

## How Can Talking through Course Evaluations Improve My Teaching?

Presented by:

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## Constructive Conversation about Course Evaluations

### Program Outline

#### The conversations you have with yourself

1. Over-reacting to negative feedback
  - a. How do you know if you are
  - b. What to do about it

#### The conversations you might have with your academic leader

1. When there's been a decline
  - a. Do you know why?
  - b. Is the decline significant?
  - c. How long has it been since you've made any changes?
  - d. If you can't explain the decline, what could you do to try and discover what's caused it?
2. When there some negative comments
  - a. Can you think of anything that happened in class that might have caused them?
  - b. Is the number of negative comments significant, given how many there are, how many evaluations there are and how many students were in the course?
  - c. Do any of the positive comments contradict or counter balance the negative ones?
  - d. Are you taking the negative comments seriously? What might you do to indicate that you are?
  - e. Are the open-ended questions encouraging students to comment inappropriately?
3. When there's a questionable assumption about why the rating are so good
  - a. What evidence do you have documenting what students must do to earn an A?
  - b. Do you grade with an absolute standard? If so does your syllabus delineate what standards must be met to earn an A?
  - c. Do you have any data or evidence that shows how that the rigor and standards in your course compares with that of other courses in the program?
  - d. What evidence does your academic leader have that you are giving students grades they have not earned?
  - e. Do students give higher ratings to easy graders and in easy courses?
4. The question you didn't expect: What would you like to tell me about teaching in this program?
  - a. Should you say what you really think?
  - b. Should you say what's safe?

#### The conversation you might have with students

1. The reasons why it's a conversation you should consider having
  - a. To learn more about their learning experiences in the course
  - b. To show that you about their experiences in the course

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- c. To model a constructive response to feedback
  2. Set some rules
    - a. The golden rule of feedback: give me feedback in the form you'd like me to give feedback to you
  3. Start the discussion with some questions: "I've looked at your feedback and it's raised a couple of questions I'd like to have you answer."
  4. Present contradictory results: some people love the quizzes; some people hate the quizzes. What should the teacher do?
  5. If the results are motivating consideration of some changes; solicit feedback on what you're thinking about changing.

## Those Negative Comments on the Course Evaluations

With the end of another academic year close at hand, course evaluations results are not far off. This post explores faculty response to those one or two low evaluations and the occasional negative comments found in answers to the open-ended questions. Do we have a tendency to over-react? I do.

One of the last times I taught my graduate course on college teaching it was a great class. I was at my best and the students were so with it. We had these amazing discussions. I looked forward to reading their papers. Oh, it was so good and I just knew the evaluations would reflect my brilliance. Sure enough, the first couple I looked at were straight 7's, the walks-on-water rating. The next couple were mostly 7's and a few 6's. I was right! What a class! Then a few more into the stack, there's a bubble sheet with straight 1's, the no-redeeming-social-value rating. What? I couldn't believe it. How could anyone be that unhappy with the course? Who was it? On the way home I ran through the role trying to imagine which student would dish out those ratings. I discussed it at length during dinner. I laid awake in bed, still mystified, dismayed and just a bit angry. If the student was that upset, why did I have to find out about this way? These were graduate students. It was not until the next morning I remembered. Two weeks earlier, in response to a colleague upset about a student comment, I had written a lecturely piece for the newsletter getting after faculty for over-reacting to negative feedback.

**How do you know if you are?** Well, you're fixated on the negative comments. There may be only three, never mind there's 34 positive comments, it's those three negative ones that run around in your mind on a seemingly endless track. And your thinking is colored with emotion, feelings bubble up and around as you consider and reconsider the comments. There's hurt, frustration, anger, confusion, dismay, doubt, not the emotions that fill you with hope and joy. After a while, the rationalizations start being developed. You're pretty sure you know who made the comments and this is not a student who put one bit of effort into the course. Then there's these open-ended questions that essentially give students license to say whatever they will. How fair is that? What would happen if you noted on a paper that it "sucked?" And with the forms filled out online, half the class isn't providing feedback and those that do are likely the ones with the axes to grind. And you know how much time and thought students put into filling out the forms—less than a minute!

Most of us know when we're over-reacting, the more challenging question is **how do we stop?** It requires concerted effort and the application of some self-discipline. Be welcome to add your suggestions to these.

- **Step back.** For the moment, let it go and move on to something else. Read every positive comment three times and smile.
- **Look again later, but with objectivity.** How many negative comments were there, versus no comments and positive ones? Try deleting the emotional language in the comment. Make it sound like constructive negative feedback and then consider what happened in the course that might have generated the response. Does the student have a point?

