

Does Mid-Semester Feedback Make a Difference?

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Abstract

Informal mid-term feedback processes create opportunities for students and academics to have a dialogue about their progress and to make any necessary or reasonable mid-stream corrections. This article reports on an action research project designed to see what impact mid-semester feedback might have on the classroom experience. The underlying motive for the study was to generate institution-specific “proof” which might encourage other academic staff to conduct informal mid-semester informal feedback exercises with their students.

End-of-semester data shows that both students and lecturers found the exercise to be a positive experience. Students appreciated being able to voice their problems and opinions at a time when mid-course corrections were possible. Lecturers felt there was an improvement in the lines of communication, resulting in a friendlier teaching and learning environment.

Article Category: Classroom Action Research

Key Words: teaching evaluation, formative feedback, student-teacher communication

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Background

With student enrolment of 3500, Lincoln University is New Zealand's smallest university. Lincoln enjoys international recognition for teaching, research, and service in its multi-disciplinary and applied educational programs. As part of its quality assurance processes, the university requires that all subjects be evaluated on a biennial basis and encourages all teaching staff members to conduct lecturer evaluations at least every three years. Though these processes are intended, in part, to be used for the purpose of improving instruction; they are actually summative feedback mechanisms. That is, they occur after the instruction has been completed and give no opportunity for follow up interaction between the students and lecturer. Any changes made as a result of student feedback must wait until the following year.

Academic staff members have often expressed a desire for an opportunity to respond to students' end-of-semester comments on their teaching. The timing and processes that the University currently follows does not permit this interaction.

McKeachie (1999), a major proponent of the value of end-of-semester ratings, has responded to this issue by stating, "A major shortcoming of end-of-course student ratings is that they occur too late to benefit currently enrolled students (p. 277)." He suggests that this problem can be ameliorated by gaining feedback earlier in the semester, at a time when instructors can "build on the things that are working well in a course and rethink those that are not (p. 278)." He further notes that obtaining early feedback sends a message to students that their teachers care about the quality of their teaching and the views of their students.

Cuseo (2002) and Angelo & Cross (1993) agree that obtaining feedback while a course is still in progress maximizes the opportunity for instructional improvements. Cuseo (2002) cites researchers who found that "receiving feedback from student ratings during the first half of the semester was positively correlated with instructional improvement – as measured by the difference in student ratings received at midterms (before feedback was received), and ratings received at the end of the semester (after midterm feedback had been received)." Angelo & Cross (1993, pp. 320 – 342) offer a variety of informal and formal methods of obtaining this feedback.

Staff within the university's academic support unit, Teaching and Learning Services (TLS), have long encouraged lecturers to obtain mid-semester, formative feedback from their students. Informal, mid-term feedback processes allow students and teachers to have a dialogue about what is working and not working in the class and to make any necessary or reasonable mid-stream corrections. This exchange gives students an opportunity to be heard and for university staff to bring to their students' attention the difficulties involved in organising and delivering a university subject.

Problem Statement

Obtaining and responding to students' mid-semester, formative feedback is intuitively a good idea. However, academics were reluctant to take on an additional assessment task and TLS staff had no "proof" that this exercise would make a difference in the local teaching and learning climate.

Participants/Procedures

Our opportunity to explore the idea came when the head of an academic division's Education Development Committee came to talk with us about staff frustrations with the present evaluation systems. Their particular concern was that they can not make any changes students might suggest until the next time the subject is offered.

TLS staff proposed a collaborative research project to determine the use and value of formative, mid-term feedback within the division. Despite our plea that TLS' position was one of encouraging, not mandating, the use of mid-semester feedback; some staff within the division expressed concern that this was actually an entry effort to make mid-semester feedback mandatory. As a result, only four members of the division agreed to participate and the study was redesigned to be of an exploratory nature.

