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Transcript

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

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Editor's note:

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Welcome to "Talking About Student Evaluation Results-- What to Say and How to Say It," co-sponsored by Magna Publications and The Teaching Professor. I'm Katie Carney from Magna Publications and we create professional development products in flexible formats for teachers and leaders. And now I'm pleased to introduce Maryellen Weimer and Jon Hess.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD, Professor Emerita of Penn State Berks and editor of *The Teaching Professor*, has been editing *The Teaching Professor Newsletter* since 1987. A distinguished scholar and author, Dr. Weimer's books include *Inspired College Teaching: A Career-Long Resource for Professional Growth*, *Enhancing Scholarly Work on Teaching and Learning Professional Literature that Makes a Difference*, and *Improving Your Classroom Teaching*. Her *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice, Second Edition* remains one of the most influential books for educators looking to adopt a learner-centered approach in their classrooms.

Weimer is a professor emerita of teaching and learning at Penn State Berks and won Penn State's Milton S. Eisenhower Award for distinguished teaching in 2005. She has consulted with more than 600 colleges and universities on instructional issues, and regularly key notes national meetings and regional conferences.

Jon Hess' scholarship centers on communication in maintaining personal relationships, and how communication and learning interface in the classroom. His research has examined how people maintain difficult relationships and how teachers' messages impact classroom outcomes. He was the editor of the discipline's leading journal for research on communication and learning, *Communication Education*.

Hess has received awards for both scholarship and teaching. He has been active professionally, helping lead professional development institutes for communication department chairs and directors of introductory communication courses. He is also a regular facilitator at a national teaching conference.

In his current role as associate dean, Jon works on University of Dayton initiatives related to faculty scholarship and grant seeking, assessment, diversity, and inclusive excellence, international programming, personnel, and programs to mentor new faculty and department chairs.

Welcome, Maryellen and Jon.

Well, thanks, Katie, and welcome to all of you who are joining us. We appreciate you being with us. I'd like to start with just a little bit of overview because this program was really my idea. I've had some sort of ongoing concerns and worries about the way we talk about student ratings. It seems like it's not always as constructive of conversation as it ought to be. And I'm not just talking about our case in point, but really I think what motivated the program was the larger kind of dialogue that we have about teaching and learning, and especially in the dialogue we have with respect to rating results or student evaluations of instruction.

What I think happens a lot of time in those conversations is that they're full of complaints. They're full of complaints about the form that's being used. They're full of complaints about the policies and practices which are taking place at the institution. Sometimes there's complaints about students and how they don't take the evaluation process very seriously.

In fact, in the resource collection, there is a survey that was done of biology faculty. It was just one discipline, but Brickman found that 41% of the biology faculty in this cohort were not satisfied at all with the student evaluation processes, and another 46% were only partially satisfied. And you know, I don't think biology is really very typical, and of course there's a lot of really good reasons why faculty are not very happy with the way student ratings and end of course evaluations occur.

There's been a plethora of research in this area, and unfortunately a lot of policies and practices in our institutions are not well-informed by that research. And that's not something that we can change in the program today, but I think what we can do is to explore some ways to try to make our conversations about student ratings, particularly the kind of discussions that we have with academic leaders to make those a little bit more constructive, perhaps a little less emotional, and really see them as conversations from which we can learn some things about teaching and learning.

The case in point that we're using-- that we're sort of using as a specific instance to consider this larger conversation about students' ratings is the annual review conversation that faculty members typically have with some sort of an academic leader. That might be the department chair, could be division head or program coordinator, an associate dean. Some sort of deanlet that will sit down with the faculty member and talk about their performance for the preceding academic year.

And I am so happy that Jon Hess has agreed to have this conversation with me on this topic. I can't think of anybody who's really more qualified to do that. A person who has a strong academic background in communication who has done a lot of scholarship on teaching and learning issues. Who has actually been a department chair and has sat across the desk with faculty having these conversations.

So, Jon, thank you so much for being with us and helping us kind of get through this topic. Do you have any sort of initial reactions to the general topic that we're talking about?

Well, yeah. So first of all, it's a real pleasure to join you and a privilege to talk about this topic. It is an important one. You know, the general reaction that went through my mind initially is to say that these are often difficult conversations because they are typically emotionally charged. It's difficult for the faculty in particular when your-- it's you that's on the line.

