

## **She Needs a Haircut and a New Pair of Shoes: Handling Those Pesky Course Evaluations**

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### **Abstract**

Student evaluations of faculty are used in most universities to determine teaching effectiveness and inform decisions about tenure, promotion, pay raises, and awards. For novice and experienced faculty, course evaluations can be intimidating. Learning how to approach course evaluation results systematically can help prevent faculty members from becoming overwhelmed by negative feedback and lead to better teaching. This paper offers suggestions on making sense of course evaluation data and using them to inform future practice.

**Keywords:** Course evaluations, assessment, teaching effectiveness.

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*My palms are sweaty and my heart is racing. What could be taking so long? O. J. was acquitted in less time! Why do I somehow think my fate won't be as positive? Am I just paranoid? Haven't I tried my best this semester? Next year's pay raise, as well as tenure and promotion, rest in the hands of my students as they fill out the end of the semester course evaluations. As I wait for a colleague to collect the evaluations and turn my class back over to me, I think about our first class meeting 14 weeks ago. Regardless of my attempts to control the thoughts of the course evaluations, from the very first night of the semester the thoughts inevitably permeate my mind. "These students look serious. They are not smiling, do not appear to be terribly happy to be here, and they refuse to make eye contact. Why did everyone sit at the tables in the back when there is plenty of room in the front? Course evaluations are going to be great this semester." And there it is again ... course evaluations.*

At some point in their career, most university teachers feel the same trepidation about course evaluations that Jan (second author) felt in the opening vignette. Although there is disagreement about course evaluations—how reliable and valid they are as well as how the results should be used in evaluating university professors (Abrami, 1990; Marsh & Roche, 1997; McKeachie, 1997; Whitworth, Price, & Randall, 2002; Yunker & Yunker, 2003), the fact remains that for many of us, particularly the untenured, they are a reality. Most universities use course evaluations as one part of the process in making decisions regarding tenure and promotion (Selden, 1984; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). We usu-

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ally don't get to decide the type of evaluations that are used (well designed, reliable, valid), nor do we get to decide how the course evaluations results are used in deciding our fate. As assistant professors in education, we found it disconcerting to go from teaching young children who always love you (seemingly no matter how bad you may have been that day) to teaching a class of adults who range everywhere from thinking you are wonderful to thinking you are the worst thing to happen to higher education. Course evaluations and, in particular, the comments section of the course evaluations, can be demoralizing to any teacher, but can be especially so for those just beginning a career in higher education.

Learning to take course evaluations in the proper perspective was definitely not something for which we were prepared. While discussing this with colleagues, we not only discovered this to be a common experience for many faculty members, but we also learned that people handled their course evaluations in different ways (including never opening them). Most of us want to be good teachers, and we also want good course evaluations because administrators use them to evaluate our performance. Course evaluations can and should be used to make improvements to one's teaching (Cohen, 1980). According to some accounts, however, most professors do not use them for this purpose, and many feel defensive about their ratings or believe the evaluations are invalid for various reasons (Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). The task for those who choose to use evaluations for course improvement is how to do so without becoming defensive or dispirited about their contents. Rather than just filing them away, getting upset, or even worse, rationalizing why they may be bad ("students are so spoiled these days, they want you to do everything for them" is a statement we often hear as a reason for poor course evaluations) it is important to learn how to sort the wheat from the tares and decide what can or should be taken from them to improve one's teaching. So how do we sort through course evaluations in ways that help us improve our teaching without devastating our self-esteem? The following are some suggestions gleaned from our own limited experiences as well as from experienced, highly qualified university teachers, and from the literature on effective teaching.

***Throw out the off-the-wall comments that do not provide you with useful information and forget about them.*** If there is truth about anything, the fact that you can't please all of the people all of the time, is tops. Why is it that no matter how many good comments we receive, there is always at least one glaring criticism over which we obsess? Many of these have nothing to do with the content or the teaching of the class. A colleague recounted an early experience with course evaluations. As an instructor at a small university, she was a single mother taking any spare teaching job she could find in order to make ends meet while completing graduate school. At the end of one semester she was dismayed to find among the comments in the "Recommendations for Improvements" section of her course evaluations, "She needs a haircut and a new pair of shoes." She couldn't argue with the truthfulness of those comments, but still found it disheartening to have a student actually leave that as a final comment. It is difficult as a new professor not to be crushed by comments that seem to be heartless and aimed at something other than our teaching abilities. Clearly there may be a million reasons why a student would choose to write offhanded comments on the course evaluation. Even the best teachers with high

ratings get odd comments that make one wonder if that student was actually sitting in the same classroom with all the students who wrote positive comments. But if we are to make our evaluations useful to us, we must learn to quickly forget them.

***Throw out the positive comments that don't tell you anything specific.*** Okay, you don't have to really throw these out, but don't think about them too much either. These comments make us feel good about what we do, and we are always thrilled to hear them. However, although "Best class ever" is nice to read and lets you know you are on the right track, it doesn't provide information about what particular elements of the course are good. These comments might also fool you into thinking you have nothing to improve in your teaching.

***Divide the negative comments into two groups: those you can change and those that you cannot change.*** Students can be the best source of letting us know what needs to be improved, and it is important to be open to those suggestions, especially when they show up multiple times. Some complaints or suggestions are easily addressed. For example, in one of our courses when students suggested redistributing the points for different assignments because of the amount of work that they perceived were required for each assignment, it was something that made sense and could be done without a problem.

