MAGNA ONLINE SEMINARS

Supplemental Materials

Talking about Student Evaluation Results: What to Say and How to Say It

Presented by:
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A distinguished scholar and author, Dr. Maryellen Weimer has consulted with more than 600 colleges and universities on instructional issues and regularly keynotes national meetings and regional conferences. She has won Penn State's Milton S. Eisenhower award for distinguished teaching. Her book, *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, 2nd ed. remains one of the most influential books for educators.

Presented by:
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In his current role, Jon Hess works on UD initiatives and programs to mentor new faculty and department chairs. He is a regular facilitator at a national teaching conference and currently is also an editor of the discipline's leading journal for research on communication and learning.

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Supplementary Materials

This program focuses on the conversation teachers have with their department chair or program coordinator regarding the end of course evaluation results. That conversation is part of a larger, ongoing conversation about ratings and often neither of those conversations are as constructive and growth-promoting as they could or should be. These supplementary materials relate to both conversations. Research on student ratings abounds; it mostly ignored by everyone involved, but the resource collections contains several classic sources. More important are recent resources in the collection that can inform our conversations and make them more constructive. They correct misinterpretations of results and describe the kind of feedback that improves instruction.

The material also contains a couple of reconstituted blog posts (from the *Teaching Professor* blog) that address issues of the climate for teaching within a department. One reminds that teachers contribute to that climate by what they do and don't say and do. The other imagines a department head saying things about teaching most of us who teach would love to hear. It raises some questions that would make for good discussion with or without a department chair present. Could be this resource can be distributed anonymously?

Responding to Course Evaluation Feedback (with Reason)
A Collection of Resources Compiled by Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Most faculty don't read a lot about course evaluations. Some of that can be explained by the fact it's research which doesn't make it fun or fascinating reading. Recently, some good work has been done that responds to what has been documented about ratings empirically (they aren't measures of teacher popularly and you don't get good ones by teaching easy courses, among other things). Some of that work also reacts to how ratings are being used in practice, by individual faculty and their institutions. This is helpful work that shows us ways of responding to results with more than just a gut reaction. There are lessons to be learned from student feedback, that collected at the end of the semester and that teachers can collect during a course. This collection of resources highlights some of this work.

Boysen, G. A., (2016). Using student evaluations to improve teaching: Evidence-based recommendations. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 2* (4), 273-284.
   —offers a clear, succinct description that outlines how faculty need to analyze student evaluation results if they intend to make decisions about what to change based on the feedback. A very helpful well documented piece of scholarship.

Boysen, G. A., Kelly, T. J., Paesly, H. N., and Casner, R. W. (2014). The (mis)interpretation of teaching evaluations by college faculty and administrators. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 39* (6),641-656.
   —three studies looking at how faculty and administrators interpreted small means (differences small enough to be within the margin of error). Compelling evidence of misinterpretation.

Brickman, P., Gormally, C., and Martella, A. M., (2016). Making the grade: Using instructional feedback and evaluation to inspire evidence-based teaching. *Cell Biology Education, 15* (1), 1-14.
   —41% of 343 biology faculty reported that they were not satisfied with current end-of-course evaluation feedback; another 46% said they were only satisfied "in some ways." Survey results also explored what kind of feedback faculty want.

Gallagher, T. J. "Embracing Student Evaluations of Teaching: A Case Study." *Teaching Sociology*, April 2000, *28*, 140-146.
   —recounts how a new teacher responded to a case of not-very-good student ratings

Golding, C., and Adam, L., (2016). Evaluate to improve: Useful approaches to student evaluation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 41* (1), 1-14.
   —conducted focus groups with teachers who used student evaluations to improve to approach and found, among other things, they viewed the data as formative and focused improvement efforts on those things that increased student learning.

Gormally, C., Evans, M., and Brickman, P., (2014). Feedback about teaching in higher ed: Neglected opportunities to promote change. *Cell Biology Education, 13* (Summer), 187-199.