This isn't just talking about scholarships and ideas. It's how you have performed and potentially who you are as a human being that can become the subject of the conversation, and that makes this a conversation that isn't necessarily easy. And interestingly enough, if there are concerns that lead to the conversation, it's often not an easy conversation for the administrator who's facilitated in that conversation, and they may or may not handle it ideally as well as it should be.

So there's all kinds of ways these conversations can get off to the wrong start. So hopefully in some of the conversation we have here today, we can at least explore some of that and then propose some possible paths that might help make those conversations go well.

Yeah, that's great. I think that sounds exactly what we're after. So the way that we want to sort of proceed is Jon and I have put together three scenarios which we think are fairly typical events that happen in these conversations. And we thought that if we describe them very specifically, that would allow us to talk very specifically about the kind of messages, the kind of exchange that you can have.

So here's the first one, and let's just read it together. The general scenario here is when the ratings have declined, and here's how it goes. Rating in the courses you've taught the last couple of semesters have either stayed the same or they've gone down. Not a lot, but they clearly didn't improve.

Your department chair pointed this out and asks you to talk about what you think is going on. So, Jon, if you're sitting across a desk from a faculty member whose ratings have gone down a bit, and you're asking them what's going on, what are some things that you would rather not have that person say to you in response to that situation?

Yeah, so what comes to mind immediately for that is that we'd like to have some kind of direct conversation on what's affecting these ratings. And so, something that deflects from that is not a good way to start that. These can fall in the form of excuses, and by excuses, what we mean are some types of messages that are attempts to remove blame from what would otherwise be at fault.

So it's a problem with the instrument. The instrument isn't any good, and you alluded to at the beginning, this is prevalent. At institutions I have been, there have always been complaints about the instrument. And interestingly enough, where I am right now, we redid our student evaluation instrument several years ago and I'm partly responsible for this because I was on a committee that helped to red it.

And we spent a significant amount of time really looking at the research to see what would be valid questions and what would not be and try and make a run at the instrument. And while I think there are fewer complaints, there still are complaints even with something that we think is pretty well-grounded from research.

I always like to sort of share a story. When I was running the instructional development program at Penn State, we used to recommend that faculty do some sort of mid-course evaluations, and we had a collection of about 75 different student rating instruments. And more than once, I would have a faculty member come into the office and go through that entire collection and tell me that there wasn't an instrument there that he or she was really comfortable using.

So finding the perfect instrument is probably something that's going to happen in instructional heaven and not here at our institutions. But, yeah, I think what you're saying is you don't want to start responding to an issue with your rating by sort of talking about the problems with the

instrument or the problems with the students, or to suggest that it's not a problem. I don't know that any administrator would want someone to flat-out say, well, my ratings are going down, but I don't think that's a problem. I'm not sure anybody would say that quite directly, but it could be sort of insinuated.

Mm-hmm, right, it certainly can. So a person might disagree with the rating or what the students are saying, but to suggest that those are the problem and this isn't worth conversation, and certainly the wrong way to start that conversation.

Yeah. In the supplementary materials, one of my favorite articles is there by a faculty member whose last name is Gallagher who's written the article. He was a new faculty member, and he writes in the article-- this took a bit of courage to do too. That his first couple sets of ratings as a new teacher were really quite low.

And he goes through the way that he responded to those ratings, which is just exactly what we're talking about. He blamed the instrument, he blamed the students, blamed the courses he was teaching, he blamed the textbook. Just a whole variety of things, and he said that these were his sort of initial reaction. And then he sort of realized that that wasn't a terribly mature way to respond to ratings, and that perhaps there was some things there that he could learn.

So let's talk about-- what would you recommend in terms of the more constructive ways of responding to a set of ratings that have gone down a bit?

Right, so I've got a number of different thoughts on that. And before I get to that, let me just say that certainly this emotional reaction of being angry with the students or the instrument or something that's outside of your control is normal. And I wouldn't discourage faculty from feeling that way initially when you first read that, and then take some time to reflect on that and move past that. But if they're the initial reactions you have, I wouldn't just qualify that as a natural emotional reaction.

Yeah, I think that's good.

--on the long run, but certainly appropriate to give yourself a little space to feel that way initially.

