

MODELING LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE: USING STUDENT FEEDBACK TEAMS TO CONTINUOUSLY IMPROVE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Effective feedback is timely, constructive, concrete, descriptive, meaningful, and credible. Yet, universities rely on end-of-course quantitative student evaluations of teaching (SETs) in broad categories to measure teaching effectiveness, in part for evaluation purposes but also as a means of providing feedback for improving instruction. The validity and impact of SETs have been well disputed. However, a few alternatives are available, such as mid-semester questionnaires and “minute papers,” which offer instructors an opportunity to make “course corrections” midway through a course. Although these formative evaluations are an improvement over SETs in terms of their timeliness and instructors’ ability to act on them, they have their own set of limitations. This paper describes a simple process that allows instructors to continuously improve their courses on a just-in-time basis: holding brief, informal student feedback team meetings after every class. Through this mutual sharing of perspectives, dialogue, and reciprocal flow of influence, instructors model openness to feedback and learning from experience to their students. As a result, this approach is particularly valuable for courses employing experiential learning methods.

“We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.”
Bill Gates

“Make sure feedback is normal. Not a performance appraisal.”
Ed Batista

“To put it another way: the opinion of those who eat the dinner
should be considered if we want to know how it tastes.”
Peter Seldin

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I describe an impactful *experiential exercise* – student feedback teams - and how it can be applied more broadly as a means of improving teaching effectiveness. But, first, I discuss the concept of feedback, what it is, its purpose, and what constitutes effective and ineffective feedback. I then discuss the traditional means by which universities evaluate teaching and offer feedback on teaching: end-of-course student evaluations of teaching (SETs). After considering various alternatives to SETs, I examine the practice of obtaining formative or mid-semester feedback from students. Finally, I propose feedback teams as a novel solution to an old problem: improving teaching effectiveness.

WHAT CONSTITUTES EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK?

Feedback refers to “information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81). Feedback is a vital resource central to work (Moore & Kuol, 2005), but it can have a significant positive or negative influence on performance (Evans, McGuire, & Thanyi, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). If delivered as criticism, is focused on errors (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991), or consists of generalized and vague comments (Besieux, 2017) instead of being offered as a developmental opportunity (Besieux, 2017) in an interpersonally just manner (Leung, Su, & Morris 2001; Steelman, & Rutkowski, 2004) centered on improvement and positive change (Shute, 2008), it can harm recipients’ performance (de Villiers, 2013), motivation (Bitchener, 2008), engagement (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Besieux, 2017), sense of control (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, (2003) and perceptions of justice (Baron, 1993; Leung, Su, & Morris 2001) and result in heightened defensiveness, dissatisfaction and denial (Steeleman, & Rutkowski, 2004).

According to several researchers (de Villiers, 2013; Evans et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Gregory, Levy & Jeffers; 2008; Grubb, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004; Grimard & Pellerin, 2017), a number of factors contribute to effective feedback (see Table 1). First, it is ongoing, continuous and timely. Because it is offered soon after the observed behaviors, the feedback is more accurate. Also, the recipient is better able to remember the circumstances of the behavior, see linkages between cause and effect, and take immediate action to improve the situation, if needed. Furthermore, effective feedback is offered in an empathetic manner that shows concern for the person who receives it. Effective feedback avoids the sandwich technique, which involves offering negative feedback tucked between two slices of positive feedback. This approach to offering feedback tends to

come across as insincere. Effective feedback is positive (confidence building) and contains learning-related information. It is objective, descriptive, and based on observations rather than inferences or interpretations. It targets specific, concrete tasks or behaviors over which the recipient has control and can modify. Thus, effective feedback proposes concrete and useful solutions and is manageable (doable rather than overwhelming) and meaningful in improving performance. It avoids evaluative language and vague generalizations (e.g., you're lazy, incompetent, always late, etc.) in broad performance categories. Also, effective feedback allows time for the person receiving the feedback to consider the comments, respond to them, ask for clarification (when needed), and take concrete steps to improve. Finally, effective feedback is credible and trustworthy; i.e., the feedback provider should have expertise in the particular skill area being observed and assessed. For example, a network administrator's technical competencies should be evaluated only by individuals who are familiar with this set of skills.

TABLE 1
Effective feedback is...

