PART X

Evaluation to Improve Teaching

52. Early Feedback to Improve Teaching and Learning
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Early Feedback to Improve Teaching and Learning

The most widely used method for evaluating teaching is the end-of-course questionnaire completed by students. The questionnaires arrive too late, however, to benefit the students doing the evaluation. Nor do the questionnaires typically encourage students to give the specific comments an instructor might need either to spot weaknesses in classroom organization, pacing, and work load or to identify how well students have understood the material.

Much more effective are early feedback activities that take place during the term (sometimes called formative evaluation or informative feedback). Early feedback activities can elicit the specific comments and constructive criticism you need to improve students’ understanding of the material and their subsequent performance on exams. In addition, considerable research shows that gathering feedback throughout the term allows an instructor to improve even very challenging classes, strengthen student learning, enhance student motivation, and positively alter student attitudes toward the instructor and course, as reflected in end-of-term student ratings (Cohen, 1980; Fabry et al., 1997; Hamilton et al., 2002; Hampton and Reiser, 2004; Kreutzer, 1993; L’Hommedieu et al., 1990; Marineovich, 1999; Overall and Marsh, 1979; Rando and Lenze, 1994; Svinicki, 2001).

The techniques described here require modest effort, are easy to carry out, use little class time, and focus on students’ experiences of learning during instruction. See Chapter 32: “Informally Assessing Students’ Learning” for additional strategies.

General Strategies

Decide what you want to assess. When you gather information on the effectiveness of your teaching, focus on items that you can change during the term—for example, the pace of the course, turnaround time on exams and assignments, or the level of difficulty of the material. Ask your students for specific comments about particular issues rather than general responses to the course or your teaching.
Schedule feedback at times appropriate to the course. If you are teaching a course for the first time or have significantly revised a course you have taught previously, you may want to canvass students as early as three or four weeks after the term begins. If you are teaching a course you have taught many times before, you may want to wait until midsemester before asking for student assessments. (If you solicit feedback immediately after a midterm, however, most of the comments will relate to the exam.)

Encourage students to give meaningful feedback. Let students know that you will use their comments to plan for the rest of the term and that you will summarize the comments for the class. As appropriate, give examples of how students’ comments from previous terms led to changes in the current term. Swinicki (2001) recommends that you encourage students to:

- Give specific examples. “The teacher brought the wrong notes to class on two occasions” is a more helpful comment than “The teacher is unorganized.”
- Focus on observable behaviors. “When I went during office hours, the instructor was not there” is more helpful than “This teacher doesn’t care about students.”
- Describe the effect of the instructor’s behavior on learning. “When the instructor faces the board while talking, I have trouble following the presentation.”
- State alternatives and preferences. “Please distribute the essay topics on a Friday—before the weekend—rather than on a Monday.”
- Provide both positive and negative comments.

Use different techniques throughout the term. Many of the techniques described below are quite simple and take very little time; a few require planning or technical assistance. Select those techniques that fit with your teaching approach and philosophy. Of course, you won’t want to use all these techniques in any one course; nor would you want to use the same one again and again. Experiment with the ones that appeal to you, modifying them if you want, and see which provide the most helpful information.

Eliciting Students’ Written Opinions about the Course

Distribute index cards during the first or last five or ten minutes of class, if your class size is less than 100. Pass out three-by-five cards to students and ask them to respond anonymously to two questions, one on the front of the card, the
other on the back. Explain that the purpose is for you to get feedback. You can pose general questions about what is going well in the course and what needs to be improved or changed. Other general questions include these: What do you want more of? Less of? How are you finding the course? Any suggestions for improving the course? Any problems? What do you need before the end of the term? How can I help you learn better? What is helping you learn in this course? What is making learning difficult? If you could change one thing about this course, what would it be?

Brookfield (1995) suggests these questions: At what moment in the class this past week did you feel most engaged with what was happening? Most distant? What action by the teacher or a fellow student did you find most helpful? Most puzzling or confusing? What about this class this past week surprised you the most? You may prefer to ask more specific questions about aspects of the course, such as whether the problem sets are too challenging or whether the pace of the class is causing difficulties.

Leave the room while students write their comments. Ask a student volunteer to collect the cards in a manila envelope and return them to your office.

Ask students to complete a brief questionnaire in class. During the first or last few minutes of class, distribute a short questionnaire to students or to a random sample of students in a large-enrollment class. Keep the number of items small—no more than ten or twelve (Boice, 2000). You can use relevant items from your campus’s or department’s end-of-term questionnaire, create your own questions, or select them from existing instruments. Murray (1987) has identified sixty items, each referring to a specific classroom teaching behavior, that are significantly correlated with teaching effectiveness. His inventory includes items about the pace of the class, clarity of explanations, student-faculty interaction, and so on.

