

Evaluating and Improving Your Teaching

By James Powell

The university requires that some form of student evaluation be conducted in a consistent and continuous manner. Most departments in the university have instruments and procedures in place to periodically evaluate instructors and courses. For tenure-line faculty these evaluations are often reviewed by committees responsible for making promotion, tenure and merit pay decisions. For contract faculty and graduate assistants, course evaluations may be a part of more general performance review. The instruments and procedures for conducting these evaluations vary from department to department, and faculty should become familiar with both the forms and the process. Although most faculty only associate the use of course evaluations with promotion, tenure, and merit pay decisions, there is a second and equally valid reason for conducting the evaluation. When done well, these evaluations provide valuable information with which a teacher can make corrections and improvements in his or her courses. There are several different effective methods for evaluating teaching. They are:

Student Evaluations

Most departments have adopted standard forms and procedures for student evaluations. Typically, the students in the course are asked to provide feedback on both the course and the instructor. For example, one might expect to find questions about the organization of the course, the assignments and readings, and availability of the instructor. These evaluations are summative in nature and intended to improve future courses. It is recommended that new instructors become familiar with both the instruments and the procedures early in the semester. One very practical reason for doing so is to allow time for the evaluation when planning the course. Evaluations typically are done toward the end of the semester, and left unplanned, can seriously impact on the culminating lessons and activities. Also, when instructors become familiar with the process, it tends to be less frightening.

This required evaluation does not preclude anyone from conducting informal student evaluations throughout the semester. These formative evaluations can provide information that allows for modifications and improvement to the course throughout the semester. It is possible to use either open-ended or structured questions, but, as with the departmental evaluation, student responses must remain anonymous.

In creating a structured evaluation, thought needs to be given as to what types of information will assist in making the course better. Questions about the students' perceptions concerning assignments, content, quizzes, and tests can provide rich data for evaluating instructional effectiveness. It is often possible to reword or use the applicable questions on the departmental form. An open-ended method of formative evaluation might have the students, at the end of a period in the fifth or sixth week, list three things they like, three things they want covered, and three things they want changed. The students should provide practical suggestions about how those changes might occur. In either case, it is important that the students understand the purpose of this midterm evaluation, and that they receive some feedback about how the course will be, or not be, adapted based on the results of the evaluation.

Peer Evaluations

Colleagues are another valuable resource for evaluating teaching. Some departments require and have guidelines for conducting peer evaluations. Like student evaluation, instructors should ask about peer evaluations, so that, if required, they may be included during the course planning. Unlike the students, peers have a broader view of the course and can often evaluate the teaching from a more objective perspective.

To be most effective, the peer evaluation should include pre-observation planning, structured observation, and post-observation discussion. In the

pre-observation stage, the instructor and the evaluator should meet to discuss the lesson or lessons to be observed. At this time, the peer evaluator should receive a copy of the syllabus and any pertinent lesson plans. Guidelines for the evaluation can also be established at this meeting. During the structured observation, the peer evaluator should be introduced to the class, and the purpose of his or her visit made clear. Following the observation, the evaluator should prepare a summary of comments and suggestions. The teacher and the evaluator should then meet to discuss the evaluation, and the teacher should then prepare a plan to deal with the suggestions raised in the evaluation.

The value of peer evaluation is that peers, unlike students, have a broader range of teaching experience and are better versed in the content. This allows them more latitude in raising difficult questions, offering advice, and critiquing methods. Peers talking to peers about teaching can be a very powerful tool for effecting positive changes in the classroom.

Micro-Teaching

Videotaping a lesson and having a colleague concentrate on evaluating the use of one or two specific teaching skills is another effective technique for improving teaching. This process is sometimes referred to as micro-teaching because of the narrow focus given to the particular skill or skills in question.

In this format, the instructor plans the lesson to include the use of the skill under observation. A camera is set-up and operated from the back of the room in an inconspicuous manner. Like the other forms of evaluation, the students should be made aware of the process. The camera will tend to prove distracting, and for best results this process should be done several times. Eventually, both the instructor and the students tend to forget about the presence of the camera. To make the evaluation useful, the peer doing the evaluating needs to be familiar with the skill or skills being reviewed. Some of the basic skills commonly evaluated are the use of:

- Reinforcement - Verbal or non-verbal responses to students which are positive in nature and tend to increase the students' participation.
- Silence and nonverbal cues - Pauses and body language that encourage students to extend their

answers and go beyond simple "yes," "no," or short statements of fact.