The research questions were:

- In what form, if any, do teaching staff currently obtain mid-semester formative feedback from their students?
- How, if at all, is this mid-semester feedback used to engage students in a dialogue on how the subject may or may not be modified for the duration of the semester?
- How, if at all, does instituting a mid-semester feedback exercise alter subsequent delivery of a subject within the semester?
- How, if at all, does instituting a mid-semester feedback exercise make a difference in terms of student and lecturer satisfaction with the teaching/learning process?

(The researchers were not interested in proving one method of obtaining feedback was superior to others. Nor were they concerned with the actual content of the feedback obtained from students. The focus was solely on any qualitative differences that engaging in this type of exercise might make.)

The four participating lecturers agreed to:

- obtain informal feedback from students in the week prior to the mid-term break;
- in the week after mid-term break, engage students in a dialogue about their feedback and, where reasonable and agreeable to all parties involved, modify subsequent delivery;
- participate in an end-of-semester interview with TLS staff; and
- schedule a formal subject evaluation for obtaining end-of-semester student feedback.

TLS staff agreed to:

- assure that all participating academics are fully aware of the options available for obtaining informal feedback from students;
- manage the end-of-semester staff interview and student feedback process;
- collate and review all end-of-semester data; and
- report findings directly to the division's academic staff.

Results from the Students

Mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback was gathered from one third-year, one second-year and three first-year subjects representing the disciplines of communication, psychology, and recreation management. The lecturers, as agreed, conducted the mid-semester feedback exercise. End-of-semester ratings were gathered from 118 students by TLS. The normal procedures for processing subject evaluations were used, with the exception of additional

questions pertinent to the study being added to the evaluation instrument. Those questions were:

1. What benefits were there in providing/receiving feedback at mid-semester?
2. In what ways did the lecturer respond to the feedback you (students) gave at mid-semester?
3. Were there things not addressed in the feedback from the lecturer?
4. Would you like to see other lecturers use mid-semester feedback? Why or why not?

The data gathered were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. For quantitative purposes, the questions were re-phrased into a format suitable for “yes/no/unsure” categorisation.

Student Responses to End-of-Semester Questions (N = 119)

	yes	no	No response	Unsure
Q 1: Were there benefits in providing and receiving feedback at mid-semester?	84%	5%	8%	3%
Q 2: Did the lecturer respond to the feedback you (students) gave at mid-semester?	74%	3%	20%	3%
Q3: Were there things not addressed in the feedback to the lecturer?	8%	47%	36%	8%
Q4: Would you like to see other lecturers use mid-semester feedback?	81%	8%	7%	4%

Question One -- Ninety-nine students (84%) responded that there were benefits gained from engaging in the mid-semester feedback exercise. Forty-nine students listed specific ways that the exercise benefited themselves as students. Sample comments:

- It gave us an opportunity to voice opinions earlier in the semester, so if there was something we were having trouble with it could be addressed.
- We had a chance to address any issues during the semester. We had a chance to be heard and, if needed, clear the air somewhat.
- Changes could be put into effect and benefit us, the current students.
- We could give our thoughts on how to make points clearer.
- [It gave] an opportunity to air grievances or clarify vague aspects during the class rather than later or afterwards.
- It was helpful to know that other students shared similar views or feelings.

Thirty-nine students listed specific benefits for the lecturer. Sample comments indicating benefits to the lecturer and/or the lecturer and students:

- The lecturer had an idea about the class situation – good.
- Lecturer knew what they needed to work on.
- Lecturer could change style of teaching in response to feedback.
- Lecturer knew what problems there were and could try and remedy them.
- The lecturer was offered a chance to improve their teaching methods, based on student feedback.
- Improved communication between students and lecturer.
- We could “iron out” a few things and make the class suit us and the lecturer better.
- Chance for the lecturer to address any problems the class may have had. Gives class the chance to say what they are enjoying and what the lecturer is doing well.

Five students gave examples of how the class delivery changed as a result of the exercise.

- Changes were made to teaching style, how the lectures were conducted.

- Changing teaching techniques before the exam.
- Lectures got better.
- The lectures changed slightly.
- Some things changed in lectures; according to our comments.