Good, right, exactly. And then after that--

At that point then, the first question I would ask myself as a faculty member and certainly getting ready to lead in this conversation is do I know what the issue is or what the problems are that led to those student responses? And in the conversation with an administrator, if you don't know what led to these responses, then a forthright admission that you don't know would be a perfectly good way to start.

But I pair that with-- and here's how I'm going to go about finding out more. Because one of the things that you really want to do is indicate that you're not just passively seeing something happen and there's nothing you can do. You want to demonstrate that you are prepared to move forward in some instructive manner.

And I do think that-- I mean, after what you're saying about the sort of emotional response, is really appropriate. And what needs to happen after that, though, after you sort of cool down and got that under control, I think is asking yourself the question that you're suggesting, Jon. Can you figure out what's going on?

And it might be a variety of things. It might be that you're using a new textbook. It might be that the course has gotten larger. Maybe it's being offered at a different time of the day.

I think there's a whole variety of reasons why a set of ratings could go down, which are not necessarily the world is coming to an end reason, but which are things that you ought to sort of reasonably sort out, I think. See if you can figure out what-- or maybe there was something happening in your life outside of your academic life that has made it difficult for you to teach that semester or may have caused some problems.

And even many institutions have Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 50-minute classes, and Tuesday, Thursday, 75-minute classes. And I've seen cases where a faculty's pedagogical style fits better with one or the other, sometimes by the class. I typically, for myself, work better with 75-minute blocks, but a class that I taught recently, I concluded after teaching, and I was on a one night a week schedule, which was really antithetical to what I needed.

I found in that course, I would do better in a 50-minute block. So there's all kinds of potential causes, some which may show up directly in the student evaluation instrument and some may not, and so it's that analysis. So if you know what's going on, then a conversation with the administrator saying either here's what I've already done to address this, or here are some things that I'm thinking about to address it would be one potential way to start that conversation.

And what I would really encourage faculty to do is think about-- to the degree possible, how can you steer the conversation to be something forward-looking, meaning planning for improvement and development rather than backward-looking and blaming over what happened. You'll have to look backwards to some degree because the student evaluations are a feedback on a class that happened and then analyzing-- thinking what you're going to do going forward. You've got to base that on what happened in the past. But certainly, I would encourage people to try to move the conversation from simply a focus on what went wrong in the past to how can that steer future actions that will improve matters?

Yeah, I think that's really good. And I think just backing up a little bit, sort of knowing when your best teaching times and situations are I think is really important, and something that you do kind of learn as you go across the career a little bit I think. I'm just a morning person, you know? I just do better in the morning.

Now a lot of students don't do better in the morning, but I always was better in the morning. I'm also better in a room where I can move the chairs around where they're not stuck in rows. And so, you know, I think even some small things like that can really make a difference.

But if you flat out don't know what's going on, then I think some sort of formative evaluation is a really good thing. And again, in the research material, there's a wonderful article authored by

Boisen-- B-O-I-S-E-N-- that's just got some really great examples of ways that you can get some formative feedback from students.

And for me, one of the sort of sad things about the end of course rating is that in a lot of ways, they've poisoned the well. And so faculty are reluctant to ask students questions that are really not so much judgmental, but much more descriptive. There's a lot of complaints about the reading in this course.

Well, tell me how you're doing the reading. When are you doing it? How much time are you devoting to it? Do you see the relationship between what's in the textbook and what we're talking about in class? That kind of feedback is-- you know, rather than sitting in your office and trying to guess how students are handling aspects of the course, just to solicit some diagnostic descriptive details from them can be really helpful and will help you sort out when things may not be going as well as they have.

So let me suggest another constructive response that I think this is particularly important for faculty in this situation. And I come from this in part because I've had a lot of responsibilities over the years on faculty development. I started my career as a multi-section course director, where I spent a lot of time with TA development and, frankly, found that one of the most rewarding things that I've done.

But one of the things that that led me to think about is a really good conversation piece in this type of conversation is to ask the administrator what do they see as the most important areas to strengthen. Do they have suggestions? What do they see as they look at those evaluations that might help them suggest direction. So in addition to your own suggestions, inviting their perspective and their feedback.

Yeah.

Some people will have really bright insights. Some will have fewer, but I would always want to open the table to hear what they see.