- Planned repetition - Repeating, and thus emphasizing, important content several times by simply restating major points. This can be done either during the course of the lesson or as a review at the end of the lesson.
- Set induction - Introducing a new topic through the use of creative, unusual activities related to the topic being introduced. It should take no more than 5 to 7 minutes.
- Closure - Summarizing a topic in a manner that allows the new concepts and information to be related to past knowledge. It may occur at any point in the lesson.
- Use of examples - Providing physical artifacts, pictures, models, and/or verbal examples of content being presented.
- Use of questions - Using questions to assess student understanding of content or extend student involvement with the content. Effective instruction requires both questions that require only a simple "yes," "no," or repetition of fact and higher order questions that require students to analyze, synthesize, or evaluate the content. Instructors should use both probing questions when following up on a student's initial response and divergent questions that allow opportunities to bridge to related concepts. Attention should be paid to the number and pacing of questions as well as their distribution by gender and ability.

After the colleague has had a chance to evaluate the film, the instructor and his or her peer should meet to review the film together and discuss any observations or recommendations. The advantages to this method are that it does not take instructional time away from the students. It does not require both the instructor and the evaluator being free at the same time, and this can be a large plus since evaluations tend to occur usually at the busiest times of the semester. It also is easier to conduct multiple assessments of the same skills. And finally, it provides concrete evidence of skills that need improvement and provides opportunities to discuss ways in which the skills could have been incorporated into the lesson in a more effective manner.

Reflective Practice

Each classroom is a highly complex collection of individuals making it challenging for the teacher to identify and analyze classroom interactions. Reflecting on each lesson taught provides a teacher with the opportunity to review the decisions he or she made during the class. One way to structure this reflection is to examine the act of teaching from a problem solving perspective. Teachers need to ask themselves what worked, did not work, and why. Schon (1983, 1988) talks about the importance of professionals being able to reflect in this manner. This type of reflection provides valuable information to guide future instructional decisions. It helps beginning teachers make sense of the complexity of the classroom and focus their attention on those instructional behaviors that had a positive effect on student learning. Good reflection provides a sound basis for future planning decisions. One economical and very useful method tool for reflection is the teaching journal. Teaching journals, like all diaries, offer an opportunity for a teacher to engage in candid conversation with oneself. Without the worry of how others might view any mistakes or omissions, it is possible to be more honest in dealing with them. To be really effective, journal entries should begin during the planning process. Particular attention should be given to "why" certain goals and objectives were chosen. What about the course or the students was a factor in choosing activities and setting the scope and sequence for the course?

Immediately after the presentation of the lesson, the teacher should find a quiet area in which to reflect on the class. Were the goals and objectives met? What worked and what did not? What alternative strategies might be tried next time? This is also the time to write down observations about how students responded to various parts of the lesson.

The final step in the process is to discuss new insights with colleagues. Seek additional input concerning what was learned and add it to the journal. Periodically, the entries should be reviewed and summarized. Are there patterns that begin to emerge? What issues seem to be the most difficult to deal with? Are there strategies that might improve some of those situations? If the journal is merely a written record, it will not be useful. It needs to be a part of a recursive

loop in which past entries effect current practice, which create new entries which will start the process all over again.

Developing a Teaching Portfolio

This evaluation method is different from the others in that it is not concentrated on a single event, course, or semester. Instead, the emphasis is on collecting a variety of information that when viewed as a whole, can demonstrate growth. It is like the journal in that it provides a means to evaluate one's growth and development as a teacher. Unlike the journal, which is personal, the portfolio is designed as a public document. Some of the items that might be placed in a portfolio include:

- A current vita.
- A statement of teaching philosophy.
- Lesson plans.
- Videotapes of lessons presented and any written reflections that might accompany those tapes.
- All student, and/or peer evaluations of lessons presented or courses taught.
- A personal evaluation of strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.
- Student work which demonstrates effectiveness of lessons presented (Wyatt & Loper, 1999).

Because these items are intended to show development over time, it is important that they be dated when they are added to the portfolio. Over time the portfolio will contain multiple examples of lesson plans, evaluations, videotapes, and reflections. By dating each entry, it will be possible to construct a chronological path through the evidence to support the concept of continued improvement.

Conclusion

Teaching, like all activities, improves with practice. Experience is still the best way to increase a teacher's effectiveness; however, the act of repeating a lesson, or course does not guarantee improved practice. Reflection and evaluation of the process are required if improvement is to occur. The focus of this chapter is to highlight a process that allows for personal growth and development when utilized in a non-threatening, positive, and constructive manner.

References

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