The nine students who saw no benefit from the exercise were distributed among four of the five papers (n=1, 4, 2, 2). The comments from the four students who elaborated on their answers were:

- Not a lot, as I was quite happy with the paper and lecturing style at this time.
- Not much, I guess, but I still think the mid-semester evaluation is a good idea. It means students and teachers can sort out problems – I don't have any problems with the class.
- It doesn't need to be reviewed in classes. A waste of time because the lecturer just listed excuses.
- Only interesting, didn't effect [sic] the students.

The two students who were labelled as 'unsure' reported "I didn't know we got any feedback" or "I was away that day."

Question 2 – The intent of the second question was to determine in what ways (if any) the lecturer altered the delivery of the course. Unfortunately, the item was worded in such a way that 52 students interpreted the question to mean "in what manner" did the lecturer respond to their feedback. (All noted that the lecturer talked about the results in class. Thirty-six said that the lecturer displayed a summary of the results.) Twenty-nine students did state that the lecturer implemented changes in response to their feedback. The types of changes mentioned included: the use of larger fonts for overhead transparencies, greater use of videos, earlier placement of lecture notes on the class web pages, better explanation of technical terms, and, in general, better lectures. Four students noted the positive way in which the lecturer received and responded to their mid-semester comments. Only two students reported there being no change in lecturer behaviour.

Question 3 – Nine students (8% of the total) reported that there were some points of feedback that the lecturer did not address. These students either indicated ambiguously that "some things not addressed" or said that there was "not much discussion on the bad points."

Question 4 – Ten students responded that they would not like to see other Lincoln lecturers using the mid-semester feedback; however, two of these indicated that their reason for this statement was that they were "usually happy" with their papers or "never had a problem" with a lecturer. The majority of students (81%) said they would like to see other lecturers use mid-semester feedback strategies. The reasons most often cited were:

- It gives students an opportunity to provide feedback.
- If things are not satisfactory, it gives the lecturers a chance to address the problems at a stage that is not too late.

It was interesting to see that one of the students who responded 'no' to this question and another who responded 'yes' gave the same reason: "It takes up lecture time."

End-of-Semester Interviews with Lecturers

Three of the four lecturers attended an interview session scheduled after classes ended. Only one of the lecturers had previously engaged students in an ongoing dialogue about how his class was running. In his second year psychology subject, he reserved an hour on Friday

afternoons for students to informally ask questions, comment on class proceedings, etc. He indicated this effort met with mixed success, primarily due to a low student attendance rate.

Two of the lecturers had made use of the university's student association's class representative system. In this scheme, the class representative asks the lecturer to give a few moments of class time for the representative to talk with the students about the running of the class. The responses are then shared with the lecturer in a private meeting. One of these lecturers had also used the class tutor as an informal source of information about student satisfaction.

Each of the participants complied with the agreement to conduct and respond to a mid-semester feedback exercise. One of the lecturers had the class representative talk with the students. The other two surveyed their classes using the feedback form that the university's teaching and learning support unit had created for this purpose. All three set aside lecture time for discussing the results with the class. In some instances these discussions included a summary display of the student comments, such as "x% of you said I go too slow" while "x% of you said I go too fast." In all instances, the lecturer made some alterations to their teaching and/or explained why they could not adopt other suggestions.

Lecturer A was able to use student feedback to alter her instruction in some very specific ways. In response to student complaints that her overheads were hard to read, she enlarged the font size on her transparencies. She also made an effort to get the lecture notes on the web before the class met and responded to differing students' requests that she either speed up or slow down by covering topics more quickly in class while providing more detailed supporting information via the web notes.

Lecturer B found the discussion extremely valuable and altered his usual practice by setting aside time in two other class sessions for talking with students about how the class was running.

Lecturer C was happy to accommodate student requests that she provide more guidance with the readings. However, the technique she tried was not successful because the students did not come to class prepared. (They were to participate in a discussion that required their having read and processed the required journal articles or textbook chapters before coming to class.) Thus, she had to revert to a lecture format to ensure that students had the knowledge needed to have a meaningful conversation.

