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## Using Informal Student Feedback to Enhance Learning

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## FORUM

**USING INFORMAL STUDENT FEEDBACK TO ENHANCE LEARNING**

Antonio Cortés

Let's face it. The current process of having students evaluate their instructors is like asking diners to rate their meals. Are diners truly the best people to rate a restaurant experience? After all, many diner reviews are biased by how popular a restaurant is, or influenced by previous commentary they have read. Some diners don't spend a fleeting moment pondering the nutritional value of a meal. Others rate a meal solely on the quantity of food received for the price paid. A few diners eschew all criteria other than taste.

In a similar fashion, educators are tempted to ask if students are truly the most qualified people to assess our delivery and leadership in the classroom. Many fear that student evaluations frequently reward easy instructors while punishing those who challenge students by enforcing high academic standards. Do attempts to make our courses nutritious endanger our academic careers by exposing ourselves to acerbic end-of-course evaluations? When we read through our student evaluations at the end of each semester, it is tempting to conclude that a better means must exist to determine our merit as teachers. Until such an assessment method is found, it is our ethical obligation to continue pursuing instructional excellence within a flawed system of evaluation.

Maybe our dilemma is not as hopeless as it appears. Is there a way to challenge students with a demanding academic environment without suffering their concomitant wrath during evaluations? Can we pursue the ideals of our profession without martyrdom? Hollywood has certainly portrayed the quest as possible time and time again. Three years ago, Kevin Kline's portrayal of a teacher in "The Emperors Club" showed us how challenging our students may actually lead to earning their respect. Hollywood portrayals notwithstanding, many educators view the enforcement of academic rigor while earning acclaim from students as the "Holy Grail" of instruction.

Perhaps students are not against strict academic expectations per se, but oppose the enforcement of standards when it is at the expense of fairness or without consideration of special circumstances. Could the key to obtaining the Holy Grail be respecting student opinions? Maybe Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin hit the nail on the head in the 1960s when they clamored for "r-e-s-p-e-c-t." A bit of

reflection on this issue leads us to a logical hypothesis. Respect does not automatically derive from imposing high standards; since anyone can be a dictator in the classroom at the expense of the students' sense of fairness. Instead, respect possesses the intrinsic peculiarity of being returned in equal measure to how much is given. In the classroom, imposing lofty ideals within a construct of flexibility and reason expresses respect towards student needs without eroding academic rigor. One prime way of showing respect towards anyone is to listen to their concerns. If we frequently solicit student input and then actively listen to what they are saying with an open mind, it is possible to discern legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

Theoretically, it stands to reason that feedback solicited throughout the length of a course can be used to fix problems prior to the end of the semester. In so doing, students completing the final evaluation of the course and professor will feel that their complaints have already been addressed. Thus, students will see no need to address such matters on their evaluations, which will result in a marked increase in positive reviews.

There are many ways to receive student feedback throughout a semester. Ideally, a professor will foster a culture of trust within a classroom in which students approach after class or during office hours to make comments such as, "That assignment was totally unrealistic," or, "You really put me down when I asked you that question today." Regardless of whether the assignment was in fact unrealistic and even if a demeaning comment was unintentional, damage has been done in both cases and needs to be addressed promptly. Of course, most students fear that stating concerns may result in some form of retribution by the instructor and thus, many students opt to

### ***Informal Student Feedback***

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vent their opinions anonymously using end-of-course evaluations. The best way to allow students to air their grievances before the conclusion of a course is to receive honest and frequent feedback while the course is still in progress.

Three methods for eliciting student feedback during a course produce positive results. The first approach involves the use of a student in the class as an advocate for concerns. The second entails creating a discussion forum in Blackboard in which students may post feedback. The last requires holding a mid-semester evaluation session during classroom hours. Although using any one process will produce results, all three tactics can be employed simultaneously for maximum synergy.

The first featured technique for obtaining class feedback involves having one or more students act as class advocates. Individuals who volunteer for such a position should be introduced to the class. Students should be encouraged to pass any concerns about the course to an advocate. The professor and the advocate can meet on a regular basis after class or during office hours to discuss how the course is progressing. It is incumbent upon the instructor to investigate the extent and severity each complaint. Having multiple advocates can greatly aid in ascertaining whether a stated concern represents a vocal minority or most of the class.

Occasionally, the instructor may choose to dedicate the last few minutes of a class period to the feedback process by leaving the classroom so that students can freely air grievances to their advocate. Doing so en masse helps overcome the understandable reluctance of students to entrust their anonymity to a peer. Even if the advocates receive no feedback whatsoever, all is not lost. If a trusting relationship between the advocate and the professor is developed, the advocates themselves can provide a great amount of insight into the ubiquitous classroom scuttlebutt.

Many of the educational psychologists who endorse the class advocate concept recommend rotating the position throughout the class so that different students perform the duty every month. Since previous advocates often continue an open dialogue with their professors after officially completing their duties, the result of rotating the advocate position is a continuously increasing amount of feedback received as the semester progresses. Furthermore, if the instructor acts on the suggestions being proffered by the students, the proportion of positive to negative feedback should increase as time passes as well. Naturally, this will reap great dividends for professors on student evaluations at the end of the semester.