The questions you select should be ones you can respond to during the term; otherwise your students may develop false expectations about the remainder of the course. Include questions that help students focus on their own learning (How do you know when you have learned the material?), or probe what students themselves could do in class (What is the one thing you want the other students to do to improve this course? What do you need to do to improve your learning in this course?). You might ask about the level of difficulty of course content, the quality and quantity of assignments, the use of class time, things the instructor does that enhance or inhibit student learning, the nature of student preparation outside of class, or the pace of the class. Svinicki (2001) recommends adding as the final item, What question should I have asked that I didn’t and what would your response have been?
Ask students to write to you rather than about you. To assure that students respond candidly, leave the room while they complete the questionnaire anonymously, and ask a student volunteer to collect the forms in a manila envelope and return them to you or place in your department mailbox.

**Ask students to complete a brief questionnaire online.** Some learning management systems (such as Blackboard) and collaboration and learning environments (for example, Sakai) enable you to survey students during the term and receive a summary of the results. You can also create your own online questionnaire through commercial Web sites such as Zoomerang or SurveyMonkey or from college Web sites such as FAST (Free Assessment Summary Tool) developed at Mount Royal College in Canada. Some faculty give modest extra credit if students complete the online evaluation form. Commercial sites can report the names of students who fill out forms independent of their responses. Faculty who create their own online surveys build in a feature so that after students complete the survey, they are directed to a page to print off and hand in to the instructor to receive extra credit.

**Compare students’ perceptions of the course to your own.** Before looking at the questionnaire that students completed, fill out the form yourself on the basis of your perceptions of your behavior or on what you expect, on average, that your students will say. In general, self-evaluations tend to be more positive than students’ responses. In comparing your assessment to that of your students, look for any discrepancies and deficiencies. A variation is to ask students to complete a questionnaire that probes what they have done in class since the semester began (for example, “Asked a question during class,” “Contributed to the discussion,” “Came to class without completing the reading”) while you complete a questionnaire that identifies what students need to do to be successful (for example, “Ask a question during class,” “Participate in class discussions,” “Come to class prepared having done the reading”). These items are taken from CLASSE, a project of the National Survey of Student Engagement that makes available forms for students and faculty (nse.iub.edu). In looking at the results, focus on any disparities between your expectations and student behaviors and use these as a basis for class discussion.

**Ask students to send you a short message.** Give each student three postcards at the start of the term and ask them to mail a card to you during the semester whenever they want to offer feedback about the course. Another variation is to have students send you a short letter or e-mail reflecting on the learning that has occurred so far in the course. (Sources: Hallett, n.d.; Rando and Lenze, 1994)
Use an old-fashioned suggestion box. Place a labeled box at the back of the classroom. Invite students to submit comments, questions, real-world applications, or suggestions. A faculty member who uses a question box asks students to write their names on their submissions. If students with four or more submissions fall between two final grades, he awards them the higher grade. (Source: Stein, 1997)

Eliciting Students’ Opinions through Discussion and Interviews

Break students into small groups for Stop/Start/Continue. Ask small groups to identify teaching activities and behaviors that they wish you would stop doing, start doing, and continue doing, and to supply a reason or explanation for each request. A variation is to focus on the class instead of the instructor: “What is the class doing that frustrates or blocks your learning? What could we be doing as a class that would help you learn?” Have the groups report back to the class and share their lists. (Source: George and Cowan, 1999)

Arrange for your students to be interviewed. Invite a colleague or staff member to conduct an oral evaluation with your students during the last ten or fifteen minutes of class, called Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) or Small Group Analysis. After you leave, the evaluator asks students to cluster into groups of five or six and to take several minutes to do the following:

- Select a spokesperson who will also write down the groups’ comments.
- Name something in the course that they find helpful or worthwhile and that has helped their learning.
- Name something that has hindered their learning and that they would like to see changed; identify how the change would be implemented.
- Name something that students can do themselves to improve the course.

The evaluator circulates among the groups as they work to remind them how much time they have left and to make certain that they are staying with the task. The evaluator then asks each spokesperson to report the group’s findings, and the evaluator records the results on the board. After all groups have reported, the evaluator summarizes for the class the points of consensus and asks for clarification on points of disagreement. The evaluator collects the written comments from the spokespeople and prepares an oral or written summary for you. A variation of this technique is to have students select the five items on the list for each question that are most important to them and to independently rank them from 1 (most
important) to 5 (least important). Results are tallied and shared with the group as well as with you.

Another variation called Bare Bones Questions considerably reduces the amount of time and training the SGID technique requires with no loss in effectiveness by streamlining the class discussion and sharing raw data instead of a summary report. Even less time consuming and labor intensive is Quick Course Diagnosis. Students jot down on an index card a word or phrase to describe the course and a ranking from 1 to 5 to indicate their level of satisfaction. Students then share their responses with others in the class. Next, students are given a sheet of blank paper and asked to identify a strength and a weakness of the class. The sheet of paper circulates from one student to another with each student adding ideas and reporting aloud what they are writing down. The strengths and weaknesses are ranked order by the group to reach consensus.

