Gathering Feedback on Instruction

Feedback on instruction is a process, not a one-time event. The success of instructors who regularly seek feedback on how and why their students are learning lends credence to the underlying premise of higher education: that lifelong learning is desirable and possible. In addition, instructors who regularly seek and respond to feedback are more likely to have positive results on their institutional feedback on instruction forms. When instructors are perceived by their learners as being adaptive to the learning community's needs, they're more likely to be assessed favourably. People generally understand that the needs of the many sometimes have to outweigh the needs of the few. What learners have zero tolerance for is an instructor who's perceived to have no interest in acknowledging and responding to the learning community's needs.

Milman (2006) recommends regular term *tune-ups* to elicit feedback of the learning:

> Just as every car needs regular tune-ups to see what is running well and what needs fixin'—so do most courses/instructors. I would like to know what you believe is running well with our class and what needs fixin'. Don't put your name on the form—your responses are anonymous. Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions. What you write will help me make the class more responsive to your concerns.
> 1. What's running well? (What most helps you learn in this class?)
> 2. What needs fixin'? (What impedes your learning, and how can realistic improvements or changes be made?) Please write anything else you'd like to share.
> (Milman, 2006, p. 68)

Stephen Brookfield (1990) recommends using a *critical incident* approach to eliciting feedback of the learning. A critical incident is an occurrence that warrants intervention. If something is compromising the learning process, you should want to know about it and be committed to restoring the learning process.

Take a moment to compare the above two feedback tools. What techniques do they have in common?

An effective feedback tool
- refers to a tangible event or action
- celebrates specific learning moments
- clearly identifies instances where learning was compromised
- uses simple language
- structures questions to require more than a one-word response
- provides examples or alternate wording to limit misunderstanding
- assures anonymity
- promises responsiveness (note: responsiveness doesn't mean that all students will get what they want)
- expresses gratitude

A feedback tool doesn't have to be as formal as the above examples. You might, for instance, simply ask students to respond to a question on a sticky note and ask them to park the note at a designated spot on their way out of class.

Sims-Knight and Upchurch (2001) suggest that

Instructors may be more effective if they put less effort into grading and commenting on students' products and more effort into structuring their courses to help students learn how to assess and reflect on their state of learning themselves... helping students to learn how to assess and reflect on their state of learning will help them learn how to provide their own feedback and thus help them to become independent life-long learners (p. 1).

Milman's (2006) and Brookfield's (1990) feedback techniques encourage students not only to identify what is and isn't working in the learning activities, but also to critically evaluate how both the activities and their participation in the activities might be altered to improve learning.

<u>Two 1-Minute Feedback Techniques</u>
Feedback can be fun, fast, and informative. Here are two quick and easy feedback techniques:

1. **One-Minute Paper**
   - What was the most important idea/insight you gained from today's class?
   - Which question most needs addressing in our next class?
2. **Muddiest Point**
   - What was the most confusing aspect of today's class?
   - What was the most poorly explained idea in today's class?

If you use this type of feedback technique, be sure to summarize the feedback and propose a response.

<u>Example #1</u>
Last class, I asked you to outline the muddiest point in our discussion on addressing dental hygiene concerns with parents of small children. Quite a bit of concern was expressed around how to diffuse parental indignation at having their dental hygiene routines questioned. I'm impressed that you're aware of the importance of safeguarding the relationships we build with our patients. Do you think some role plays would increase your comfort level? Does anyone have any other ideas about how we might address this concern? Our syllabus is pretty jammed this week, but I think we can find some time to delve into this topic next Tuesday. How does that sound?

<u>Example #2</u>
Last class, I asked you to submit one-minute papers outlining what most needs addressing in our next class. Some of you expressed concern over memorization of terminology. I can sympathize! Memory work was extremely difficult for me when I was in school, too. Memorization difficulties can be attributed to a number of causes, so I think this issue is best addressed one-on-one. I invite those of you who indicated concern to stop by my office so that I can work with you to "win the war" over these very long words! I will be in

my office between 2 and 3 this afternoon. If that time doesn't work for you, please contact me to set up an appointment.

Ideally, responses to feedback should be offered in class. However, an email or a notice through your institute's learning management system can be an efficient alternative.

Feedback on instruction is most effective when it's
1. regular
2. varied in terms of format
3. responded to in a timely manner

The Institutional Process of Feedback on Institution
Your institution will likely have a prescribed feedback on instruction process. Most post-secondary institutions require instructors to seek feedback using an institutionally approved process once per semester—usually at roughly the midterm point of the semester. However, it suits neither your purposes nor those of your students to wait until half the course is over to discover that the learning environment needs adjusting. Seek and respond to feedback on your students' learning regularly, and your formal feedback on instruction should hold few surprises!

A Word on Anonymity
Students tell us that anonymity affords them the psychological safety to be forthright in their feedback. Regardless of their age, students are engaged in a risky process: learning something new implies revealing the vulnerability associated with not knowing or not being certain about one's ability to achieve learning outcomes. While some students might use anonymous feedback as an opportunity to vent against you or your program, regular feedback and responsiveness to feedback counteract venting. It's unlikely you'll have to address the venting directly. Most students self-correct once they witness your response to reasonable requests.

From time to time, you'll recognize the author of a particular piece of feedback; you might recognize the handwriting, the event being described, or the language being used. Resist the urge to either confirm your suspicions or to inadvertently out the student—anonymity during feedback is a contractual agreement between you and your students.

A Final Reminder
Remember: responding to feedback doesn't mean you have to respond to each and every point that's been raised. Responding to the main concerns as they arise sends the message that you can be trusted to put the collective needs of the learning community first. In so doing, you create collective and individual trust. Students who are struggling and require individualized feedback are more likely to seek contact with you when you demonstrate trustworthiness in the larger group.

REFERENCES

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