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Getting feedback is a kill-ha-can-be-lea-ned. What are the conditions for effective learning and evaluation of the kill-for-feedback opinion?

Encouraging Your Students to Give Feedback

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“This class was great!” “This class was horrible.” “The instructor was so disorganized.” “The tests were sooooo unfair.”

Are there any instructors who have received these kinds of vague comments from students and have not wondered, “What does this mean?” Even more frustrating is receiving no comments at all from students, just the results from the typical scaled student evaluation survey. This volume is about what to do with such results, but perhaps the best thing to do would be to improve the quality of student comments and prevent the frustration in the first place. This article provides instructors with the kinds of suggestions that will help them help students be better evaluators of instruction.

In the mid-1980s, my university decided to revamp its student evaluation of the teaching process. At that time, the system consisted of a large number of Likert scale items pointing at different aspects of the course and instructor, and a free-response section where students could write whatever their muse inspired them to write. In good assessment methodology, we polled the various users of the form to identify their needs and their preferences. The faculty who responded gave a resounding endorsement to the written comments from the students in comparison to the scaled items. As a result, we proposed doing away with the scaled items altogether and concentrating on encouraging student written comments, but there were too many individuals at various levels of decision making who would be lost without numbers, so both parts of the survey were retained. The revealing part of this story is the solid preference for student written comments exhibited by those faculty who responded, despite the common confusion that the comments sometimes elicit. This finding has been reported in other

Indeed, there has been little opportunity for students to learn the skill of giving feedback to teachers. Learning this skill would require some sort of feedback on the feedback, and the typical student evaluation of teaching usually disappears from students' thoughts once it has been completed. Students have no opportunity to see models of good feedback or receive any feedback on whether what they wrote was helpful or useless. The rise of collaborative learning models is starting to make some inroads into teaching students how to respond to the work of others, but it would be a stretch to assume that students could translate those skills into feedback to their instructors.

Learning to give good feedback is much like learning any other skill: it requires motivation, direct teaching, and optimal conditions for practice. The motivation level that students bring to their giving of feedback is an important determinant of the amount of feedback they will give. The learners must believe that what they are doing will make a difference in a class. How can we convince students that giving feedback is worth their time and energy? One easy first strategy rests on the principle of early success: if the students are given an opportunity to provide early feedback

the instructor values student input and how he or she has used it can influence student attitudes as well. It is particularly effective to relate the feedback from previous semesters to the changes students have seen in the current semester. In the course of this inspirational narrative, the instructor can even acknowledge the problems that students have had in the past trying to give feedback to other instructors. Communicating expectations about the feedback is often enough to influence the amounts and kinds of information the students think to give.

D . . . Because the skill of giving feedback is becoming a more and more important one as we move toward teamwork in classes as well as the workplace, one possible solution to the problem of desultory student feedback is to take the time in class to teach students how to give feedback.

According to the literature on learning, one of the best ways to learn a skill (and giving feedback is a skill) is to observe a model (Bandura, 1986). It is likely that students have not seen many good models of feedback for improvement, so one solid instructional strategy would be to provide good models of giving feedback. For example, when giving feedback to students on their own work, an instructor can follow the same guidelines that he or she wants the students to follow in any other feedback situation. No definitive list of guidelines that cuts across all fields stands out, but some of the qualities of effective feedback are frequently mentioned:

- Feedback should be specific, using examples familiar to the individual to make the point. For example, feedback on a student's writing should not simply say something vague like, "Good logic," but instead should point out the characteristics of the writing that contribute to the logic, such as, "A good hierarchical structure of the main points with nice examples and supporting citations for each level; also a good use of relational phrases as transitions between points, which makes the meaning and structure much clearer." Given this level of feedback, a student who was looking to rewrite his paper would have some clear guidelines to follow in the revision process.

The same would hold true for teaching feedback. Rather than saying that the instructor was "so disorganized," students can learn to enumerate the observations that led to such a label—for example, "The instructor frequently forgets where he is in the logic of the lecture and has to retrace his steps, which wastes everyone's time," or "On two occasions, the instructor brought the wrong notes to class for the topic listed on the syllabus."

- Feedback should concentrate on observable behavior rather than inferring what the individual is thinking or feeling. For example, it would be counterproductive to say, "Jim doesn't get his work done because he is irresponsible." It is sufficient simply to observe that his work is not being done and to give a few examples to support that observation. In the same way, student feedback should not make inferences about the instructor's level of caring, because that is not directly observable. Students should

instead point out the behaviors that the instructor engages in that make them feel that he does not care. For example, it is much more helpful to say, “I visited his office during office hours at least three times, and he was not there for any of them.”

- Feedback should avoid personalization or emotionally charged wording (“This instructor is worthless” or “This instructor doesn’t like students”). Sticking to descriptions of actual incidents is much more helpful as feedback.

- Feedback should describe the effect the behavior has on the giver so that the receiver can experience it from a different perspective (“When the instructor uses jargon that we don’

would be most beneficial to schedule periodic feedback sessions early in the semester. For example, after about the first third of the course or around a

The second way that an instructor can improve the conditions under