Researchers report that SGID and its variations lead to improvements in courses and a better understanding of students’ needs. (Sources: Black, 1998; Clark and Redmond, 1982; Coffman, 1991; Diamond, 2002; Lenze, 1997; Lieberman, 1999; Millis, 2004; Snooks et al., 2004)

Convene focus groups. Ask for volunteers to meet with you to talk about the course and improvements in organization, structure, assignments, and the like. Begin by posing an issue, concern, or dilemma and ask the group to help you understand it. This is more effective than asking, “What improvements are needed in this course?” Faculty who use this technique report animated discussions that contain helpful suggestions. Instructors who convene focus groups also tend to receive higher student ratings at the end of the term. (Sources: Hamilton et al., 2002; Tiberius, 2001)

Name a set of “spotters” for each class session. Spotters are students who arrive in class a few minutes early and report to you on troublesome aspects or challenges in the previous assignment, readings, or class session. Plan to address the spotters’ issues immediately, toward the start of class. In large courses, the spotting system will also give you the opportunity to meet more students. (Source: Fisch, 1996)

Establish a student liaison committee. Ask two to four students to meet with you periodically outside of class to discuss difficulties or dissatisfaction with the course. Membership on the committee may be rotated from a list of volunteers, as long as the entire class always knows who the liaisons are and how and why to contact them. If you teach a course with a large number of discussion sections, invite each section to select a delegate. Encourage the liaison students to circulate
and seek out information formally or informally from other students. Report back to the class about your meetings with the liaison committee. (Sources: Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983; National Research Council, 2003; Tiberius, 1997)

**Form a student management team.** After the first three or four weeks of class, ask for student volunteers to serve as the management or resource team for the course. The team meets regularly to identify problem areas and propose changes, and you visit their meetings to hear their suggestions. Faculty who use this strategy have found it effective for improving course quality and are enthusiastic about the results. (Sources: Kogut, 1984; Nuhfer, 1997)

**Encourage students to form study groups.** Invite representatives of the study groups to meet with you to discuss any difficulties with the subject matter. Study groups provide students with opportunities to learn from one another, and some students may find it easier to seek assistance as a group rather than as individuals. While this technique seems workable in small classes, it can be particularly effective in large-enrollment courses, where students may feel less connection with their peers. If you form study groups in class, it’s important to help all students feel included. See Chapter 21, “Learning in Groups.”

### Responding to Students’ Feedback

**Respond quickly to students’ comments.** Reporting back to the students lets them know that you appreciate and value their concerns, and it also helps them understand the diversity of opinion among their classmates. When you distribute index cards, administer online questionnaires, or schedule interviews, respond to students’ comments at the next appropriate class meeting. If you are working with student teams or committees, plan to report back to the class periodically.

**Consider carefully what students say.** Begin by looking at the positive comments your students have made. This is important because it is easy to be swayed by negative comments. Then read their statements about problems and their suggestions for improvement. Look for patterns: What are the most common problems? Are there broad agreements or disagreements? Do their comments verify your own hunches? Try not to place undue significance on any one student’s comments. As you identify the major themes, group your students’ suggestions into three categories:

- those you can change this term (for example, the turnaround time on homework assignments)
• those that must wait until the next time the course is offered (for example, the textbook)
• those that you either cannot or will not change (for example, the number of quizzes or tests)

When you present your findings to your class, share conflicting responses on topics in all three categories, so that students are aware of the diversity of opinion within the class. Also, you may want to ask a colleague or a teaching consultant to help you identify options for making changes. Research shows that faculty who receive expert consultation are more likely to improve their teaching. (Sources: Brinko, 1991; Cohen 1980; Marinovich, 1999)

Let students know what changes you will make in response to their feedback. Thank your students for their comments and invite their ongoing participation in helping you improve the course. Public acknowledgment of shared annoyances (for example, outside construction noise, inoperable window blinds) can lower frustration levels boost morale. Take time to clarify any misunderstandings about your goals or about their expectations. Explain which of their suggestions you will act upon this term, which must wait until the course is next offered, and which you will not act upon. Let students know what they can do as well. For example, if many students wrote that they were often confused by your board work, invite them to ask questions more often. As you discuss these matters, try to avoid sounding defensive, indignant, or unduly apologetic. (Source: Kreutzer, 1993)

Select a response method that works for you. Most faculty simply discuss the results with the class as a whole. Some faculty provide a handout of responses to all questions other than those that seem idiosyncratic (for example, a single complaint about x or y). Other faculty prepare graphs and charts of responses, or post summary responses on the course Web site. Whichever method you select, the most important thing is to respond in a thoughtful and timely manner.