When asked how the students reacted to their explanations of why they could not adopt some of the student suggestions, the lecturers reported that the classroom atmosphere seemed accepting, but they could not really know what their students were thinking.

The questions of key interest to the researchers were "How did this exercise affect your satisfaction with the teaching and learning process?" and "Will you do this again?"

Lecturer A said that as a result of the feedback exercise she felt closer to the students and felt there was better and more interaction within the class. Lecturer B indicated that he felt this had been a positive experience for him because he felt more relaxed with the students and, in general, felt the classroom was a friendlier place. Lecturer C agreed with the first two comments.

All said they would definitely continue using the mid-term feedback strategy, though Lecturer C held some reservations. She said that if she were to do this in the future with another second or third-year class, she would ensure that she again had a good student representative to lead the discussions. If she were to do this with a large introductory class (which she did not in this project), she could see that distribution of a survey would be a more effective method for getting feedback from students.

Lecturer C appreciated that this exercise stressed the idea of gathering ‘feedback’, which is a better term for this informal approach than ‘evaluation.’ However, she thought that the connotation could be further improved by referring to it a ‘conversation’ or ‘dialogue’. Feedback and evaluation imply that one is seeking negative comments, whereas holding a conversation does not hint towards such an agenda and, indeed, indicates that both students and lecturers are “on the same side”.

Conclusions

Participating students and lecturers generally found the mid-semester feedback exercise to be a positive experience. Students were glad to have an opportunity to voice their opinions at a time when mid-course corrections were possible. Lecturers felt there was an improvement in the lines of communication, resulting in a friendlier, more open teaching and learning environment.

The findings of this exercise will be used to encourage other academic staff to conduct mid-semester “conversation” with their students. This will be promoted via campus newsletters, teaching/learning seminar discussions, and informal conversations with groups or individual members of academic staff.

A continuing issue is the reluctance of academics to participate in a mid-semester feedback exercise. Is this because lecturers see little value in gaining student feedback? Is it because they don’t want to give up class time due pressure to cover the maximum amount of content in shortened semesters? Or is it simply suspicion of the existence of ulterior motives? Marinovich (1999) strongly supports the argument that mid-semester feedback should not be used for making evaluative personnel decisions:

Let me emphasize that the results of any alternate student feedback system should remain formative and confidential. Otherwise, alternative student feedback systems may suffer the same fate the end-of-term evaluations have. The end-of-term ratings began as formative feedback; they became summative when colleges and universities found themselves needing an objective and quantifiable source of data on teaching that would help them make sensitive and important personnel decisions.

Judging from our experience with this study, and selected readings in the literature, the keys to successfully engaging in a mid-semester feedback exercise with students are:

- Establishing the ground rule that this exercise is for formative purposes only. It should be viewed as an opportunity for conversation between students and lecturer. All results are to be confidential to the participants.
- Asking students for simple, yet specific behaviorally-oriented information. The questions on the mid-semester form used by lecturers participating in this study were:
 1. What helps your learning in this class?
 2. What obstacles are there to your learning in this class?
 3. What could be changed to help you learn better?
- Setting aside a specific time to thank students for their comments and to respond to them. Students want to know that you take their comments seriously. Indeed, don’t bother asking for their opinions if you have no intention of responding to them or feel that you cannot maintain a positive and accepting attitude when discussing the results.
- When responding to student feedback, concentrate on ideas or issues that are problematic for a large number or a subset of students having difficulty. Don’t allow yourself to be devastated by one or two students’ unfair comments. We all have students who are

generally disgruntled at one time or another. Their comments may have more to say about themselves than about you.

- Taking a tinkering approach with any changes you choose to make. Marinovich suggests, “Make small, modest changes and don’t abandon a change the first time it doesn’t seem successful. Tinker with it, making little adjustments, and see if it can be made successful after all.”
- When discussing a teaching strategy that you cannot change, give your rationale for doing so. Students will accept a reasonable explanation as long as it doesn’t just sound like “an excuse.”

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