—summarizes a set of best practices for providing instructional feedback; a very practical and helpful analysis

Hodges, L. C., and Stanton, K. (2007). Translating comments on student evaluations into the language of learning. *Innovative Higher Education, 31,* 279-286.
—shows how students complaints about quantitative courses, writing-intensive courses and student-active formats can offer important insights into how students understand learning. Explores options for responding to the complaints.

Summaries of the Research on Student Ratings with Policy and Process Recommendations

Braskamp, L., and Ory, J. *Assessing Faculty Work: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
—Both authors did research on student evaluations; Braskamp was also a dean at the University of Illinois, Chicago. The book is well organized and readable.

Centra, J. *Reflective Faculty Evaluation: Enhancing Teaching and Determining Faculty Effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
—Written by one of the premier student ratings researchers. An excellent summary with implications fully explored.

Hobson, S. M. and Talbot, D. M., (2001). Understanding student evaluations: What all faculty should know. *College Teaching, 40* (1), 26-30.
—If a book is too much, here's a five page, well-organized, clearly written, nutshell summary of the research on ratings. It offers individual faculty recommendations for dealing with rating results.

Improving Teaching in My Department

In the same way classroom climate is created jointly by teacher and student actions, the climate for teaching in our departments results from our collective contributions. Absolutely, department chairs and other administrators play key leadership roles, but they don't create the climate for teaching on their own. We all contribute by what we say and do. When we say and do nothing, that too, becomes part of the teaching culture.

Academic lives are full, and our first teaching priority has to be what we do in our courses. Good teaching takes time. That investment benefits students and it contributes positively to the climate for teaching within a department. Do we have a responsibility to do more? That's probably a decision best made individually. Sometimes we are willing to do more but bereft of ideas and I can help on that front. Here are some actions that advance the teaching-learning agenda.

- Regularly flavor talk about teaching and learning with good ideas, information, and evidence. Just a pinch of salt can really enhance how something tastes. Maybe it's a pithy quote, or a research finding, maybe a question or a pedagogical reading recommendation—shared online, posted in some prominent place, or tacked onto the department meeting agenda.

- Suggest teaching and learning topics for department meetings. Think short topics; a ten-minute discussion of the pros and cons of extra credit, the criteria being used to grade participation, in class activities that develop critical thinking skills, good ways to handle the grade challenge conversation, there's all sorts of possibilities.

- Convene a reading group. Don't get mired in logistical details. Make it simple. Suggest meeting once a month, distribute a short, provocative reading beforehand. If you regularly read Magna publications (like the *Teaching Professor*), you've got a good source of material (pardon the biased opinion). Get a list of those interested in attending and extend an invitation. Go with who shows up. Don't measure success by how many attend, but by the quality of the interaction. Be the convener and point person for three meetings or one semester, and then if the group wants to continue, let others step up.

- Pick an issue and advocate for it. Say the only student feedback faculty get is from end-of-course-ratings which offer global assessments. Advocate for departmentally sanctioned mid-course evaluations that focus on formative feedback. Or, propose a different kind of first year experience for new faculty; one with a reduced teaching load, more careful consideration of initial teaching assignments, departmentally endorsed mentoring, and instructional observations opportunities. If the only teaching awards are university-wide ones, encourage the department to consider alternatives. Maybe it's an advising award, or a teaching with technology award, or a recognition for those who teach the large service courses or an award with a revolving focus.

- Find collaborators who are willing to do more than complain about students or the climate for teaching in the department or at the institution. Support each other's efforts in the classroom but do more—actively advocate for change. Two voices, three or more are easier to hear and harder to ignore than one.