Using Video and Colleague Evaluation

Video one of your classes. Watching yourself on digital video allows you to see for yourself whether you dominate the discussion, whether you allow students enough time to think through questions, whether you maintain adequate eye contact, and so on. For pointers on how to plan and use video, see Chapter 53, “Video Recordings and Classroom Observations.”
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**Invite an observer to visit your class.** Invite a colleague or a teaching consultant to observe one of your classes and make suggestions on specific aspects of your presentation; see Chapter 53, “Video Recordings and Classroom Observations.” Before class, brief your observer on your specific goals for the session or on a particular technique you are trying to perfect (for example, the level and method of questioning). Meet with the observer immediately after class, while the experience is fresh in both of your minds. Consider pairing up with another instructor to observe each other’s classes and to meet regularly to discuss teaching. (Sources: Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Katz and Henry, 1988)

**Have a colleague review your course syllabus, assignments, exams, or other materials.** Ask a colleague who teaches a comparable course or who is knowledgeable about the subject matter to look at your teaching materials and make suggestions about such topics as the amount of assigned reading, whether the exams adequately cover the subject matter, or whether the homework assignments give students the opportunity to apply concepts and demonstrate their understanding. (Source: McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)

**Encourage graduate student instructors (GSIs) to give you comments about the course.** In large courses, most student complaints eventually find their way to a GSI. If you have GSIs, ask them to give you brief written reports on any problems the students are having. You can also ask the GSIs to list the one or two topics or problems sets that caused students the most difficulty in the last week.

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References


Evaluation to Improve Teaching


Video Recordings and Classroom Observations

Watching a video recording of your teaching is a powerful and extremely valuable experience. Video allows you to see and hear yourself teach, and also to observe the overall class atmosphere and your students’ responses to your teaching. By analyzing the dynamics in your classroom on video, you can check the accuracy of your perceptions of your teaching and identify those techniques that work and those that need revamping.

Another way to gain insight into your teaching is to invite a colleague to observe your class. Faculty members at all levels and in all disciplines can benefit from the opportunity for self-reflection provided by carefully planned observation by peers or a faculty development specialist (Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Millis and Kaplan, 1995; Webb and McEnerney, 1995).

The suggestions below will help you use video recordings and classroom observation to think about your teaching and develop a broader repertoire of instructional strategies.

Preparing for Video Recording

Contact your campus educational technology office. Many colleges and universities offer classroom video or webcast services to faculty members. The educational technology office can explain what services and equipment are available. On some campuses, large-enrollment courses are routinely webcast for the entire term, making it easy to access recordings of class sessions.

Select a typical class—or an innovative one. Most instructors choose a class session that typifies their teaching and that includes both lecture and discussion. But you might also want to record a session in which you are trying out a new instructional format or teaching new material for the first time.

Announce that the class will be recorded. Tell your students that the purpose of the recording is for you to review your performance—not theirs—and analyze
your teaching. Assure them that the recording will not be preserved, or explain how it may be used as part of your portfolio (see Chapter 54, “The Teaching Portfolio”). Some researchers recommend setting up a “video-free zone” for students who don’t wish to appear on the recording. (Source: Malmstrom et al., 2004)

**Don’t worry about the camera.** The recording equipment is not intrusive, and no extra lighting is required. Though you may feel a bit awkward at the beginning of the session, focus on your teaching and you will soon forget about the camera. Remember that no one will see the recording except you, unless you choose to share it.

### Viewing the Recording

**View the video with a supportive consultant.** A staff member at your campus’s office of faculty development or instructional improvement can assist you in identifying your strengths and weaknesses. In addition to providing helpful suggestions, the consultant can help you temper any tendency to be hypercritical of yourself. Or ask a trusted, experienced colleague to give you constructive feedback.

**View the video as soon as possible.** Plan to view the video on the day it is made or the next day so that your memory of the class is fresh. Play the first ten or fifteen minutes of it just to get used to seeing yourself on video. Be prepared for a dose of “video-induced despair,” a common ailment brought on by the distortions of the medium. Most people tend to cringe at their voice, appearance, gestures, and mannerisms: Do I really sound like that? Is my hair always this disheveled? Why didn’t I notice that my shirt collar was askew? It is important to realize that these details are exaggerated on video and are far less noticeable and distracting in real life. In any case, a wrinkled blouse or a crooked tie has nothing to do with effective teaching. (Source: Krupnick, 1987)

**Plan to spend at least two hours analyzing a one-hour recording.** Once you’re used to seeing yourself on video, restart the recording and begin to analyze it. The problem areas are likely to jump out at you, but don’t overlook those things that you are doing well: talking to the class, not the screen; answering questions clearly; and summarizing key points. During this viewing, focus on the following questions (from Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983, p. 214):

- What specific things did I do well?
- What things could I have done better?
- What do students seem to enjoy most?
- What do students seem not to enjoy?
- How was the overall flow of the class?
- If I could teach the session over, what three things would I change?
- How can I make those changes?

