



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

Hotel D, 24 East Range * (434) 982-2815 * trc-uva@virginia.edu * <http://trc.virginia.edu>

Spring 2007

Using Mid-Semester Evaluations to Encourage Active Learning

Carey Sargent, former TRC Graduate Student
Associate, Department of Sociology

In recent years, there has been a move toward “democratic classrooms,” in which students lead discussion, provide input about course design, and independently choose project topics. These practices have become institutionalized at U.Va. in the form of TA-led discussion sessions and labs, Summer Session and January Term, upper-level seminars and even in large lecture courses. Yet while our teaching practices aim to empower students and shape them as active learners, the standard templates for final course evaluations suggest a more passive role for students. In many standardized evaluations, students are encouraged to express general sentiments and reactions without being given specific tools to evaluate the learning environments they help to create. Rather than be the focus of a conversation or collective effort to modify the course, final evaluations serve as a closed statement to which instructors may not directly respond.

By using mid-semester evaluations, instructors can provide students with the tools to reflect on their own contributions, their peers’ contributions, and the pedagogical values of the instructor. This early conversation not only makes students aware of their responsibilities in the course, but also allows instructors to address issues of concern before the students have left the classroom for good. In this article, I offer one approach to constructing mid-term evaluations that may be used to generate conversation about everyone’s role in meeting the aims and objectives of the course.

The first question you might have is why any

instructor would want to discuss the results of evaluations with students—some of the information is misdirected and hurtful, or accurate but embarrassing, or just plain irrelevant. However, I have found that using mid-semester evaluations and reporting the results back to students has several benefits beyond empowering students to be responsible for their learning. First and perhaps most obviously, it gives me a chance to hear how things are going and provide insight into issues that already concern me, such as a lack of class dialogue or poor performance on assignments. Next, it allows me an appropriate space to rearticulate my pedagogical style and course objectives to students who now have a deeper sense of what the course is about than they did on the first day (if they were even there). Finally, by modeling reflection on teaching with students, I can provide them with the tools they need to write constructive final evaluations.

Once ready to go ahead with mid-term evaluations, it’s important to consider what kinds of information will be most helpful to your objectives. I structure student responses in ways that bring out constructive criticism and minimize such irrelevant comments as their time preferences, my wardrobe, or assessments of the course’s “fun factor.” By structuring questions around students’ learning processes, I give them a framework to draw upon when they are asked more open-ended questions about the course in the future. To this end, I write four questions on the board and have students respond on their own paper:¹

1. What knowledge and experience have you contributed to this course?
2. How have your peers aided your learning?
3. How has the instructor and/or course materials aided your learning?
4. Has anything been hindering your

learning?

When I compile the responses to these questions, I like to organize the comments into three categories:

1. Things that are going well
2. Things that we can work on
3. Things we can't change

I report this information back to students in the next class at either the beginning or the end, depending upon our activities that day. I convey the results verbally and as briefly as possible (no more than five minutes) because anything more formal or lengthy is tiresome for us all.

Under "things that are going well," I give credit to myself and to the students in turn. Students seem to be the least interested in this category, so I try to focus it on issues that may be less obvious or things that I am particularly pleased about.

For the category of "things to work on," I specify a few things for students to work on, in response to their honest admissions about not completing assignments or being too tired to participate, and so on. I then list a few things that I will work on, often related to course materials, feedback on student work or organization. In this category, I try to focus on one or two of the most pressing and most doable things so that it is possible to follow through. I sometimes tell them that I will consider other issues in future courses. This response shows students that they and you are often already well aware of problem areas. It also creates a "contract" of sorts, making everyone in the class work towards resolving these issues.

Finally, the "things we can't change" category allows me to talk about what I won't sacrifice for pedagogical reasons or for department or curricular requirements (I once had to remind students that I assign sociology readings exclusively because it was a sociology class!). This category is also a repository for silly or unhelpful comments, such as, for instance, to wear a watch, to hold class later in the day, or to "force students to talk." While you would lose their attention by listing everything here, the strategic and humorous use of a couple of these comments can be an eye-opening experience for students.

Overall, I have found this dialogue not only helps me to address problems and miscommunication early on, but it also helps many students to gain insight into how to convey constructive criticism. It helps students become more reflexive about their role in making the course a success. And finally, it can make final evaluations more useful to our efforts at improving teaching at the University.

¹ You may prefer to create a shorter, more general set of questions, such as those used in the Teaching Resource Center's Teaching Analysis Poll: "In this course, what aids your learning?" and "In this course, what hinders your learning?" Often students will remark on themselves and their peers, as well.