Encouraging Students to Give Constructive Feedback

Feedback is a vital part of any learning process, as much for instructors as it is for students. Thus, students' feedback is a necessary part of the process for teachers to improve their teaching. However, for teachers to take feedback seriously and work on improving their teaching, the criticisms must be constructive. Constructive feedback from students is a valuable resource for improving teaching. The feedback should be **specific, focused and respectful** and address aspects of the course and teaching that are positive as well as those which need improvement. Below are some points to consider to encourage students to give constructive feedback during the semester and in formal student feedback surveys.

Inform students why they are providing feedback:

- They provide instructors with constructive feedback to improve the learning experience for current and future students.

- They help instructors improve their teaching through constructive criticism and feedback. It is the effectiveness of the teaching and not the likeability of the faculty member which is being evaluated.

- They provide important feedback to Teaching Assistants which is indispensable in helping them improve their teaching effectiveness as they begin their teaching careers.

- They support an ongoing dialogue about teaching between instructors and administrators, including positive reinforcement and identification of areas in need of improvement.

- The information from end-of-course evaluations is considered when evaluating professors' teaching for purposes of merit, reappointment, tenure and promotion.

- Following each semester, the results are reviewed by instructors, teaching assistants, and departmental administrators. The more students who fill out course evaluations, the more seriously the feedback is taken by both instructors and administrators.

Talk to students about how valuable their feedback is, and how their constructive feedback will be used to improve instruction. Let your students know that you value their feedback, that their experiences help you make decisions about the course. Provide students with examples of changes that you have made in the past as a result of course evaluations.

Discussing what sorts of responses are helpful for you, and why, can help students understand your teaching methods and the course learning goals. Students tend to respond better and rise to the occasion when they understand how teaching methods connect with learning goals.

Teach students how to give constructive feedback:

- Point out specific problems and suggest ways to improve the delivery of material.

- Provide examples of useful, specific comments from your past evaluations.

- Provide ample class time and detailed instructions.

- Offer a professional development seminar on giving constructive feedback.

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Some talking points:

- **Be respectful**. Derogatory comments or criticisms based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. are not appropriate feedback.

- **Be specific**. Give a detailed description of why a certain aspect of a course, or an instructor's delivery of material, did not work, and try to suggest what could be done differently. Similarly, be specific about why successful aspects of the course are working. Be specific and provide examples when commenting on the course or the instructor. Speak based on your own experiences, not on behalf of your classmates.

- **Focus your feedback on observable behavior and course elements that impact your learning** (for example, assignment instructions or how an instructor uses clicker questions). This will help the instructor improve the learning experience.

- **Avoid personal or emotional comments, instead, describe actual incidents.**

- **Describe how the instructor's behavior or elements of the course affect you**. Describing how a situation makes you feel offers the reader a different perspective and allows the instructor to gain a better understanding of the situation.

- **Offer alternative solutions or suggestions to address your feedback about the course**, which helps the instructor when planning the course for the following year.

- **Balance the feedback**. To help instructors improve the course and their teaching, **provide both positive and negative comments** in a constructive manner. Comments should offer specific reasons for judgment. These are very helpful as they inform the instructor of what you suggest be kept or changed. While comments regarding what needs to change may come more readily, it is just as helpful to remind the instructor about what went well.

- **Consider area of responsibility**. While the instructor clearly has influence and control over many of the factors that influence the quality of a course and the teaching, in many instances that influence is shared with the students and/or the administrators. By thinking about who is in a position to change barriers to learning or maintain successful practices, it can help you frame your comments usefully. When possible, make suggestions from the student perspective as to actions that the instructor or administrators could take to help improve the situation.

Gathering feedback before the course ends allows students to share their perspectives and enables instructors to make timely adjustments, fostering a more interactive and reciprocal feedback process instead of relying solely on end-of-semester surveys.

References
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