**On the next viewing, focus on selected aspects.** For example, you might want to pay attention to your presentation style, or to the kinds of questions you ask or the kinds of answers you give to students’ questions. Identify your strengths and those areas that need improvement. Watch a portion of the video with the sound turned off so that you can focus on your nonverbal behavior. (Source: Murray, 1995)

**Chart the frequencies and types of classroom interactions.** For seminars and small classes, one simple method for analyzing a classroom discussion is Contracted BIAS (Brown’s Interaction Analysis System). As you watch a segment of the video, stop every five seconds to make a tick mark in one of three columns: Teacher Talk, Student Talk, Silence. You can also write a “Q” each time you or a student poses a question. (Source: Brown and Atkins, 1988)

**Analyze specific types of comments.** Focus on specific types of questions and statements: teacher’s questions, students’ responses to teacher’s questions, students’ questions, teacher’s response to students’ questions, teacher’s reward and praise statements, and teacher’s criticism. To analyze your use of questions, for example, view the video, write down all the questions you asked, and examine the following issues:

- How many questions actually requested a response from students?
- Did all the questions require yes/no responses or short answers? Or did some questions require more complex answers? Did some questions require students to explain their reasoning?
- What kind of thinking (or level of thinking) did the questions require?
- Did you allow sufficient time between questions for students to respond?

If you observe that you are asking too many questions or not pausing to give students time to answer, you can focus on improving those aspects of your questioning skills. (Source: Acheson and Gall, 2003)

**Use checklists to focus your analysis.** Create self-observation checklists that reflect your particular areas of interest, or select items relevant to your teaching style, subject matter, and class size from the following checklists (adapted from Davis, 1988, based on questionnaires from the University of California, Berkeley;
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University of California, Los Angeles; University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; University of Texas at Austin; and Northwestern University).

Opening, Organization, and Closing

Do you

• state the purpose of the class session and its relationship to the previous class?
• briefly summarize the key concepts from the previous class?
• present a brief overview or outline of the content at the beginning of the session or state the problem to be solved or discussed?
• emphasize or restate the most important ideas?
• make smooth transitions from one topic to another?
• restate, at the end of the class, what students are expected to have gained from the session?
• summarize the main points or ask students to do so?
• relate the day’s session to upcoming presentations?
• seem at ease with the material?
• begin and end class promptly?

Voice, Pace, and Eye Contact

Do you

• speak in a clear, strong, audible voice?
• speak neither too quickly nor too slowly?
• speak at a rate that allows students to take notes?
• avoid filler phrases such as “you know” or “umm?”
• use intonation to vary emphasis?
• adjust tempo when necessary?
• make appropriate eye contact and talk to the class, rather than to the board or windows?
• avoid reading from notes?

Clarity of Explanations and Student Understanding

Do you

• define new terms, concepts, and principles?
• give examples, illustrations, or applications to clarify abstract concepts?
• explicitly relate new ideas to familiar ones?
• know when the class is understanding or not understanding you? know when students are puzzled or confused?
• offer alternate explanations when students do not understand?
• slow down when discussing complex or difficult ideas?
• avoid needless digressions from the main topic?
• use technology effectively?
• write legibly and clearly?

**Questioning Skills**
Do you

• ask questions to determine what students know about the topic?
• periodically ask questions to gauge whether students need more or less information on a topic?
• pause sufficiently after all questions to allow students time to respond?
• ask different levels and kinds of questions to challenge and engage students?
• encourage students to answer difficult questions by providing cues or rephrasing?
• ask follow-up questions if a student’s answer is incomplete or superficial?
• refocus students’ “off-the-wall” questions, when possible, to help explain course concepts?
• when necessary, ask students to clarify their questions?
• request that time-consuming questions of limited interest be discussed during office hours?

**Student Interest and Participation**
Do you

• encourage students’ questions and comments?
• listen carefully to students’ comments and questions without interrupting?
• accept other points of view?
• provide opportunities for students to apply what they are learning to new examples or situations?
• engage students’ intellectual curiosity?
• note and respond to nonverbal cues of puzzlement, confusion, or boredom?

**Classroom Climate**
Do you

• address all or some students by name?
• call on male and female students in equal or proportional numbers?
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- call on students sitting in different areas of the classroom?
- give praise, encouragement, and criticism even-handedly?
- avoid language and examples that may exclude or derogate any groups?
- offer meaningful encouragement and support?

Discussion

Do you

- encourage all students to participate in the discussion?
- draw out quiet students and prevent vocal students from monopolizing the discussion?
- refrain from monopolizing the discussion yourself?
- let students challenge what you say?
- encourage students to challenge and respond to one another?
- mediate conflicts or differences of opinion?
- bring closure to the discussion?

Physical Space and Classroom Features

Do you

- move about the room to reduce the physical distance between you and the students and keep their interest?
- engage students seated in the back of the room?
- acknowledge problems, if any, with noise level, ventilation, and lighting?
- arrange the furniture, if appropriate, to reflect your instructional strategies?

Having Colleagues Observe Your Class

Invite a faculty development consultant or a colleague to observe you teach. If your campus has an office of faculty development or instructional improvement, one of the staff members can observe you teach. Or you can ask a supportive, experienced colleague—perhaps someone with a reputation for teaching excellence—to sit in on your class. Keep this observation separate from any department process related to tenure or other rewards. There are advantages to selecting someone who is familiar with the course content, but faculty from a different field may be better able to focus on your teaching methods. If no single class is representative of your course, ask the observer to attend two sessions. For small classes, let the students know in advance that you have invited an observer to sit in.