Ongoing
Timely
Empathetic
Positive
Specific/concrete
Actionable/under person's control
Objective
Manageable
Meaningful
Credible

STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING: NECESSARY BUT CONTENTIOUS

University instructors obtain feedback about their teaching primarily through end-of-semester, questionnaire-based SETs. SETs are widely used in universities around the world (Zabaleta, 2007) as a means of contributing to tenure/promotion decisions but also as a way of improving teaching and (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013). Indeed, Seldon (1989, p. 89) noted that students are an important source of feedback regarding teaching, since they are, "the only direct, daily observers of a professor's classroom teaching performance." Furthermore, Moore and Kuol (2005, p. 60) propose that, "students can provide useful information about the effectiveness of teaching methods, equity in the evaluation/teaching process, faculty focus on the student, and faculty enthusiasm and interest in the content of the course or subject (e.g. Stockham & Amann, 1994)." However, the value, reliability, and validity of the summative approach to teaching evaluation offered by SETs are regularly called into question (Clayson, 2009; Spooren et al., 2013). In his review of the literature, Richardson (2005, p. 402) concluded that:

One fundamental difficulty with this approach is that it privileges satisfaction as a notion that is coherent, homogeneous and unproblematic. In fact, the limited amount of research on this topic suggests that student satisfaction is a complex yet poorly articulated idea that is influenced by a wide variety of contextual factors that are not intrinsically related to the quality of teaching (Wiers-Jenssen *et al.*, 2002). On theoretical grounds, it is not at all clear that satisfaction should be a desirable outcome of higher education, let alone that it should be likened to a commodity or service. Indeed, the discomfort that is associated with genuine intellectual growth has been well documented in interview-based research by Perry (1970) and Baxter Magolda (1992).

Aside from the methodological contentiousness associated with the quality of the questionnaires and whether they truly measure effective teaching, their lack of convergent validity (their relationship with student achievement) and contradictory findings regarding their discriminant validity and divergent validity (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013), additional criticisms have been lodged against SETs. SET scores are likely to be influenced by outside factors such as grading leniency (Crumbley, Flinn, & Reichelt, 2010), students' expected final grade (Cohen, 1981), "personality contests" (Kulik, 2001, p. 10), instructor sexiness (Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2004) or "hotness" (Freng & Webber, 2009), and the degree of seductiveness and physical appearance of the instructor (Wachtel, 1998). Wachtel (1998) concluded that the following factors also influenced SET scores: anonymity of student raters, instructor presence in classroom, stated purpose of evaluation, course electivity, class meeting time, level of course, class size, subject area, workload, instructor gender, and even an instructor's minority status.

Research has found that professors may have difficulty accepting the feedback offered by SETs or may even ignore it (Richardson, 2005) for several reasons: (a) they may view students as non-credible judges of teaching effectiveness (Spooren et al., 2013) or instructors' subject matter knowledge (Seldin, 1989); (b) SETs do not direct attention to specific areas of improvement that are needed (Spooren et al., 2013); (c) they may concentrate on any negative feedback that is received (Moore & Kuol, 2005); and (d) the anonymous nature of SETs contributes to increased levels of negativity and harshness (Wachtel, 1998). Researchers report that SETs can result in professors feeling nervous and anxious (Yao & Grady, 2005), negative (Flodén, 2017), and, indeed, devastated and ashamed (Arthur, 2009).

As a means of boosting their SETs, professors may make unjustified changes to their teaching methods (Flodén, 2017). For example, they may employ "safer" traditional teaching methods that are preferred by students (Arthur, 2009; Chan, Luk, & Zeng

2014). Alternatively, professors may engage in: grading leniency (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000), distributing SET forms after fun classroom activities or after offering food such as pizza or chocolate to students (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000), watching students complete their SET (Wachtel, 1998), and high levels of socializing with students (free lunched, hosting parties, etc., Wachtel, 1998).

TABLE 2
SETs are...

Summative
After the fact
Potentially insensitive
Broad
Not necessarily under person's control
Subjective
Overwhelming
Not useful
Not credible

In sum, SETs do not appear to be particularly beneficial sources of feedback for improving teaching effectiveness (see Table 2). Their impact may be limited, especially if instructors do not receive assistance in their interpretation (Lang & Kersting, 2007) or formative sources of feedback. Indeed, in their review of the literature, Sporeen, Brockx, and Mortelmans (2013, p. 628) concluded the following: “Such evaluations alone do not lead to better teaching. For this reason, (a) SET should be embedded within a more holistic approach to the evaluation of teaching, in which teachers make a serious effort to reflect upon the improvement of their teaching in a course; (b) teachers should be able to rely on expert consultation concerning their SET scores; and (c) SET should not be the sole means used to map a teacher’s teaching (or progress therein).”