- **Decide what you're going to do.** And nothing may be an appropriate response. Students have been known to offer criticism that is neither fair nor legitimate. If that's the case, forget it. But don't let this be the automatic response to every critical comment. Do you need more information? How might you get it? Are you considering making a change based on the feedback? How about some input before you do?
- **Talk to a trusted colleague.** Yes, you can start by venting. Then ask the colleague to help you put the comment in perspective. Ask how they'd interpret the comment. Ask if they think changes are in order. Ask if they have any good ideas that prevent over-reacting to negative comments.
- **Talk to some students.** A few may be better than many. Students are good at clarifying what other students mean. They can venture some guesses as to how representative the comment might be. They can offer feedback on proposed changes and/or suggest possible changes. This conversation is safest and most likely to be productive if it that occurs between teachers and students who know and trust each other.
- **Recognize that you are not alone.** Don't in your wildest dreams imagine you are the only teacher who's gotten a blistering comment.

And if you'd like to read something really helpful, here's classic.

Hodges, L. C., and Stanton, K. (2007). Translating comments on student evaluations into the language of learning. *Innovative Higher Education*, 31, 279-286.

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## Constructive Conversations about Course Evaluations

### Scenarios

Here's some course evaluation issues that can arise in conversations with course coordinators, department and division heads, deans and various deanettes. It's good to think about how you might respond before they come up. The questions that follow each scenario aim to lead you to some constructive responses.

#### *Scenario 1: To What Do You Attribute the Decline?*

The course evaluations from a course you regularly teach went down this semester/term. They didn't nose dive, but they are significantly lower than they were last time you taught the course. Your relevant administrator lays out this recent set of evaluations and alongside those from several previous semesters. He/She asks you what's going on in the course.

--Do you know what's going on? Implementation of some new approaches? Changes in policy? A new assignment set? Different students taking the course?

--Are the ratings significantly lower from a statistical point of view? Check out the summary of the Boysen, et. al. 2014 research that's included in these supplementary materials

--If you really and truly don't know what's going on, what plans have you made to find out? Use of some formative assessments during the course next time you teach it? Have a colleague review of your course materials and maybe make a classroom visit? An informal conversation with some students you trust?

--How long has it been since you changed the syllabus, added new content, updated the reading, fussed around with the assignments, incorporated some new technology, tried a different approach to participation? Could it just be a case of the course (and maybe the teacher) getting a bit tired?

#### *Scenario 2: Why Those Negative Comments?*

Your relevant administrator carefully reads student responses to the open-ended questions on the course evaluation. Two students in your class of 45 made negative comments. One accuses you of "putting students down" if they didn't agree with you. The other said that your exams "sucked." Your administrator says she/he wants to talk about these comments. He/She asks why you think students would make comments like these.

--Can you think of anything that happened in the course that might have caused these students' responses? A heated discussion of a much disputed topic? Exams scores lower than students expected?

--Do two negative comments from 45 students indicate there is a serious problem with your teaching in the course?

--Are there positive comments in the feedback that dispute the claims made in the two negative comments?

Are you taking the negative comment seriously? Is there anything you've learned from them? Are you taking any actions in response to them? Thinking carefully about how much you reveal about your views and beliefs? Soliciting formative feedback on your exams from students?

--Are the open-ended questions framed in such a way that they encourage students to make judgments without offering any evidence? Could you propose a better way of asking these questions?

### *Scenario 3: And How Did You Get Those High Ratings*

In various public venues, you've heard your relevant administrator talk about grade inflation and how it's a big problem at your institution and everywhere else in higher education. Your ratings are high, significantly better than most of the faculty in your department. In your annual review meeting, your administrator questions you about your course standards. Does your course challenge students? How hard must they work to get an A? Then you get it: he thinks you're getting good ratings by teaching an easy course.

--What evidence could you present that shows what students must do to earn an A in your course?

--Do you grade using an absolute grading standard? If so, what standards must be met in order to get an A in the course? Does your syllabus provide a detailed delineation of what it takes to earn an A in the course?

--Do you have evidence to show that your course is as intellectually challenging as others offered in the department or program? Does it cover the same amount of content? Does it have the same type and number of assignments? How well are your students doing in subsequent courses in the program?

--What evidence does your relevant administrator have that students are getting grades they don't deserve in your course? If students know and can do the objectives specified for the course, how can you give them less than the grade they've earned?

--Do students give easy courses high ratings? Not according to the research. Check out large comprehensive studies by Marsh and Roche (2000) and Centra (2003) in the resource collection.

### *Scenario 4: The Surprise Question*

Near the end of the conversation, your relevant administrator says, "What would you like to tell me about teaching in this department and at this institution

--Say teaching isn't recognized and valued as much as research at your institution, could you say something about that, constructively?

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--Say class size is continuing to creep up, could you say something about when and where the big classes are located in the curriculum? Must they always be the required courses taken by beginning students?

--Say there's no or not much institutional support for professional development, what kind of support would you like to see? Can you think of some examples aren't all that costly?