(Sources: Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Keig, 2000; Webb and McEnerney, 1995)
**Arrange a collaborative peer review.** In a collaborative peer review (also called reciprocal review), two or more teachers agree to exchange class visits and observations. The collaborators may be at the same level, or a senior colleague may provide a more experienced perspective. A variation called teaching squares consists of four faculty members from different disciplines who observe at least one class taught by each of the other three. Observers share their comments first in pairs and then with the entire quartet. Another variation called video clubs involves teachers viewing one another’s digital recordings and discussing best practices. These collaborative reviews may also include examining course materials such as syllabi, handouts, and tests. (Sources: Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004; Keig, 2000; Keig and Waggoner, 1995; Rhem, 2003; Sherin, 2000)

**Plan for the observation.** Meet with the observer before the visit to discuss class goals, instructional strategies, planned activities, and students’ preparedness, motivation, and engagement. Offer the observer a copy of your course syllabus and an outline of topics for the class period, and mention the particular features you would like the observer to focus on during class. You and the observer should also decide on the method of observation (for example, a checklist, a rating form, open-ended comments). Some researchers recommend using six or eight open-ended questions on topics such as the organization of the presentation, instructor-student rapport, and clarity of explanations. Others recommend a combination of checklists, open-ended questions, and open narratives. Or the observer can record what is happening at a specified interval (every two minutes) during a portion of the class. Or you can ask the observer to tally specific behaviors (for example, the gender of students who ask questions, the number of questions from a particularly dominant student, and so on). For examples of rating forms, narrative prompts, and teacher behavior systems, see Chism (2007). Regardless of the format, the observer should try to report actions without imposing opinions or making judgments. Here are examples of good feedback statements from experienced observers. Note that they all begin with I:

“**I noticed student energy sagging when you started talking about X.**”

“**I understood the principle best when you used the Y example.**”

“**I could tell Herb felt affirmed when you understood what he was trying to say. I noticed that he spoke up again.**”

(Sources: Chism, 2007; DeZure, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 1995; Millis, 1992)

**Introduce the observer to the class, as appropriate.** In small classes, where an observer might be noticed, let students know the purpose of the observation.
(for example, giving you feedback on your teaching) and what the observer will be doing (for example, taking notes) and not doing (for example, participating in the class).

**Meet with the observer as soon as possible after the visit.** The sooner you meet, the fresher your memories will be. You might begin by discussing general impressions of the class: Which aspects went well? Which did not? What was typical or atypical? Any surprises? Were your goals for the class met? Then ask the observer for specific comments about behaviors and actions. You may also want to ask the observer for any suggestions for improvement in two or three specific areas. Throughout, try to listen with an open mind and try not to respond defensively to criticism. If the observer makes negative comments, treat these as new information—not as an attack. Even if you disagree with the observer’s comments, you can always benefit from knowing how others view your teaching. Keep in mind that the observer can benefit from positive reinforcement too: “Thanks for noticing that. I wasn’t aware of it.” (Sources: Martin and Double, 1998; Saroyan and Amundsen, 2004)

**References**


The Teaching Portfolio

Creating a teaching portfolio, or dossier, by compiling your teaching materials and related documents gives you a chance to reflect on your accomplishments and to organize information that will be useful in subsequent revisions of the course. Portfolios created for these self-assessment purposes are called *working portfolios*, *developmental portfolios*, or *portfolio banks*.

More selective portfolios may be requested by committees making decisions about employment, promotion, and tenure; these portfolios, which combine materials from several courses, are called *presentation portfolios*, *evaluative portfolios*, *assessment portfolios*, or *showcase portfolios*.

There are no conventions governing the content of a portfolio; examples of portfolios are available online at the Web sites for Cornell University, University of Nebraska, and University of Massachusetts, among others. The suggestions below address the materials you might compile for yourself and then adapt for a personnel committee for making decisions about merit and promotion.

**General Strategies**

*Prepare a concise working portfolio for each course you teach.* Place copies of relevant documents in a folder as the term progresses: course syllabus, course materials, sample assignments, exams, and examples of graded student work. Jot down ideas for improving the course as they occur to you, and assemble the portfolio shortly after the end of the term, while your memory is still vivid.

*Include samples of successes and failures.* Careful and judicious selection of materials will help you think more critically about your teaching. Don’t, however, overlook your teaching missteps. Good teachers take risks and experiment with new ideas. As you create your portfolio, reflect critically on what did and didn’t work.