SUPPLEMENTS (OR ALTERNATIVES) TO SETS

Formative feedback offered during the session is likely to be more relevant to students enrolled in those courses. According to Sadler (1989, p. 120), formative feedback is, “specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning. Such feedback enables instructors to adapt courses that are in progress to the needs of their students and, potentially, improve student performance in the course. Indeed, Greenwald and Gilmore (1997a, b) and Overall and Marsh (1979) found that midterm feedback improved students’ overall achievement levels as well as instructors’ SET scores.

Several types of midterm feedback mechanisms have been discussed in the literature. Three approaches focus on the provision of brief, but ongoing feedback. Bateman and Roberts (1995) proposed that instructors obtain *fast feedback* from students by means of brief surveys (see Weimer, 1988) and, in turn, offer students feedback on their feedback either verbally or in writing. In this manner, their proposed feedback cycle is two-way and continuous. When using Angelo and Cross’ (1993) *Minute Paper*, instructors invite students to answer one or two questions about what they learned in class. In response, instructors provide clarification where needed. This approach offers feedback to instructors about student understanding of course material (Stead, 2005). In related research, Marthouret and Sigvardsson (2016) evaluated the effectiveness of quick feedback – a brief, regular discussion between managers and an employee – in increasing employee motivation and performance. They found that when managers delivered positive, personalized face-to-face feedback in a sincere manner, employees were more open to constructive criticism. Instructors could use both mechanisms – fast/quick feedback and minute papers - as a means of obtaining formative feedback about their course.

Seldin (1997) presented a number of additional means of obtaining feedback from students regarding workload, teaching methods, and other factors that influence their learning. For example, instructors may ask instructional consultants to interview their students about overall course functioning or specific issues that may be present in their class. Alternatively, student evaluation committees, formed by a small group of students, can meet to discuss ways to improve the course. Another method that both Seldin (1997) and Berk (2005) mentioned is the quality-control circle, which is composed of a group of students who systematically gather information and suggestions about a class from other students and who report back their findings to the instructor. Finally, Seldin (1997) discussed the idea of student-visitors who obtain feedback from existing students or who observe a class and report their findings to the instructor. As an example of this approach, in her research, Cook-Sather (2009) engaged students as consultants who gathered midcourse feedback in courses in which they were not enrolled. Student-consultants distributed questionnaires to students enrolled in the courses, summarized the feedback, and communicated it to instructors. Instructors, in turn, acted on that feedback.

Similarly, Berk (2005) described 12 strategies for obtaining feedback on teaching effectiveness. Among these were a peer review process, which involves peers observing an instructor’s teaching, reviewing course documents, and offering feedback on both of these. As an additional source of feedback, Berk (2005) identified self-evaluation of teaching effectiveness, through an activity sheet (innovations in teaching, publications or conference presentations related to teaching, teaching awards, etc.), arguing that more effective instructors were more likely to produce accurate self-evaluations. Alternatively, instructors may video tape themselves while teaching and, perhaps with the help of an instructional consultant, evaluate their teaching effectiveness. Finally, Berk (2005) proposed student interviews or even exit or alumni interviews in which graduates are asked questions related to teaching effectiveness.

FEEDBACK TEAMS: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE FOR IMPROVING TEACHING

OBJECTIVES AND INTRODUCTION

In this section, I describe an approach that I have used to obtain formative feedback from students as a means of adapting courses to their needs. Whether students are undertaking experiences in the classroom or in their personal or professional lives, I encourage them to explore and learn from their experiences through a continuous cycle of reflection, abstract conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 2015). As part of the learning process in my leadership courses in particular, I invite students to assemble a feedback team with whom to share their thoughts, exchange feedback on their assignments, and offer mutual support throughout their learning journey. I tell them that effective leaders do not function in a silo, isolated from others. Rather, leaders must be able to solicit feedback and receive it openly as well as offer helpful feedback to others. Leaders surround themselves with people whom they trust who are willing to give them honest feedback that helps them grow. Moreover, leaders know that the only way to improve is to see that it is necessary to improve; they are not “unskilled and unaware of it” (Kruger & Dunning, 1999, title). Authentic leaders also realize that, sometimes, the most challenging feedback is often what forges leaders (George, Sims, McLean & Mayer, 2007).