--Say there's lots and lots of committee work at your institution, how does that compromise what you do in the classroom? Is committee work equally shared in your department? Often poor committee performance excuses one from subsequent committee assignments and conscientious work on a committee results in more committee assignments.



## Teaching Evaluations: A Misinterpretation Issue

“Even measures with perfect validity can be rendered useless if they are interpreted incorrectly, and anecdotal evidence suggests that teaching evaluations are frequently the subject of unwarranted interpretations based on assumed levels of precision that they do not possess.” (p. 641) And now there’s some research verifying that faculty and administrators do make unwarranted interpretations. “We investigated if differences in teaching evaluations that are small enough to be within the standard error of measurement would still have significant effects on judgments made about teachers.” (p. 641)

There’s no question that teaching evaluations matter. Teachers and administrators, including department chairs, deans and provosts take them seriously and make decisions based on the results. The problem is that the quantitative nature of the ratings make the data appear precise and objective. A score of 4.62 is higher than a score of 4.34. However, that does not automatically mean that the faculty member with the higher score is superior, more effective or a better teacher than the faculty member with the lower score. “As is true of all measurements, the means produced by teaching evaluations are only an estimate of the true score; sources of error—such as small sample sizes, outliers, misinterpretation of questions, and less-than-perfect reliability—interfere with the measure of true scores.” (p. 643) So what looks precise and reliable provides no more than a “veneer of objectivity.” (p. 643)

The huge research exploration of student ratings that occurred during the 80s and 90s clearly delineated appropriate statistical standards for interpreting evaluations. Unfortunately, what has been established empirically is not always implemented in practice, as this research demonstrates.

Comprised of three separate, but related studies, randomly selected faculty and administrators from randomly selected post-secondary institutions and in randomly selected disciplines read short scenarios that contained the same details except for the teacher ratings that were slightly higher or lower. For example, in the first study 57 faculty members considered hiring two potential candidates, and the allocation of a travel award. In the second study 80 department chairs assessed two untenured faculty members who had implemented an instructional innovation. In the case of the innovations, the overall course rating was 4.20 in the first scenario and 3.92 in the second one.

The results of both studies were the same. The rating differences had significant effects on the judgments made about these fictional teachers. Writing about Study 1, the researchers note that, “even without critical statistical information needed for interpretation, small increases in an overall teaching evaluation led participants to perceive teachers as significantly more deserving of a merit-based reward; this is a meaningful effect for a teaching evaluation of less than a third of a point on a five-point scale.” (p.647) In the second study, “small changes in raw means led to statistically significant differences in judgments about teaching techniques.” (p. 649)

In Study 3 the research team decided to include both the means and the standard deviations needed to interpret them. In this case 48 faculty were asked to imagine they were on a committee in charge of evaluating faculty for reappointment. The scenarios described two

faculty members again with virtually identical teaching assignments, course designs and instructional methods. A table listed their student evaluation means and standard deviations. “The results of Study 3 provide the most convincing support yet that small differences in fictional teaching evaluations have a significant impact on judgments. Study 3 allowed participants to consider full and realistic information about teaching evaluations. Still faculty in the study judged variations as small as 0.15 of a point as meaningful. “The statistical tests of significance indicate that participants were providing reliably different ratings based on teaching evaluations that were. . .highly unlikely to be reliably different.” (p. 653)

“Despite the importance of teaching evaluations and the simplicity of the principles for their interpretation, the current studies illustrate the relative ease with which faculty members and department heads can be led to make inappropriate generalizations from limited data.” (p. 653) These are not encouraging findings, although for most of us they do not come as a surprise. Let them be a wake-up call, whether you’re a teacher looking at your own results, assessing those of a peer, or conversing with the department chair about yours. If you happen to be serving on a search committee or doing tenure reviews with colleagues, this would be a great article to review and discuss before looking at teaching evaluation results.

Reference: Boysen, G. A., Kelly, T. J., Raesly, 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.

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## Constructively Responding to Course Evaluation Feedback

A Collection of Resources Compiled by Maryellen Weimer, Ph.D.

Email: [grg@psu.edu](mailto:grg@psu.edu) blogs at: [www.facultyfocus.com](http://www.facultyfocus.com)

- 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.

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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.

Do Easy Courses Get High Student Ratings?

Centra, J. (2003). Will teachers receive higher evaluation by giving higher grades and less course work? *Research in Higher Education*, 44 (5), 495-514.

--An analysis involving 50,000 individual courses did not find correlations between high ratings and higher grades and less course work.

Marsh, H. W. and Roche, L. A. (2000). Effects of grading lenience and low workload on students' evaluations of teaching: Popular myth, bias, validity or innocent bystander. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92 (1), 202-228.

--This large study found it was a myth. Easy graders and easy courses don't results in high course evaluations.