That's a really great suggestion. I did some instructional mentoring of the faculty when I was at Penn State Berks, and one of the things that I did was the first semester teaching, I got the end-of-course ratings, and I gave them to the new faculty member in the context of a conversation about them. And one of the things I did, Jon, which was kind of surprising, was that I said to the faculty member, OK, here's your course evaluations. I want you to go get a cup of coffee, take 10 minutes, and I want you to write the three or four things that you would conclude based on an initial review of your results.

And what I had done was to look at the evaluations and write three or four things that I would conclude based on a look at the evaluations. And then when a faculty member came back after the coffee, we shared our lists, and I was really surprised the number of times the lists were totally different-- that we had really keyed on different things. We had seen different things. So I do think that emotional investment of our teaching does sometimes make it difficult to see what might be there in the ratings. So I think asking the administrator is a very sanguine suggestion.

The one empirical question that we need to spend just a little bit of time on is whether or not the decline in the ratings are statistically significant. And that means something very specific, and I've included a research reference here, which is also in the supplementary materials. But a really small decline in a set of ratings from one class may not be indicative of a decline in instructional quality. And what is really telling about this particular piece of research is that both faculty added and administrators-- I love this study-- they were actually given results, and then they were given a certain amount of a merit raise. This is all hypothetical, of course. A designated amount that they could give for a merit raise.

The only thing that was different in the descriptions of the faculty member was that there was a slight less than statistically significant difference in the ratings. And both faculty and administrators gave more merit raise to the person who had the higher ratings, even though we're talking about a minuscule amount. And one thing that's nice about this article, for those of you who are like me and not great on statistics, is that it really, in a very simple way, shows you how to calculate whether or not a difference is statistically significant.

So Jon, if you're the faculty member, and you looked at your ratings, and you really don't think the decline is statistically significant, but your department chair is sort of going on about it, should you try to raise this kind of empirical issue?

Yes, that's a great question. But let me, just before I say something about that, just elaborate just briefly for any listeners who are not particularly statistically inclined what the importance of this issue is. Whenever we do statistical testing, we look to see whether the differences that we find are basically attributable to chance-- just random fluctuation as opposed to differences that are big enough there's probably something going on that causes that.

We'll never have identical numbers in any given population, and so we have the concept that sometimes statistical tests are statistically significant, but not real-world significant. And that's really what you're talking about here. We'll say yes, these are different. This is not just by chance, but the difference is so small, it doesn't make any difference. And the place that people may be familiar with this is in medicine, we'll often have studies that will say something will triple your risk of a certain type of cancer. And it turns out that the risk initially it might be 0.1%, and so to go from 0.1% to 0.3%, it's still effectively zero.

You know, again, not being a statistical person myself, what I compare it to is my scale weighs pounds to the tenth, and so when I get on the scale in the morning, and I'm up 0.3 of a pound, my first reaction is to start panicking. And that-- I think these scales, whether it's a physical scale or this kind of measurement scale, are really not that precise. And so things like the sample size, things like the outliers, misinterpretation of the questions, and not completely-perfect reliability-- all of those things can change the rating, whereas the instruction-- the quality of the instruction-- may not have changed at all. So I think that's really important for faculty to look at the decline in terms of whether or not it's significant.

Right. So I think this can be a relevant conversation piece, but I would put a few cautions in. One is that, if this is something that the administrator mentions in passing but doesn't really dwell on

at all, it may not be worth bringing up. If it's something they're really making a big deal out of it, then maybe. But if you start to say yes, but--

Right. Exactly.

--then you start to create a potentially defensive situation. And so it may be the case where there may be a yes and that I understand that this is not the same or it's a little bit less than it was. And this is a small enough difference, but I don't think it will probably reflect a significant change in the class. And I would still like to see what we can do to get this going in a better direction.

You can't have constructive conversation if the message is yes, it is a little bit different, but it doesn't matter any. And then you start essentially contradict what the administration is saying. Then that may create a situation where the conversation starts to become attacking--

Even to be able to say, well, I'm concerned about whether or not the degree of difference that's here, and here is an article that I read that was really quite useful in talking about small differences. I would say maybe if you're a brand-new faculty member, you wouldn't want to say that. But if you've been around for a while, and you've got tenure or a continuing contract, you might be able to pass off a piece of research like this one by Boysen and Kelly, et al, that I think could be affirmative.