*Keep a teaching file during the term.* Writing regularly about your teaching can contribute to your growth as a teacher. Set up a “next time” file (hard copy or online) for each class you teach, and take five or ten minutes immediately after each session to jot down some comments: At what points did your students seem...
puzzled? What questions did they ask? How well did the activities engage them? How well did you allocate the class time? Add a test question that came to mind, and list one or two things you could do to improve this session. Review these notes when you are preparing to teach this course again. (Sources: Mckcachic and Svinicki, 2006; Mues and Sorcinelli, 2000)

Components of a Working Portfolio

Describe the course. List the course title and course number. How many times have you taught this course? Is the course required or an elective? How does it fit within the department’s curriculum? Were there any course activities that placed special demands on your time (for example, field trips or student projects)?

Describe your students. How many students enrolled? Did these students seem more or less engaged, inquisitive, passive, or hardworking than other students you have taught? How many students preregistered for the course but then dropped it? How steady was attendance throughout the term? Did students show up at office hours? Did you make extra efforts to work with students who were not well prepared for the course or with students facing special challenges? Did you make extra efforts to work with your best students?

Write a succinct self-assessment of your teaching in this course. Self-assessments generally include four components: (1) the goals of the course, (2) your teaching philosophy and methods, (3) the effects of your course on students’ learning, and (4) your plans for improvement.

Goals. What were your goals in teaching the course? How well did the course meet these goals? What problems did you encounter in attempting to meet these goals? Here are examples of goals (adapted from materials on Web sites at Iowa State University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Indiana University/Purdue University at Indianapolis):

• helping students learn factual knowledge, fundamental principles, and ways to apply course material in new situations
• fostering critical thinking (ability to analyze ideas and information from multiple perspectives)
• facilitating the acquisition of lifelong learning skills
• developing problem-solving skills
• expanding creative capacities (inventing, designing, performing in art, music, or drama)
• strengthening writing
• helping students express themselves orally
• developing skills in interpreting or expressing concepts using visual or mathematical representations

**Philosophy and methods.** Write a brief statement about the values that inform your teaching. What imperatives guide your teaching? What do you do to help students learn? How are your goals translated into action? How did your choice of teaching strategies relate to your goals? How did your methods take into account the level and abilities of your students? What were your grading policies? What changes did you make in topics, readings, or assignments for a course you have taught repeatedly? How well did those changes work? (Sources: Chism, 1997–98; Coppola, 2002)

Because teaching is personal, you may want to draft your statement of philosophy before looking at the examples of others. If you are stumped, try to answer these questions (Korn, 2003): What are the characteristics of the best and worst teachers you have had? What metaphor would describe your teaching? If you decide you want to see examples, search the Web or your university’s Web site (using “teaching philosophy” or “teaching statements”) or see Tollefson and Davis (2002).

**Effects.** Describe how your teaching encouraged independent thinking, intellectual development, and students’ enthusiasm for the subject matter. How did you know whether students were gaining competence and learning the material? What evidence do you have of student learning? How many students demonstrated understanding and at what levels? What misconceptions did students have and how did you address these? How well did student work meet your intellectual goals for the course? (Source: Bernstein, 2002)

**Improvement.** What were the strong and weak points of the course and your teaching? What would you do differently next time? What did you find most interesting about this course? Most frustrating? In addition, list any specific ideas you have for improving your teaching.

**Compile selected course material.** Include copies of the course syllabus, examinations and assignments, course reader, handouts, and your teaching notes. Annotate the materials to give details about how you used them and your candid assessment of their effectiveness. Look critically at the materials to identify the kinds of intellectual tasks you set for students. Do the materials reflect adequate breadth and depth? Your commentary might respond to the following kinds of questions:

• Are fundamental concepts and core principles adequately addressed so that students can understand advanced ideas and research in the field?
• Is the treatment of the subject matter consistent with the latest research and thinking in the field? Is this material valuable and worth knowing?
• Are the topics logically sequenced? Does each topic receive appropriate attention relative to other topics?
• Do the readings represent the best work in the field? Do they offer diverse, up-to-date views? Are the reading assignments appropriate in level and length?
• Are the assignments effectively coordinated with the syllabus and well-integrated into the course? Are they appropriate in frequency?
• Do the tests and exams give students a fair opportunity to demonstrate their abilities? Do they adequately cover the subject matter? Do test questions assess students’ abilities to apply concepts as well as the accuracy of their recall?
• Are the standards for grading clearly communicated to students? Is the grading fair and consistent? Are written comments on papers constructive and helpful?

Include representative examples of student learning. As appropriate, include the distribution of students’ scores on tests; samples of students’ work with your comments; successive drafts of student papers with your comments for improvement; graded work from the best and poorest students in the course; and student publications and presentations done under your auspices. Remember to obtain students’ permission to keep copies of their papers, lab books, assignments, or reports.

Describe any instructional innovation or experiments you undertook. Whether your experiments were successful or not, discuss what you tried to do, and the effect on students and on your teaching. Include any efforts to get feedback from students during the term and changes you made in response; see Chapter 32, “Informally Assessing Students’ Learning” and Chapter 52, “Early Feedback to Improve Teaching and Learning.”

