Different approaches to doing course evaluation

This is by no means an exhaustive list – there are many ways in which to find out what your students think and feel about what they are learning with you and how you are being received as a teacher. These are just some ideas that will hopefully give you a starting place or spark some new ideas about doing evaluation.

**Idea 1: ‘STOP, START, CONTINUE’**

This kind of evaluation should be done at points during the course. It takes about 5-10 minutes. Students are asked, after the first 2 or 3 weeks of classes, or after a series of tutorials, for example what they would like you to stop doing, what they would like you to start doing, and what they would like you to continue doing. They write the responses on a clean piece of paper anonymously and hand them to you. Ask them to write the three words and their comment next to them so it’s easy for you to make sense of their feedback. Read all or a representative sample of their comments (depending on your class size) and in the very next class after you have read them and made some notes, give the class your feedback on their comments. If, for example, they have asked you to stop doing something that has pedagogical value, perhaps you could reflect that this is not clear to them and you can explain why you cannot stop doing it and why it is actually necessary. If they have made funny comments, share some of these. If they have asked you to start doing things that you cannot, explain the requests and your reasoning. This has a double benefit: you become more human to the students and they get to know you a little better, and they feel like you care and you know them a little better because you have taken their comments seriously. You could do this once or twice during a semester – say, once a term.

**Idea 2: ‘POSITIVE - NEGATIVE - INTERESTING’**

Again, this can be done at strategic intervals to get ongoing and more immediate feedback from your students. This also takes about 10 minutes and can be done at the end of a lecture or tutorial. You can do it one of two ways. You can ask your students to write the letters P N I on a clean piece of paper and next to be write something positive or something they like about the course so far; next to N write something negative or that they don’t like; and next to I write something that they have found interesting thus far. They can write these responses anonymously and hand them to you as they leave the lecture room, or place them in a pile. Alternatively, a fun way to do this is to hand out coloured post-its and ask them each to write one post-it for each letter (P N I) and near the exit, stick up three or six flipchart sheets (one or two for each letter depending on class size) and ask them to stick their post-its on the correct flipchart sheet (label them) as they leave. This is quite a colourful and visual way of seeing where the feedback is and what students say, and it’s easy to read. Again, read all or a representative sample and tell your students what you found interesting and what they said to you that made an impression on you. You can also simplify this to have them just give feedback on the positive and negative, and leave out the interesting.

![Example of post-it feedback](image-url)
**Idea 3: NARRATIVE AND REFLECTIVE FEEDBACK**

A British colleague once told me at a conference that she gets her students to write narratives as a form of evaluative feedback. I don’t remember where she got the idea, and I am sure there are many others who do this and that there are papers about this, but the basic idea will suffice here. Those who are interested can perhaps look it all up, try it and write a revised version of this document! What she does in the final week of classes is write the beginning line of a story on the board, something like: “Once upon a time I took Sociology 121, and....” Or “ When I signed up for Sociology 121 I...” and then she asks them, in one page or less, to finish the story, giving her details of what they discovered about Sociology, about themselves and about their experience of taking her course. She asks them to focus their story on what they most want to tell her about their experiences of the course. I think this is a lovely creative way of getting feedback from your students, in a way that brings forward their own voices and personality, and I think they are probably far richer and more interesting than a tick-box form. If you wanted to read them and write a short response thanking your students and reflecting on their comments, you could post this on e-teaching before exams are finished so that some of the can read it, or use the mass email function to send them all a copy.

**Idea 3: ‘MIXING IT UP’**

My comment about tick-box forms being a less rich and interesting source of feedback than stories does not mean I don’t think they are useful. They can be a very useful source of information if you want to ask students questions about how useful certain interventions, workshops or exercises were, or not, or if you want to ask students about their own levels of preparation for classes and tests (where always, often, occasionally and never) can be given as options to be ticked off. However, I have found that purely quantitative, tick-box forms tend to give a picture that is fairly superficial, and I may end up knowing that 70% of my students only prepared for assignments or tests some of the time, but I don’t know why. How will that help me to plan for next year? How will I turn this into a small number and get the ‘always’ number up? By mixing quantitative tick-boxes with qualitative prompts on questions where a ‘why’ or ‘please state the reasons’ would be valuable and provide you with increased insight, you get the best of both worlds. You get an evaluation comprised mainly of questions where the answers can be counted fairly easily and converted into percentages to give you a visual representation of the information that can be represented as graphs and pie-charts, for example. But you also get more in-depth information in the students own voices and words on questions where you would like to know the reasons for the answer they have ticked, and in this way you get more information to help you see what can be improved and how to start thinking about doing that.

**Example:**

1. Do you feel that the workshops and the lectures worked together to support your writing of this essay?
   - Yes [ ]
   - No [ ]

2. Please give a reason for your answer, whether it was yes or no.

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*Written by Sherran Clarence (October 2012)*