So the second scenario I think is one that gets us the place where we tend to be most emotional. Let's read it together. In your introductory survey course with 45 students, there are four or five negative comments, and this would be in response to those open-ended question. One of them accuses you of making offensive liberal remarks. I can't imagine any faculty member is doing that. A couple complain about how you've formed groups, saying all the slackers ended up in my group. And one comment says that you were rude to students but provides no examples.

And here again, I think we want to imagine that our department head has picked up on these negative comments and is asking us for some response to what's going on here. So again, could we start, Jon, with some of the things that the division head doesn't want to hear if you've got some negative comments on your student rating?

Definitely. And what I would classify as these types of responses as ones that either seem to again deflect from the issue or that seem to show some type of indifference towards what's happening. And so saying student opinions don't matter would certainly be one thing that just is an important issue. Saying there is no truth to their objections would be one unhelpful response. Saying I'm not concerned or it doesn't really matter whether the students like my courses would be something that I'm doing what I need to do, and then I don't care what they think about it. Or worse yet-- something that makes an accusation toward the other person. You teach the course and please everybody.

Right. Yeah.

That would be one that would be setup for, again, either showing disregard for the importance of working in an effective manner and potentially even disdain toward the person who is trying to, we hope, have a productive conversation.

And I think this is really a good scenario for illustrating the value of going ahead and having your emotional response. And your emotional response can be these negative sort of things. Well, who knows who made that comment? They're probably student x, who showed up two days and wore a grumpy face in class. And you can't please everybody. I think you can do that yourself and make yourself feel a bit better and get through the emotional response, but that's not what you want to take to a conversation.

And I mean, I don't think we want to underestimate-- I think one of the things, Jon, that really concerns me is that we ask students such an open-ended questions-- what did you like most about the course? How does the course need to be improved? Which essentially, behind the cloak of anonymity, gives the students the opportunity to talk about-- I mean, I would always get in response to that question, she shouldn't be teaching this course at 8:00. She's too enthusiastic. Well, so I think you have to get through the fact that in some ways we're getting the answers we get from students because we're not asking them very good questions.

I think we're missing an opportunity to teach students the principles of constructive feedback when we ask them those very open-ended questions. But that's not really what the program is about. But I think that we've got to be truthful to ourselves about how these questions engender responses that are really not appropriate.

Right. I would agree with that. The other element about this question that I think is really interesting is that, in the end, what matters more than anything else is are the students learning and coming away transformed in a positive manner. And so there is a tiny bit of merit to the point that student learning is really more important than what their opinion about the class is or how much they like you.

And I think that's one challenge that I've seen for beginning instructors in their first year or two of teaching is the realization that your job is to help the students learn and not for them to walk out of the class thinking you are the best person ever. It's not about them liking you. It's about the learning. So on the one hand, there is a kernel of truth to this idea about how much do the opinions matter. However, one of the things that we know about learning is that, as human beings who have emotional sides to us, students learn better when they're in a situation in which they have positive affect toward the instructor in the class.

But that is a relevant consideration in the sense that that affect drives student learning if it's done well. And we have to make choices. We should always choose what's going to help the students gain the most from the class, rather than what's going to make them like us more. We don't want to get in a position where we're feeling like their opinions don't matter, where there is no point in trying to please them, because that can set up a toxic environment in the class, as well.

Right. And I think this scenario-- I mean, I tried to come up with some examples of things that you could-- I mean, I think we're teaching in a highly-politicized environment. And students and

teachers have these stereotypes about each other. And so I think we do have to be very careful about how students are interpreting what we're saying. And the example of the student who is being rude.

I just heard this in a class not very long ago, where a student gave a kind of off-the-wall answer. It was a very strange way of describing what had been happening in the class. And the faculty member walked over towards the student, and with a confused look on her face, said to the student, where did you get that idea? And I think she was really just trying to figure out how his mind was working, and what the student said in response to her was, well, apparently, I got it from another planet.

In other words, he interpreted her response as a put-down, where she thought that his idea was just crazy. Well, I thought his idea was a little bit crazy, myself. I think she was really just trying to sort it out, and I think a lot of these comments sometimes that students make are in response to nonverbal behaviors that communicate really powerful messages.