Comment on student ratings from the course. Include a copy of the student rating form and results, noting the response rate (the percentage of your students who turned in questionnaires). Respond briefly and candidly to the students’ evaluations and critiques, commenting on those aspects with which you agree and will change in the next offering and those with which you disagree; see Chapter 60, “Student Rating Forms.”

Assess your role with your graduate student instructors. If you worked with graduate student instructors (GSIs), review your role in guiding, supervising, and
evaluating them. What did you do that was especially effective in helping them learn how to teach? What did the GSIs do that was especially helpful to students or to you? How satisfied were you with the GSIs’ teaching performance? What would you do differently if you taught this course again? See Chapter 5b, “Guiding, Training, Supervising, and Mentoring Graduate Student Instructors.”

**Add any evaluations by reviewers or observers.** If colleagues or instructional consultants observed your course, interviewed your students, or reviewed your teaching materials, include their notes in your portfolio. If appropriate, add statements from faculty in your department or elsewhere on campus regarding the levels of preparation of your students for subsequent courses.

**House your hard-copy portfolio in a convenient form.** Store materials in labeled folders in a file drawer or box in a way that will be easy to update the next time you teach the course. A three-ring binder may also work well. Date all materials, and create a brief table of contents.

**Create an electronic portfolio.** Compared to hard copies, electronic materials are easier to update, navigate, and disseminate. An electronic portfolio can also include video and audio, or links to multimedia material. With an electronic portfolio, it is even more important to limit the amount of information and to organize it. Barrett (2003) describes how to create an electronic portfolio; examples of e-portfolios, pros and cons, and tools and resources are described in Batson (2002), Heath (2005), and Lorenzo and Ittelson (2005). The Open Source Portfolio Initiative (www.osportfolio.org), designed to work with the Sakai Project (www.sakaiproject.org), offers free software and templates and tools for faculty interested in developing e-portfolios. The Knowledge Lab at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning contains galleries of multimedia teaching portfolios and KEEP, a free toolkit (www.CarnegieFoundation.org/KML/KEEP/index.htm).

**Presentation Portfolios**

**Find out what your institution requires and how portfolios are evaluated.** Some observers (Burns, 1999, 2000; Pratt, 2005; Wright et al., 1999) have raised concerns about using portfolios for decisions about merit and promotion: faculty and administrators may not know how to review portfolios; there is scant research on the reliability and validity of faculty judgments with this type of data; portfolios can be time consuming to review; and reviewers’ own philosophies of teaching
may unduly influence their evaluations. Other observers (Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Centra, 2000; Zubizarreta, 1999) believe that portfolios can provide useful information when multiple reviewers work from clearly defined standards for evaluation. Quinlan (2002) analyzes how academics review a colleague’s portfolio, noting that reviewers tend to pay the most attention to student evaluations, the self-reflective essay, and the course syllabus. Quinlan also recommends that faculty whose teaching practices are unorthodox explain their rationale for reviewers. Bernstein’s guidelines (2002) for peer review of course portfolios focus on four areas for evaluation: the course’s intellectual content, the quality of teaching practice, the quality of student understanding, and the quality of self-reflection and development.

**Include materials that demonstrate your broad contributions.** Present your teaching contributions, both inside and outside the classroom. Organize the materials in a way that exemplifies your thinking about teaching, your current responsibilities, and your efforts to improve your performance. Provide a table of contents and a brief executive summary. A presentation portfolio could include some of the following (adapted from Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Knapper and Wright, 2001; Mues and Sorcinelli, 2000; Murray, 1995; O’Neil and Wright, 1995; and Seldin, 2004):

- description of teaching responsibilities (courses taught, enrollments, frequencies, office hours and advising, efforts to involve students in research and publications)
- statement of teaching philosophy, values, and beliefs
- discussion of teaching objectives, strategies, and methodologies
- representative instructional materials (syllabi, exams, assignments, course readers, course Web sites, handouts)
- evaluation activities conducted during the term (feedback on teaching and learning)
- end-of-term evaluations of your teaching by students
- classroom observations by faculty peers or administrators
- review of teaching materials by internal or external colleagues
- evidence of students’ learning (assignments with your comments, graded exams, other assessments)
- efforts to improve teaching (innovations, curricular revisions, conferences or workshops attended, grants for improving teaching and learning)
- contributions to the institution or profession (publications on teaching, participation in school partnerships to improve student learning)
- teaching recognition and awards
**Strive for brevity.** Keep your comments succinct, and present only those materials and documents that are accompanied by thoughtful analysis and reflection. Researchers recommend limiting text to ten pages, exclusive of appendices. (Source: Knapper and Wright, 2001)

**Show self-awareness, but don’t be overly self-critical.** You are unlikely to be rewarded for focusing on your weaknesses. Showcase your best work, and cast it in the best light. Nonetheless, your institution is likely to welcome some degree of candor, which should be accompanied by your plans for improvement. (Source: Murray, 1995)

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**References**


Mues, F., and Soricelli, M. D. *Preparing a Teaching Portfolio*. Amherst: Center for Teaching, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2000.