In appreciating how much courage it took for students to create and work with their feedback teams and how invaluable these feedback teams were to my students’ progress on their learning journeys, I realized that I needed to visibly model this same openness by forming my own feedback team. So, immediately after every class, I meet with a representative of each student team in a group setting. These informal meetings are best characterized as mutual exchanges of perceptions regarding the class and how to maximize learning in future classes with this group of students. I solicit and offer feedback and clarify and encourage when needed, but I mainly listen and receive student feedback. Then, I act on the feedback in some manner. Aside from contributing to the development of a course that is tailored to their needs, this *just-in-time* process teaches students several lessons: (a) the importance of giving and receiving effective feedback; (b) that continuous improvement is incremental and, indeed, *continuous*; and (c) that they can make a difference (i.e., their voice has an impact).

PARTICIPANTS AND TIME REQUIREMENTS

I implemented feedback teams in three undergraduate leadership courses. Class size ranged from 30 to 60 students, and feedback teams consisted of 5 to 8 students. The length of the feedback team meeting varied from 10 to 30 minutes, depending on the extent of the feedback being shared.

REQUIRED MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

No materials are required to implement end-of-class feedback teams. However, the instructor should have a series of questions developed prior to the beginning of classes. Here are some sample questions:

1. How was this class for you? Your team?
2. What seemed to work well? What was helpful?
3. What adjustments should be made?
4. Did you have enough time in your teams to discuss your assignment?
5. How is your team functioning?
6. How well prepared for class were students in your team?
7. What can we do – the students and the instructor – to make this an even better learning experience?

Instructors can prepare and provide their feedback to students about their observations regarding these questions. Also, as a class unfolds, instructors should take note of additional questions or comments that may be pertinent. For example, if team discussions appear to take less/more time than expected, instructors could ask for feedback in this regard.

Finally, instructors may find it helpful to consider their intentions and overall goal in seeking feedback from students. Their openness to receiving this feedback and, in turn, offering feedback will contribute to the success of the feedback meeting. As Askew and Lodge (2000) suggest, the process of offering feedback is not a gift or like ping-pong “batted back and forth.” Rather, it is a dialogue and a reciprocal flow of influence in an unending loop that links feedback and learning. Courage is required to be open to feedback. “As soon as we open ourselves up to feedback we open ourselves to the possibility of criticism – something which many of us find very difficult to handle” (Askew & Lodge, 2000, pp. 8-9). Also, instructors must be prepared to act on feedback that is received or explain why they cannot act on this feedback.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARRYING OUT THE EXERCISE

At the beginning of the semester, instructors should place students in teams as a means of facilitating group work in and outside the classroom. Instructors should inform students that immediately following the end of each class, a brief and informal feedback meeting will be held so that they can share and obtain feedback about “how the class is going.” The feedback team meeting is a chance for instructors and students to share their mutual perceptions of what’s working and what needs to be adjusted so that their learning is maximized. The feedback team is not a ‘gripe session,’ nor is it an occasion to pressure instructors to reduce course workloads. Rather, instructors should emphasize that the focus of the feedback team is on considering positive actions that the

instructor and students can take to enhance learning. I recommend the following process for introducing the concept of a class feedback team to a group of students:

1. During their meetings, teams should identify an individual who will serve as their representative to the class feedback team meeting.
2. At the end of class, each team sends a representative to the feedback team meeting.
3. During the meeting, the instructor asks each representative to offer feedback on behalf of the team (see possible questions above). Then, the instructor shares perceptions and observations about the functioning of the class. During the meeting, the instructor takes notes of key topics and any agreements that are made.
4. At the end of the meeting, the instructor thanks students for their participation. The instructor may also ask students if the meeting was helpful for them.
5. After the meeting, team representatives communicate the central points of discussion and agreements that were made during the meeting with their team email.
6. At the end of the following class, each team sends a different representative to the class feedback meeting. This rotation of feedback team membership encourages all students to participate.