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- Propose meaningful ways to assess the teaching potential of candidates. Teaching philosophy statements written for search committees tend to describe what the candidate thinks needs to said to get the job. Research presentations don't clearly represent teaching practices. Have the search committee and invited students ask the candidate to respond to instructional scenarios. "Students are regularly checking social media, not giving you or fellow classmates their full undivided attention. What would you do?" "You receive an email from a student saying that she is very afraid of participating in class. She asks you to please not call on her. Would you honor her request?" "The class has done poorly on an exam. They ask for an extra credit assignment. Would you provide one? Why or why not? If so, what would you have them do."

We tend to believe that not much can be accomplished without a big time commitment, without having to sign up to do something in perpetuity. The climate in a department is the confluence of many small actions, a few large ones, and a lot of inaction. Is teaching taken for granted in your department? Saying that it matters doesn't makes it so. Actions that improve the climate for teaching and learning can and should be undertaken by everyone. Could that mean you?

—a revised version of a *Teaching Professor* blog post from June 2016.

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Things I Wish my Department Head Would Say about Teaching

I'm imagining that this department head works at an institution where budgets are tight, everyone works hard at recruiting and retaining students, and teaching is an important part of the institution's mission. The department head doesn't need to say these things in any particular order.

"We need to be having **more substantive conversations about teaching and learning in our department meetings**. We talk about course content, schedules, and what we're offering next semester, but rarely about our teaching and its impact on student learning. What do you think about circulating a short article or article excerpt before some of our meetings and then spending 30 minutes talking about it? Could you recommend some readings?"

"I'm concerned about how we are **introducing new faculty to teaching** in this department. Do we have them teaching the courses they should be teaching? Should our mentoring efforts be more formal? What if we didn't put student ratings from their first year in their dossier? I'm asking for recommendations and would love to hear your thoughts on the "ideal" first year teaching experience for our new faculty."

"I've been trying to **think more creatively about teaching awards**. The big university-wide awards are few and far between and I question the processes used to select the winners. Some of the best teachers in the department consistently focus on student learning but they do so with quiet, unassuming teaching styles which are not usually recognized. Then there's good work on big committee assignments like revising our curricula, always participating in those prospective student events, and advising above and beyond the call. Shouldn't that work be recognized in a more public way? I'd like us to devise some sort of departmental award or recognition for all kinds of work that support teaching and learning, and I need your help. Is a monetary award the only option?"

"I think we're doing **too much summative and not enough formative evaluation of teaching.** The research on student evaluations is clear. For mid-career faculty teaching the same courses, ratings do not vary all that much from one semester to the next (which says something about the power of summative assessments to improve instruction). I'd like to institute a semester-off policy. A tenured faculty member (not up for promotion) will not be required to do the end-of-course ratings. In lieu of those, the faculty member will select and undertake a series of formative assessments. They will not be expected to report results, only to document that the activities can be completed. Would there be support in the department for a policy like this?"

"I'm teaching a course this semester and I'd welcome some feedback. I haven't taught this course for a while and am trying some new approaches and different assignments. I've posted my syllabus on the course website and would appreciate your comments and suggestions. I was also wondering if a couple of you who use in-class group work might be willing to come and observe when I try out some of the group activities I have planned."

"Teaching well is hard work and I don't say thank you as often as I should. Many of you have been teaching here for some time now, and you continue to work hard on behalf of students. Good teaching demands focus, emotional energy, and extraordinary time management skills. Teaching loads are not light in this department and class sizes are larger than they used to be. You have

reasons to complain and you do, but you're still there for students and for that I am deeply grateful. Please join me for lunch on Friday. We're providing a nice spread in the department office between 12 and 2. I'd like to say thank you personally and hear more about your instructional concerns, challenges, and successes."

"And oh, one final thing, if you'd be willing to devote some time and energy to one or several of these areas, let's talk. I could see you being excused from all other departmental committee responsibilities for the coming academic year in exchange for work on these projects."

What would you add to the list? There's a need to be realistic about what academic leaders at the departmental level can do, given the constraints under which most of them must currently operate. Theirs is not an easy job, either.

—revised version of a *Teaching Professor* blog post from January 2016