I would agree. There's one exception I would make in terms of concerns about student comments. And then actually-- I have unfortunately seen this once or twice-- and that is, occasionally students will make comments that are patently offensive, racist, or other hate-filled types of comments. And those ones are ones where hopefully the instructor doesn't have to say this. Hopefully, the administrator would look at something that's racist.

For an example that I've seen, just say that the instructor-- this, unfortunately, says more of the students than the teaching. I'm sorry to see this in the feedback. Disregard it.

I think that would be very helpful if an administrator would-- that feels like such good support for the faculty member, because some of the things students say are very hurtful. And I think the whole business about the overreaction is that which comments do we carry around with us? The good things that students say about us? Or the really awful things-- that I think we wear some of those awful comments for a really long time.

Oh good. Thank you, Maggie.

So would there be any value in having a trusted--

Oh, yes. I think having a colleague in class to provide feedback is just a wonderful way to get some good descriptive feedback. And one of the things I think that's really helpful that you can say to a trusted colleague is you can identify the areas that you'd like to get feedback in. And especially if then they've keyed off on maybe some things, some questions that were raised by the student ratings that you got. That's really a great--

It's a great idea, and not only can this be a good source of information, particularly because this is a formative type of experience. If someone comes in to give you feedback in your class, this is not part of your formal evaluation process. So it's easier to have a constructive conversation when there's nothing riding on the outcome of that.

Absolutely.

And that's a really good thing to do.

Yeah. I think that's really true.

Yeah. And I think that what colleague can also do-- I really think if you've got some negative comments from students, and they're following you around. You're thinking about them a whole lot, and you feel like you might be overreacting. I think it's really good to share them with a trusted colleague and say, could you help me get a bit of perspective on these?

When I did faculty development, I was always amazed that someone could have five or six comments which said they absolutely walked on water, and a whole bunch of comments in the middle that were nice of them to posit it, and two people who say negative things. And the only thing the new faculty member wanted to do is talk about the two negative comments. So the overreaction is, I think, a big issue.

There is a question from Rowan [University] about students who give low ratings due to course load. I'm thinking that means that students are overworked and out of sorts about everything. I don't know of anything in the student rating literature which would say that students give low ratings when they're taking too many courses. Maybe you could clarify the question a little bit.

That was my interpretation of the question, as well. And if that's the case, then we should anticipate students to be giving lower ratings across multiple instructors. And so I think that would then become a more pervasive issue than any one individual faculty.

Yeah. OK, well we may work on that one a little bit longer. Oh, classwork is more than expected. OK, thank you, Rowan [University]. That's a perfect segue to the last scenario. And what's happening here is that you're dealing with a set of ratings that are good-- excellent, in fact, among the best in your program. The high ratings have been so for a number of years now. Rather than complimenting you for a job well done, the program coordinator carries on about grade inflation and starts asking about how much work it takes to get an A in your course. You figure it out. He thinks you're getting high ratings because you're teaching an easy course.

And the questions that are coming in here are the reverse of this-- the concern that students may rate difficult, hard courses lower than courses that are easy. So how should a faculty member confront these misconceptions? I guess I almost need to go to the next slide, which are the two landmark studies that basically dispel these beliefs. I would have to be honest and say that there are mixed results in the research, but these two studies are usually the ones that are given the most credence to, in terms of the weight of evidence being against the fact that students are giving easy courses high ratings, and giving the hard courses low ratings-- primarily because both of these are really gigantic studies.

So I'm of the opinion that the research evidence would say that you're not getting good ratings because you're teaching an easy-- I mean, the rating research really gives students sometimes more credit than faculty members do. And even though students are likely to clap if you're

canceling a class, they really do know when they're getting their money's worth in a course. Now it is true. You can make a course too hard, and students will stop working in those courses. I think that there is some research on that score.

But the way to win at the ratings game is, I would say, not by teaching a Mickey Mouse course. But this is a fairly widely-held belief among both faculty and administrators. So again, Jon, we're confronted with whether a faculty member should raise the issue, and this scenario seems to be one where it's really ripe for a faculty member to start being defensive.

