

February 4, 2005

Teaching Tip

Student Feedback for Enhancing Teaching

Last semester I wrote a teaching tip about peer observation and how such an activity could enhance teaching—if the process was well thought out. Peer observation can provide the kinds of critical feedback to the teacher that is essential for one's improvement in teaching. The same may be said of student feedback. Research has shown that thoughtful and constructive comments from students about issues of student learning can impact our teaching in ways that lead to positive change for both the student and teacher. Note that I said “thoughtful” and “constructive” comments about learning. Receiving these thoughtful and constructive comments is not necessarily an easy as it may seem.

Before I lock into a particular method for gaining useful student feedback, let me comment briefly about some caveats regarding student feedback about their learning...and you're teaching. Some may argue that students may not be the best source at identifying their own learning needs for a specific discipline...nor are students the best source for identifying whether they learned the key concepts of a particular subject. Now if there is any truth to this at all, how can students give constructive feedback to teachers about their learning in say a biology or political science class? The answer to this can be found in a plethora of research that both confirms our suspicions about what student can assess effectively about their learning in discipline specific courses, and how students can indeed assess aspects of their learning in discipline specific courses. However, the debate over these issues of student learning is far too complex to discuss in this short note.

The short answer is that students can indeed provide constructive feedback about such things as student learning environments, how they learned, what they have learned, and whether the instructor enhanced the learning experience for them or not. It can be argued that the such issues as to what students should be learning, and perhaps even how they should be learning a particular subject is better left to the teacher and not the student who gives feedback. ..but this is a subject that needs more time and a bigger forum than this teaching tip.

So what are some ways for faculty to capture useful student feedback about a course, the teacher and students as learners? There are many formal and informal ways to do this in and out of the classroom. For example, faculty could regularly probe students in class about what has helped them learn a particular concept or what has not helped them learn a particular concept. I'll cover more of these methods in future tips, but for this teaching tip I'll look at the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID).

SGIDs

The SGID is often used at mid-semester in an effort to provide constructive feedback to faculty about how a course and/or the learning is, from a student perspective, working. Like many methods that seek student input about learning, the SGIDs are not always the best way to provide feedback to faculty about student learning, attitudes, etc. It has its

share of detractors. However, our Center offers the SGID to all faculty and instructors at BGSU (so do some departments) and we have had, on the whole, favorable results, including good feedback from faculty about the value of SGIDs. The key to a successful SGID is that it must be done by a well-informed and sentient colleague and/or faculty developer. And we must remember that all parties should realize the limitations of any tool. Training to learn this method for student feedback is essential.

Here are the basics: A faculty member meets with a colleague or a faculty developer to discuss the merits of an SGID and how such a method might help improve the way they teach their class to foster student learning. Upon agreement, the faculty developer or colleague schedules a time to visit the teacher's class to conduct the SGID. The teacher is not present during the SGID. Once in the classroom, the faculty developer or colleague (facilitator) asks the students to break into groups of 4 or 5 and respond to the following prompts (Prompts can be changed depending on the type of feedback the instructor wants.):

- Give one or two examples of specific things your instructor does that really help you learn in this course?
- Give one or two examples of specific things your instructor does that make it difficult for you to learn in this course?
- Suggest one or two practical changes your instructor could make that would help you improve your learning in this class?

The facilitator then goes around to each group asking them to give one of the examples that the group has agreed upon as important. After several passes around the room, most of the examples have been given and written on the board. The facilitator then polls the class for each example to find out what percentage of the class agrees as to its importance.

Crucial to a successful SGID activity is the way the facilitator presents information to the teacher. It is key to remember that constructive feedback from the facilitator means focusing on the issues brought up by the students that most of them had agreed upon in terms of importance. It is also recommended that instructors address the results of the SGIDs, or the actions on the part of the teacher as a result of this activity, with students. Students appreciate being asked about their views on how the classroom-learning environment can be enhanced. SGID's do have the potential for helping faculty get good feedback early on in the semester so that positive changes can take place in the classroom.

To find out more about this service at CTLT contact us. Also, if you have other ways of getting useful feedback from students throughout the semester that contributes to positive change in the classroom, please email me.

Have a nice weekend everyone.