Prior to the first class feedback team meeting, instructors should provide students with tips for providing effective feedback such as the following:

1. Offer feedback with the aim of being helpful.
2. Keep things polite, positive and constructive.
3. Show appreciation for what is working well.
4. Deal with things as they come up, instead of ignoring them.
5. Focus on behavior, rather than trying to change the person.
6. Avoid vague generalizations, labelling people, or being argumentative.
7. Be helpful. Avoid accusations, criticisms, and rudeness.
8. Be patient. Give people the benefit of the doubt.
9. Provide specific, concrete examples of strengths and opportunities for improvements.
10. Focus on what is within a person's control and doable in this semester.
11. Focus on what will make the biggest difference to your learning.
12. Offers solutions, options, and suggestions.
13. Consider what you can do to make things better.
14. Listen. Ask for clarification. Confirm your understanding.
15. Be open to how others respond to your feedback and to the feedback that they offer you.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

Unlike most experiential exercises that are discussed at ABSEL conferences, the primary target of this exercise is the instructor rather than the students. After each class feedback team meeting, instructors should reflect on what happened during the meeting, draw conclusions about what is helping and what is hindering learning in the class, and then develop an action plan that identifies what they need to continue doing, stop doing, or start doing as a means improving the effectiveness of their teaching. In this manner, instructors *debrief* the exercise with themselves. However, at the end of the semester, instructors may find it useful to initiate a class discussion on the lessons that students learned as a result of participating in the class feedback team.

CONCLUSION

I implemented feedback teams in four courses in the past semester (organizational behavior, leadership). In general, I found that student feedback teams were helpful primarily in directing my attention and that of students to *just-in-time* adjustments that we could jointly make to enhance student learning. Student feedback was centered primarily on operational matters that require "tweaking" in the class (for example: length of time provided for small group discussions, composition and functioning of groups, exam procedures, homework assignments, etc.). However, student feedback was also offered regarding aspects of classes that were making a positive contribution to their learning and that did not need to be changed (for example: active involvement, beneficial exercises, insightful debriefing).

Given my experience in using feedback teams, I would suggest that instructors be aware of the potential advantages of their use as well as their associated risks. First, it is important that instructors implement this process with a mindset that it will benefit both them and students, that it constitutes an open dialogue, that students may need assurances that providing feedback is "okay," and that students need to be guided in the manner in which they offer feedback. Second, the process demonstrates the instructor's openness and interest in adapting the course to maximize student learning. Moreover, the instructor is viewed as more accessible and interested in student learning. However, it is important that instructors not appear to be wishy-washy and adapt the course in a "trial and error" manner. Students are not trained in pedagogical decision making. Instructors must retain their credibility and be frank about what can and cannot be changed. They must make it clear that the feedback team is a "consultation" group, rather than a group imbued with decision making authority. Third, feedback teams are a chance to correct erroneous perceptions and expectations about the course. As such, they increase the likelihood that there are no "negative surprises" for instructors' SETs since feedback teams give students every opportunity to voice any concerns and participate in their resolution. Fourth, feedback teams allow instructors to

address uncivil student behaviors (such as cell phone use during classes) before they become significant and widespread issues. Fifth, they offer student a chance to practice their skills in giving and receiving feedback. Finally, students participating in a feedback team may serve as positive role models for other students. For example, in one feedback team meeting, when a student reported that she didn't know how to prepare for the next class, other students responded by pointing out where to find this information in the course syllabus. Aside from their many advantages however, feedback teams present risks First, students may see the feedback team as an opportunity to apply concertive pressure to negotiate reduced workloads, easier grading, and other demands. Indeed, the meetings may turn into "gripe sessions" focused on voicing complaints about the course and other students. Second, given that points aren't associated with participating in feedback teams, some students may not feel motivated to participate or contribute. However, instructors may choose to offer points for feedback team participation if they believe that this incentive is needed. Third, students may focus on things that are outside of an instructor's control and that cannot be changed during the semester (for example, issues with course scheduling, location, etc.). Fourth, the instructor may adapt aspects of a course, such as the composition of teams, as suggested in a team feedback meeting only to realize that other students may have preferred existing arrangements. If instructors are able to identify potential risks in advance and manage them, then feedback groups may serve as an effective feedback mechanism and learning opportunity for everyone involved.

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