Right. So a thought or two in terms of that particular communication dynamic, and let me just add one other piece to the question about the legitimacy of difficult or easy courses is-- one of the things that's interesting about the research on student evaluation is how complex some of these relationships can be. But the general read I've had is, again, that's largely in this. One area that there does seem to be a little bit of an impact is whether students believe that the workload has a purpose and is meaningful work, or is it just busy work?

And if a student said there's too much work, that's too heavy of a work, and it doesn't have a purpose, then they can be more negative than students who realize it's a lot of work, but they see why there is a lot of work to it. And then likewise with grading-- when students believe that the grades are aligned with appropriate standards. Even if it is difficult to understand why, they tend to be more supportive of that. And again, the research I've seen has suggested that any impact on rating is much smaller than what you would think it would be.

So one of the suggestions that I would raise is in this conversation, the goal that you would have as a faculty member is to say, how do I keep the conversation from turning defensive. And what I mean by defensiveness is that when somebody feels like they're under attack, what happens with the conversation is, instead of trying to explore what the issues are, people focus their energies on how do I protect myself. And that changes how the conversation plays out.

So there's a number of strategies that people can use to help keep a conversation in a more supportive or constructive or collaborative climate, rather than one that becomes defensive. And there are a few that I think are really not only easy to implement, but also are ones that are pretty powerful. So let me just mention a couple as general strategies for communication to help be able to take some of these topics where there might be disagreement or even basically trying to invalidate what the other person has said.

And ways to do that collaboratively and together-- one of these is to couch comments descriptively rather evaluatively. And say rather than throwing in evaluation of quality, or you couldn't be terribly insightful to have said that. Just simply describing without any salience to that is one strategy you can use. Another is talking about things provisionally, rather than with certainty. And so instead of a firm, this is the way that it is, a comment that says, here's what I see. What you think about that? Check my perception a little bit, and tell me if this seems the same to you-- is a way to help put an idea out there and not create defensiveness.

So those are two that are particularly important ways to be able to say, OK, I disagree with you, but I'm open to having my own perception checked on this. Here's what I think. Want me to describe the situation, and see if see it the same way or not.

Yeah. And I think if you are feeling under the gun, or there is an impression, of there's something that the administrator has the impression that you are teaching an easy course-- to be able to document the details of your course. In other words, to have a good, complete syllabus that says exactly what students will know and be able to do at the end of the course, to have some sample assignments or exams that you've used in the course, some graded work that's in the course. To be able to say, compare a test that you're using with a test that somebody else who is teaching the same section is using.

Just to be able then to say, well, let me share some of the artifacts from my course and have you take a look at those. I think that is an illustration of how you do it. You're saying, Jon, where you're just saying, well, here's some evidence. Let's take a look at it, and talk about my course in light of what you're seeing on my syllabus. It's just almost fighting words to say, well, it's an easy course. I mean, the last thing you want to do is to teach a Mickey Mouse course, even at a big R1, a Research One university, where I spent my career, and where teaching is not particularly valued, you still don't want to take an easy course. So those are fighting words.

I noticed one of the questions asked is it possible to provide some references for various instruments being used at different universities. There are two reports from instrument development that have been done fairly recently at university that I have found particularly compelling. And one was from the University of Minnesota. The other was from Cal State or University of California Channel Islands. I forget the exact university title for that. But I can easily make those references, or even if they are doing a download, those documents are publicly available.

And there's a number of other ones out there, as well. But those two had some really good commentary in terms of how they developed the instrument, and what they looked at, and some really nice reference stuff, as well.

I can recommend the Kansas State IDEA form, because they have a venerable history, and their website is really good with lots of information on that. I think what you want to avoid is what we often refer to as a camel created by a committee, where you got a group of faculty members sitting down, and the instrument is put together by a process of negotiation. Well, I'll vote for a question on discussion, if you make sure there are two questions on lecture. So that's, I think, where instruments end up not having items on them that are valid in terms of what we know about the ingredients and components of effective instruction.

Well, we had one last scenario that we can look at very quickly, and this is probably the easiest one. You work hard on your teaching. You're getting better. You're finding your way to a style that works. You started actually designing your courses, as opposed to making lists from the table of contents. You've still got some issues with classroom management. Students are not paying attention. They don't take many notes. They text in class, but you see ways you can work

on these issues. And as the conversation with your department chair is concluding, the department chair asks if there's anything else you like about your teaching.

