instructors](#) over female and demonstrate [bias against teachers of color](#). They are made worse by the anonymous [one-size-fits-all format](#), which sets students up to provide harsh or unhelpful comments. Those challenges make it all the more pressing to think more holistically about evaluation.

How might we use evaluation to focus on our own teaching experience and intellectual growth? Here are three basic ways I've found make evaluations a tool to improve teaching, gain a sense of efficacy and meet students' needs.

Enrich the evaluation options. Enriching evaluation means diversifying its form and increasing its frequency. Why rely only on the views of others? Self-evaluation can be an empowering exercise to set your own terms of assessment and move away from simple ideas of success and [failure](#) toward growth. You may want to focus on one or two main goals for yourself as you design each course. (Next year, for example, I plan to experiment with more student-to-student writing engagement by revamping some of my in-class writing workshops and by integrating [peer-based reading responses](#).) At the end of the course, ask yourself the same questions. What do student evaluations reveal about those questions? In addition to their learning outcomes, what were yours?

As I go, I keep a running document of notes about what is going well in the course and what I might want to change. These are very informal, brief impressions to think through issues that come up, document how an experimental approach seemed to work and jot down ideas for the future.

When a class session feels like a bummer, the most likely reaction is to silently curse the students, drown our sorrows in a glass of wine and repair our armor to fight the good fight another day. But there are additional options. In a course that never quite jelled, I realized later that, at the beginning of the semester, I distributed too many resources in different formats about [historical thinking](#), [reading strategies](#) and [writing](#). As the term progressed, I noticed with frustration that students failed to take advantage of them when needed throughout the course. Before planning the next course, I reviewed my notes from last time and changed my approach. I streamlined the materials in the beginning, with more targeted reminders and interventions later. More students engaged with those resources on their own and implemented the key ideas.

We should also encourage peer evaluation and observation, which gives us all the wonderful opportunity to learn from each other. We're surrounded by brilliant colleagues who each take a different approach. We recognize the

importance of readers' feedback on writing, so why not invite a colleague into your class to learn from their observations? Or ask if you can sit in on another's to learn from their example? I am astounded at how rarely faculty members sit in on one another's classes outside of a high-stakes performance evaluation. If you find this scenario hard to imagine, consider this a call to change the culture of academic teaching to make it more collaborative. (If you are a senior faculty member, be aware of power dynamics and consider asking someone who wouldn't feel vulnerable to your assessment.)

I've also experimented with short and frequent student evaluations and discovered that they give an extraordinarily worthwhile bang for the buck. Getting feedback during the course allows you to actually make recommended changes. For example, office hours are a great time to get informal feedback. Let students know you value their thoughts and perspective by asking them how the class is going for them. It might feel awkward at first, but it lays the groundwork for engagement and encourages them to give honest feedback in other forums.

I have found incorporating a five-minute evaluation every few weeks to take the pulse of the class particularly useful. I use a five-question, half-page "check-in" evaluation:

- What is one main takeaway you remember from the course so far?
- How do you feel about your participation in discussion this week?
- What works best for you in class?
- Is there something that we could change or add that would enhance your learning?
- Any other questions or comments?

You can do this even in large classes. Instead of getting stuck on individuals, look for trends in what's working and what's not. Think about student suggestions and see if you can build off what they suggest. You don't need to take every response to heart, but it's a useful -- and quick -- temperature check.

Here's the kicker: communicate to students a summarized version of what you heard from them. The following week you can briefly synthesize the responses to the class (pointing out areas of difference between them), and quickly explain how you will address suggestions. You can also praise the students and encourage them to take responsibility for the discussion.

It's vitally important to communicate openness to feedback. If we come across as defensive, how can we expect them to take our feedback on their work? Or share issues with us before letting loose on the end-of-term evaluation? (You can also experiment with ways to identify and practice with students [what makes for meaningful feedback](#), which is a transferrable skill for the workplace and in the home, too.) Through brief check-ins and appropriate comments on papers, you can model respectful constructive criticism.

Incorporate student self-reflection in your evaluation questions. The short check-in evaluation encourages students to reflect on what they've learned, as well as on the effort they've contributed. Including questions such as "What is one main takeaway you remember from the course so far?" and "How do you feel about your participation in discussion this week?" communicates that students share responsibility for the quality of the course experience. One of my colleagues became an evangelist for this approach after she raised these self-reflective questions on her midterm evaluation and immediately noticed increased student engagement.

During the last week of class, I also devote class time for students to complete a reflection that includes questions about what they took away from the course as a whole, what they learned about themselves as thinkers and writers, and what advice they would share with future students. As I explain to my students, [this metacognitive process helps clarify and solidify their own learning](#) and provides me with an invaluable window into their experiences, including their frustrations, in a framework oriented toward growth more than judgment. Consider other important moments for reflection, such as at the end of a writing process.

Experiment. All of these strategies involve experimentation and risk taking, which can make teaching not just better but more intellectually stimulating and productive. In the field of product design, the process of creative problem solving called design thinking emphasizes [prototyping](#) to test assumptions and ideas. The expectation is that each idea will need to be refined and changed through iterations and feedback. In the classroom, collaborative and low-stakes experimentation -- from trying different seating arrangements to varying discussion formats -- followed by informal debriefings can create a community orientation toward learning and change, and communicate to students that their ideas matter.

Let's be gentle with ourselves. I've come to expect my heart to race when I open the evaluations and accept that any negativity will sting. Allow words of praise make you feel fantastic -- they should. But what really shows our stuff as teachers is what we do with that feedback, and how we turn evaluation into a powerful tool for both pedagogical and intellectual enrichment.