The second featured feedback mechanism is easily implemented through Blackboard. Amongst the many features available in Blackboard course modules, a provision exists for creating discussion forums. One such forum can be created exclusively for the posting of student feedback. The forum can be designed to permit anonymous posting by users. Creating such a discussion board enables students to voice their thoughts conveniently and anonymously. A Blackboard "gripe" forum is very easy to use, but students often hesitate to post negative criticism. This apprehension may be the product of healthy Orwellian skepticism regarding online claims of identity masking. Many of us share such worries. Fortunately, there is another approach for garnering criticism that virtually guarantees anonymity.

The method for receiving student feedback which consistently nets the largest amount of useful suggestions is to take time from a scheduled class session to orchestrate a mass feedback moment. By asking all class members a consistent set of questions during a mass feedback session, responses can be quantified and compared across the entire class population. This feedback mechanism is best employed somewhere near the midpoint of the semester. Instructors can set aside the last fifteen minutes of a class period to solicit written, anonymous feedback from the students regarding the course. Index cards are distributed and students are asked to answer a list of questions, which are either written on the board or presented on a PowerPoint slide. The questions can be custom-tailored to the subjects being covered in the course and to each instructor's teaching style. A small number of questions can produce a large amount of feedback. The following four questions exemplify a selection that has produced insightful student comments in the past:

1. What concerns do you have about this course?
2. Is the course material presented at a proper speed?
3. How would you improve this course?
4. Any other comments?

In order to secure anonymity for the whole group, students should be instructed not to write their names on the index cards. Furthermore, as with the formal student evaluations that occur towards the end of the course, instructors should vacate the classroom to promote a spirit of freedom amongst students as they write their observations. Before leaving the room, place a shoe box or similar container by the door for students to drop off their cards as they exit. Prior to walking out of the room, the instructor should encourage students to voice their concerns amongst themselves by comparing thoughts and lobbying suggestions to garner support from their peers. It is amazing how vociferous some students can be during the process. Don't be surprised to hear the sounds of spirited discussion echoing from the classroom as you walk down the hall.

In spite of how common it is for students to openly promote their suggestions during the feedback session, many comments received are often contradictory from one index card to the next. This is representative of the multiple learning styles, past academic performances and varied life circumstances existing amongst our students. Nevertheless, determining which areas demand the most attention is as simple as noticing trends amongst the student responses. Such analysis proves particularly enlightening when one discovers similar complaints spanning different sections of the same course that is being taught.

Obtaining feedback is only of value to the instructional process if it is assessed without bias by the instructor and acted upon. These two actions require a great degree of humility on behalf of the instructor and a sincere desire to improve the course. Often, brutal and direct feedback is received. The process is reminiscent of President Nixon's reflection regarding his resignation from office in 1974, "*I gave them a sword and they stuck it in, and they twisted it with relish. And I guess if I had been in their position, I'd have done the same thing.*" Prepare yourself for an eye-opening experience. Do not shy away from harsh comments. Instead, seek them out and embrace them. Remember that the authors of such comments are the same individuals who will write your final course evaluations in a few short months. Now is the time to implement damage control measures while the official course evaluations can still be salvaged! It helps to prioritize the feedback received into a handful of needed improvement areas and then to develop a plan of attack that addresses each specific area.

If feedback seems particularly unified on a specific aspect covered by the syllabus, consider changing the syllabus to reflect student demands, subject to a few conditions. First, the proposed change must fulfill a justified need expressed by a large segment of the class and should not be expected to face opposition from other students. Second, the proposal may adjust, but not reduce, academic standards. Third, the change must not reduce any required course content. Lastly, since syllabi are increasingly seen as learning contracts between students and professors and since the semester is already underway, all students in the class must agree to the changes being proposed. When faced with overwhelming student support for a change which is against the instructor's desires, consider reaching a compromise measure that attempts to mitigate student discontent. As one might surmise, the trickiest aspect of the entire feedback process is balancing legitimate student concerns with the requisite rigor of academic standards. To use our dining simile, judgment is required to ensure that instructors consider both the nutrition and taste of the meal being offered.

All these matters are best addressed at the start of the next class session following the informal evaluations. It is important to expose all concerns noted by students to the entire class, not just the comments which have resulted in action by the instructor. Student criticism which does not produce change must be addressed in public. Explaining the rationale against taking action on certain suggestions may not please those who voiced the concern, but it demonstrates respect towards their opinions. In fact, some comments are so outlandish that their mere mention prompts chuckles from the students themselves. This must create quite an impact on the poor chap who proffered the proposal and may conceivably prompt reconsideration of airing the complaint on the formal evaluation.

Obtaining the Holy Grail of instruction is feasible if a trusting classroom environment is produced by showing respect and empowering students with a modicum of control over the learning process. Instructors must practice humility and implement improvements to the course based on classroom feedback. Students will greatly appreciate attempts to improve the quality and fairness of a course. The result will be a nutritious and tasty learning experience for students and a marked improvement in course evaluations for professors. Take a risk and give it a try! →

***Informal Student Feedback***

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