And really, Jon, my idea here is how do we create, or what are some good little bits of advice on how you can create a favorable impression about your teaching with your academic leader?

That's a great question. And one of the things that I would start with on that is to provide some concrete examples of what you have done that's improve the teaching and then how students learn. If you had been doing any type of assessment within your class, informal or formal, where you gathered some information about students' experiences and been able to use that to implement some type of change, that's a particularly compelling piece of information for administrators.

Another recommendation I would really make is where you have plans moving forward, talking about how are you planning to move forward with improving your teaching. Because again, it's one thing to reflect on where you, but it's another to demonstrate that you have a path forward and that you are moving ahead. One other thing that I would put into this is that I would always, if they're concerned about how you're doing, or even if it's just an entree to thinking about how you might do better, I would always raise the question with the administrator-- is there support for professional development opportunities for me?

Many universities in a learning-teaching center will have ongoing activities on campus. There are also some fantastic teaching development conferences. And would the department chair or the associate dean or somebody else be willing to fund your travel to a teaching development conference that might help you strengthen. Or there are other forms of programming where resources might be available. And resources are there. We're in a time where resources are not as plentiful as they may have been in the past. But many administrators do have small amounts of funds that can be used, and where they see a really concrete, potential gain, that's really appealing.

So doing a little bit of research and seeing what might be out there, and then asking, can I have funding to do this? It's a great opportunity to not only demonstrate an interest in-- a sincere interest-- in strengthening what you're doing, but also potentially have a path forward to doing that.

What I was thinking about here, too, was if you could talk a little bit about something that you've learned about your teaching or about student learning, an insight that you've got-- maybe something that you've read, or something you learned in the school of hard knocks that where you figured something out-- well, you know, I've been having trouble getting students doing the reading, and I've been trying a couple of new things. And here's something I've really learned. I have to talk about what's in the textbook in class. I have to bring my textbook to class-- that's a way I can get students to read. So if you could talk about some things that you're learning, I think that always sounds really impressive.

And I also included in the supplementary materials a blog post I wrote in which I put down five things that I wish my department chair would say about teaching. And I tried to come up with

things that were the opposite of lip service, which is always saying that teaching is important. These are more action-oriented items. And so to be able to suggest to a department chair something concrete that would improve the climate for teaching-- I think it would be really great.

Any parting shots, Jon? That final summary, comments, or anything you'd like to make?

Well, I think the way that I would pull things together is to say that these types of conversations-- and incidentally, one thing we did not mention is the question of whether the conversation is meant to be evaluative or developmental. And in many cases, it can go both ways. It's better if these conversations are developmental, but to the degree that even if it is evaluative, helping make a developmental experience, is helpful. And so the degree that the faculty member can help create a climate where this becomes a process where they recognize an opportunity and take advantage of that is a really good way to handle the conversation.

We mentioned earlier the idea of inviting a peer in for giving feedback, which is a great idea. The other thing you can do is you can invite that department chair or that associate dean to come in and give feedback, if you want to. I remember my very first teaching job-- I invited our college dean to come to my next class. And I think I was probably naive enough not to realize how busy deans are at that time, but he did. He showed up, and he gave me feedback on it. It was valuable. So that may be another thing that you can do, as well.

It sounds kind of nerve-wracking to me.

Yes, it is, and it may not be for everybody. But if you can invite that person--

Yeah. Right.

--in a way for them to see what you're doing and to actually

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Well, let's go ahead, and let me thank you, Jon, so much for taking the time to do this. And to those of you who are participating and have asked questions, thank you.

Thank you so much, Maryellen, and thank you, Jon. Thanks for joining us, everyone out there in the audience. Complete information about our upcoming seminars is available on our website at magnapubs.com. Thanks again, Maryellen and Jon. Hope everyone has a great day.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/evaluation091318>

ADOBE CHAT TRANSCRIPT

Maggie Cooper:Would there be any value to having a trusted colleague sit in on a class or two to provide some informal feedback? It might head-off some of these negative surprises that come at the end of the semester.

Rowan University:What about students who give low ratings due to course load?

CNM 2:What about students that give low ratings because the course was cognitively complex an they were not up to speed to address this complexity?

Rowan University:Class work is more than expected

CNM 2:Is it possible for you to provide us with some references for the various student evaluation instruments that are being used in different universities?