Tips for Interpreting and Using Student Course Feedback

Student voice is important and should be taken seriously. The end-of-semester student course feedback survey is one of many methods you can use to gauge the effectiveness of your course and make enhancements. Mid-semester course evaluations, discussions with students, student grades, input from colleagues, and your own reflection can provide additional information. As with any type of evaluation, we often feel emotional in receiving positive and negative reactions. These tip offers strategies to help you interpret, contextualize, and use your feedback data in service of continuous improvement. [i]

Remember Student Feedback is Not a Measure of Learning

Remember that surveys are individual perceptions; they represent someone's thoughts and feelings. Students are not experts in teaching or the evaluation of teaching. Furthermore, many factors outside your control can introduce misunderstandings or biases. Similarly, student feedback is not a measure of learning.

Students can learn a great deal from a class they didn't enjoy or learn very little from a class they loved.

Consider the Context

Contextualize your interpretation; consider the type of class you taught.

Was it a difficult course that students are required to take? An introductory course? A large lecture hall? Team taught? A requirement or elective? Online or face-to-face?

Keep in mind that trying a new or innovative teaching strategy can initially be off-putting to students.

Identify the Patterns in Comments

Look at the big picture. It's human nature to dwell on a single negative comment or score. Allow yourself some time to process responses. Ignore comments unrelated to teaching. Look for patterns and areas of consensus among students.

What is the nature of the overall feedback?

Review the Percentages

Pay attention to percentages. Did most students lean in the same direction? Disagreement among students can indicate a problem area. It's also helpful to aggregate data in various ways: for example, look at individual questions across different classes to determine consistencies in perceptions, or look at survey subscales (i.e., syllabus and policies, feedback and grading, course content, communication, self-analysis) to identify opportunities for change. You can also use these data in your teaching portfolio to demonstrate continuous improvement and sensitivity to student voice.
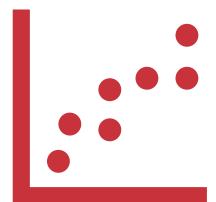
Consider Other Sources of Evidence

Student feedback should be one piece of information in your teaching portfolio. Other sources of evidence for effective teaching might be:

- chairperson observation feedback,
- teaching awards,
- innovative and dynamic syllabi and assignments,
- scholarship of teaching and learning,
- attendance at faculty development workshops,
- letters from students,
- and/or your own reflections.

ITL tracks your participation --- email ysuitl@ysu.edu to request a copy of the workshops you've attended!

Work to Increase Response Rates

Remember that higher response rates will yield more valuable and reliable data, and that low response rates do not necessarily represent the whole class. Seek ways to incentivize survey completion. Use class time for students to respond wherever possible.

According to research cited by the Brown University Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, minimum recommended response rates depend on class size:

- 5-20 students, 80%.
- 21-30 students, 75%.
- 31-50 students, 66%.
- 51-100 students, 60%.
- over 100 students, 50%.

Embrace Change

Last, be willing to make changes that benefit student learning and satisfaction. Perhaps one course had some issues to fix, or perhaps someone made a great suggestion!

What actions can be taken, and with what tradeoffs?
Are there ways to clarify assignments, organization, or grading?
What can improve student learning or morale?

Book a Consult w/ITL

After making changes to your course, compare student feedback over time. Finally, pass on to your chair comments that are unactionable or out of your control. Consider booking a consult with ITL Staff to review, brainstorm, and generate actionable steps to improving student learning.

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[i] Sources: Boise State University, University of Georgia, Stanford University, Alliant International University, Indiana University Bloomington, Duke Learning Innovation & Lifetime Education

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