

## Helping Students Effectively Evaluate Your Teaching

At many institutions, student evaluations of teaching are a crucial aspect of the tenure and promotion process. However, first-year students have little experience with college-level teaching and may make unfair comparisons to high school. Students in multi-section courses may be comparing you to their roommate's stories of his or her section; non-majors may have life goals at odds with what they are being "forced" to learn; and the "chemistry" of a single section may be totally different from another. Research on course evaluations indicates that students may need assistance focusing objectively on the questions and understanding their meaning. True, the student may not have LIKED you, but you DID teach them a lot about a subject. Can they communicate those separate issues effectively? In some cases, the form of the evaluation makes that possible, but in others, the two issues become jumbled together.

Recommendations for helping students understand what you are doing and how it connects to the evaluation instrument include the following:

- *Read carefully the evaluation instrument before structuring your course.* In what areas will students be evaluating you? That also means: in what areas will your university be evaluating you?
- *Use the language of the evaluation instrument in the course syllabus, the course schedule, and in your interactions with students.* For example, if "development of critical thinking" is a key area for assessment of your teaching, look at your course materials and structure. Where can you appropriately identify, in writing and speech, an activity as "developing critical thinking skills" for students? Label it as such, announce it as such, and be sure students are aware that this is what is happening. Include it in rubrics or assignment handouts.
- *In your feedback to students, use the language of the evaluation instrument* so that they can more readily identify where you did or did not meet expectations. If a student has demonstrated critical thinking skills or it's apparent that your structuring of an assignment has helped the student apply a concept well, let the student know: "Good critical thinking here as you..." and "The structure of this assignment seems to have worked well in letting you demonstrate your firm grasp of the concept."
- *Explain how the evaluation instrument will be used.* Early on, indicate that you will be asking for feedback and assessment throughout the semester, with one or more larger, summative evaluations at the end. Explain formative versus summative evaluation. If students understand that you WILL use their feedback to alter a course to make it more effective, they are more likely to offer constructive comments and to effectively use the portion of the evaluation instrument that permits narrative feedback.
- *Do a mid-semester course evaluation.* Use this in exactly the way you described, above. You can design it to provide both narrative and numerical feedback, to look like the formal evaluation—or not, depending upon what you are trying to get across. Prepare a short presentation on the aggregated results and DO make changes in the course based on the evaluation.

- *Create an evaluation form for students to evaluate themselves.* Use the same criteria: are they enthusiastic? Do they come to your office hours? Are they prepared, organized, and participatory? Do they engage in critical thinking? Share the results with them, even if they don't match up to what YOU see. Decide how you will address that mis-match and how you will use that self-evaluation.
- *If the final evaluation instrument doesn't offer you much more than numbers, create your own, informal evaluation,* asking, for example, which books or readings or parts of readings were most effective and why and what should be changed or deleted, or which activity was best and why. Such an evaluation jogs the student's memory and forces him/her to reflect on the course. Schedule this for class time before the formal evaluation, so that students come to the formal evaluation with a clear sense of what it does and does not do for you as a teacher and for them as students.
- *If it is not your first semester at an institution, explain to students how you used the previous semester's evaluation to alter your course.* Be specific. Tell them, for example, that THIS semester, you are cutting a paper and adding a shorter response, or that you have invited a guest speaker. Let them know that they are the lucky recipients of the previous class having done effective evaluations!
- *After receiving your student evaluations, write a reflection that may/may not (depending upon departmental culture) be included in your evaluation file.* Respond to praise from students as well as complaints, and outline, for yourself and a reader, what will happen in the next incarnation of this course, and in your teaching overall. Be specific: help yourself by doing this reflection.