In other instances, making changes may not be an option because it would compromise important elements of the course. Some things may be set in stone because of our own philosophies or because of state, university, or accreditation requirements. In these instances, it is important to let students know why the assignment, rule, or experience is in place and how it will help them in their learning or development (McKeachie, 1997). Letting students know ahead of time that you realize that they may have objections about this part of the class and helping them to understand your rationale for including it can go a long way in eliminating potential negative comments about it in course evaluations. We both have attendance requirements in our courses, a fact that some students find disturbing. In fact, one of us received the comment, "I can't believe that professors can put attendance as a requirement. She should just be glad we are here at all!" Framing the attendance requirement as an important part of professionalism for teachers and explaining why we feel this is an important requirement has eliminated most of the comments concerning this practice. We sometimes receive comments that we should let students out of class early rather than keeping them the entire class period. Because we teach some night classes until 10:00 p.m., students are understandably anxious to go home. However, we find it helpful to point out to them at the beginning of the semester that they are paying a lot of money for the contact hours with the instructor and that, while we know the meeting times are late, we don't want to cheat them out of the education to which they are entitled. In other words, we still need to teach the same material that would be covered if the class met during the day. We then try to make sure that the last hour of class is the most interactive and interesting.

***Work on perceptions and learn to be explicit.*** As we look at our evaluations, we often think, "But I do that!" If we feel we are doing the things that students say we are not doing, then it maybe that we need to address students' perceptions. One professor was dev-

astated after receiving somewhat low marks on the questions “The instructor was accessible outside the classroom” and “The instructor seemed concerned about students’ progress”. She knew that she was always in her office during designated office hours (although very few students visit during this time) and was easily available through email at all times of the day (a fact that at least some students knew and took advantage of). She felt very concerned about all of the students’ progress, but evidently this concern was not obvious to all students (or to enough students to make a difference in the evaluation numbers). Now, in addition to discussing office hours and contact information while going over the syllabus on the first day of class, she reiterates these things clearly and often throughout the semester, along with strong statements that let students know she is concerned about their progress in the course. In addition, she emails students who perform poorly on tests and assignments to offer additional help in areas of weakness.

We find that being explicit about what we are doing and why we are doing it is necessary in order for our students to learn and for them to make the appropriate connections to their own lives and teaching situations (as future classroom teachers). “The instructor should have modeled some of the lessons” let Connie (first author) know that she needed to model more but also that she needed to really make it clear when she is modeling. She knew that she had modeled in her own teaching many of the concepts and practices discussed, but failed to help students recognize that this was happening. “Sometimes discussions were far from the topic at hand and strayed from the material” also let Connie (first author) know not only that discussions needed to be kept under control, but also that she needed to make the connections when the discussion is relevant to what students should be learning. We cannot assume that students will automatically connect the dots in the way that we would hope, so it is important to make these connections explicit.

***Prepare students for doing course evaluations throughout the semester.*** Our students need to know that we are concerned about their thoughts regarding the class and our teaching. We remind them throughout the semester that they will be filling out course evaluations and the importance of those evaluations in helping us improve our classes for those students who follow. Discussing constructive criticism and giving examples of the types of comments that provide specific information as well as examples that would not be useful can prepare students for completing constructive course evaluations. “She is wonderful and this is the best class I have ever taken,” provides less useful information than does the statement, “The professor provided multiple examples within her instruction. I found this very helpful.” Students should understand the importance of discussing specific positive aspects of the course as well as specific criticisms. Recently as one of us passed out course evaluations for a colleague, a couple of the students commented, “We don’t like filling these out unless we have had a bad experience in the class.” We suspect that, just like with service at a restaurant, students tend only to comment when they have something negative to express.

One of our colleagues purposely makes specific comments on different aspects of her classes throughout the semester as reminders of significant learning experiences. She finds these same comments often show up on her course evaluations. For example, she might say, “Wasn’t visiting that preschool a powerful way to observe young children’s

behaviors?” or “Think back about what we learned as we looked through those primary sources. How did that add to your thinking about teaching this subject?”

Allowing students to complete unofficial, mid-semester evaluations (or perhaps even every few weeks) is a great way to provide students with opportunities to express their concerns as well as practice writing useful course evaluations. Explain to students that you want to improve your teaching while they are still in your class and that the only way to do so is to get constructive feedback from them. Not only does this signal to the students that you are concerned about your teaching and about them, but it also gives you an opportunity address their concerns and make changes while they are still in your class (Keutzer, 1993; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). These evaluations can be easily completed in the last few minutes of class or out of class on Blackboard or other course management systems. Take the time to discuss the results with students to let them know what changes you plan to make as a result of the feedback and also to let them know your reasons for changes that will not be made. Allowing students to provide feedback throughout the semester can improve motivation and student learning which can be reflected in better end-of-course evaluations (Davis, 2009).

***Savor the comments that are meant to be negative, but let you know you are doing your job:*** Sometimes we get comments that make us smile. Those are the ones that may have been meant to be negative, but in the long run are exactly what we want students to be doing. One colleague remembers getting feedback from her department head who had met with a disgruntled student. The student’s big complaint—“She made us think”—made both the instructor and the department chair very happy. This was exactly the expected outcome. Another professor received the comment, “Dr. S. is a very influential teacher, but I didn’t come to college to be influenced,” on a final course evaluation. We all hope to influence our students’ thinking about the subject we are teaching.

## Conclusion

Reflection and the ability to make positive changes are essential to good teaching. Feedback from students is just one way that we can gather information about our teaching. Peer observations, working with a faculty development specialist, or even watching videotapes of our own teaching are other possible sources of information (Davis, 2009). Learning to systematically analyze the feedback we receive from students allows us to both acknowledge the things that we do well and to find positive ways to address the things in which we need improvement. Maintaining a balance between celebrating our successes and understanding our failures is vital to being neither complacent nor paralyzed in our future teaching endeavors. In order to do this, we must learn to make our course evaluations work for us, not against us.

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