# What Happens in a Course is a Shared Responsibility

ONE THING ABOUT student evaluations that troubles me is how they give students the impression that it's the teacher who makes or breaks the course. A few instruments query students about their own efforts, but I'm not sure those kinds of questions make it clear that what happens in any course is the combined result of teacher and student actions. Early in my teaching career, I heard a wise colleague tell students, "It's not my class. It's not your class. It's our class, and together we will make it a good or not-so-good learning experience."

Yes, faculty have more responsibility for what happens in the course than students do. Teachers can take all sorts of actions that positively impact course experiences—starting by demonstrating that we care about students. We can carefully prepare and organize course materials, design effective activities, treat all students fairly, offer clear explanations, and establish policies that promote learning. Although this list could go on and on, teachers can't do everything it takes to create a constructive learning environment. If students decide not to speak in class, a participation policy that encourages interaction makes no difference. If students opt not to engage in the course activities the teacher has planned, those activities will not support learning. The teacher can lead, but if no one follows, the course doesn't go anywhere.

Students can contribute to the success of a course in three different areas, starting with **their individual efforts to learn**. They can attend class or participate regularly online, do the reading or homework problems, pay attention, take notes, ask questions, study for exams, complete assignments, and take advantage of office hours and other resources when they need help.

Next, **students can support the efforts that the teacher makes to help them learn.** They can respond nonverbally by nodding, showing interest, and occasionally smiling. They can volunteer to answer questions as well as ask them. They can offer examples and share relevant experiences. They can participate in group activities and take leadership roles in getting the group started. They can provide the teacher with constructive feedback, suggesting ways the course could be improved and noting the teacher's actions that help them learn.

Third, **individual students can contribute to the learning experiences of others in the course**. They can do that by avoiding disruptive behaviors like coming and going during class or surfing the web instead of taking notes and participating in discussions. They can help others by trying to clarify what's confusing, respectfully responding to each other, learning the names of others in class, and chatting socially before class begins or via the online discussion board. What one or two students do makes a huge difference. If even a few students start contributing positively, everyone in the class feels the influence. Positive behaviors infuse the room with energy, keep the class flowing, and motivate other students to contribute. Unfortunately, the opposite is equally true.

I don't think the ways in which we solicit instructional feedback from students makes them aware of their roles in the course and how they can contribute to a successful learning experience. "It was a boring course," they write on the evaluation. Well, did you do anything to help make it interesting? "We had to work in groups, and it was a big waste of time." Well, what did you do when the group was wasting time? "The homework problems weren't at all like the ones we did in class." Well, did you ask the instructor to explain how a homework problem was related to the ones solved in class?

So, how do we help students understand that what happens in a course is a shared responsibility? How do we encourage them to make contributions that are constructive? How about a midcourse evaluation titled something like, "How are we doing?" The students provide the teacher with some feedback—not so much on presentation skills but more on the climate for learning that exists within the course. In turn, the teacher provides the class (as a whole) with some feedback on their contributions to the well-being of the course. A follow-up discussion reveals the results, but it's not about who's at fault. Rather, it's about how both the students and teacher could be doing better. It's a forward-looking, action-oriented exchange.

How do you make it clear to students that what happens in a course is a shared responsibility?

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Fall & Summer Registration Begins
New Students - April 17
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Exams - April 26-May 2

# What Can We Learn from End-of-Course Evaluations?

NO MATTER HOW much we debate the issue, end-of-course evaluations count. How much they count is a matter of perspective. They matter if you care about teaching. They frustrate you when you try to figure out what they mean. They haven't changed; they are regularly administered at odds with research-recommended practices. And faculty aren't happy with the feedback they provide. A survey (Brickman et al., 2016) of biology faculty members found that 41% of them (from a wide range of institutions) were not satisfied with the current official end-of-course student evaluations at their institutions, and another 46% were only satisfied "in some ways."

But are these approaches to assessing teaching likely to go away any time soon? I'm not feeling the winds of change. For that reason, I'd like to use this post to suggest several ways faculty can work around and move beyond end-of-course ratings.

A good place to start is with how we orient toward the feedback provided by these summative assessments, and for this there's literature to help. Golding and Adam (2016) used focus groups to explore how award-winning teachers approached the feedback provided on student evaluations. Among a number of findings, these faculty talked about an improvement mindset—about always confronting themselves with how they could improve, always being on the lookout for ways to increase student learning, and always accepting that no matter how high (or low) the scores, improvement is an option. Hodges and Stanton (2007) looked at a collection of common student complaints (e.g. "Problems on the exam weren't like the ones done in class") for what they indicated about the intellectual challenges faced by novice learners. Gallagher (2000) received a set of low ratings. After some rationalizing and blaming, he decided to see if he could learn something from the feedback. By reading the comments through this new lens, he saw that they could be used to improve his teaching.

The global judgments frequently offered by end-of-course ratings (how does this instructor compare with all others on the planet) should be viewed as a place to start. Rather than offering answers, they can be used to raise questions. "What am I doing that's causing students to view my teaching this way?" Such questions need to lead us to specific, concrete behaviors—things teachers are or aren't doing. The Teaching Practices Inventory developed by Weiman and Gilbert (2014) is a great place to start acquiring this very detailed, nuts and bolts understanding of one's instructional practice. It was developed for use in science and math courses, but slight adjustments can make it relevant in many other disciplines.

The Brickman et al. (2016) study of biology faculty also asked them what kinds of instructional feedback they thought they needed. The faculty reported that they value what peers could provide, but they usually don't. Classroom observations for promotion and tenure were seen more as rubber stamps than real opportunities for critical analysis of teaching. Classroom observations can do so much more, as two recently developed instruments (COPUS and PORTAAL, see references) demonstrate. COPUS collects data on teacher and student actions at regular time intervals, and PORTAAL provides observational feedback on the use of 21 active learning elements with proven positive effects on learning. To clarify, if a colleague observes a session across disciplines, the observer is there not to judge but to experience the session as a student. When was it easy to understand? What examples made sense? When was it confusing? What questions should have been asked?

We also can obtain more useful input from students. We need to ask for feedback in the middle of the course, when there's still time to make changes and students feel they have a stake in the action. We need to provide ground rules that give students the opportunity to practice the principles of constructive feedback. And we need to ask more specific questions formatted in different ways. Hoon et al. (2015) showed that even the simple start-stop-continue format improved the quality of student feedback, as did Veeck et al. (2016) with collaborative online evaluations. (For those not familiar with start-stop-continue, this is where you ask students to tell you what you should start doing, what you should stop doing, and what you should continue doing.) Finally, we need to close the loop by talking about what we've learned from the feedback, what we've decided to change, and what will remain the same.

Brickman et al. wrote, "Our findings reveal a large, unmet desire for greater guidance and assessment data to inform pedagogical decision making" (p. 1). This post illustrates some things faculty can do about that.

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