

Looking Forward to Stuff Student Say in Evaluating Teaching: Why ask, what to ask, how to ask, and what to do with what they say

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Given that student comments in teaching evaluation forms are primarily about students' subjective experiences of a course, how do we focus on student experiences that are more substantial than surface-level? That is, what aspects of student experiences of a course are correlated with reasonable, reliable, and valid indicators of effective teaching and learning? Which of these aspects can we know ONLY by asking students about them? How might we ask them about their experiences of teaching in ways that they can describe meaningfully and substantially, with both reliability and validity while also mitigating implicit biases and cultural stereotypes about "excellent" teaching? And how should we then analyze, interpret, and use what they say for the purpose of evaluating teaching in equitable and inclusive ways?

Why ask? What to expect from student statements about subjective experiences

Due to limitations on their design and implementation, teaching evaluation forms are by necessity constrained to focus on students' self-reported and individual memories of their subjective experiences of a course at the end of a semester. They are indeed what Kirkpatrick (1994) classifies as at best a first-level or "reactions"-level measure of teaching effectiveness. This explains in large part why most student comments in such forms tend to be about mostly surface-level experiences of a course, such as a student's perception of an instructor's personality, style, charisma, delivery methods, etc., most of which have been shown to be influenced by implicit biases and cultural stereotypes of "excellent" teachers. Thus, using student experiences to measure teaching effectiveness is like using a thermometer to measure water quality. However, we can distinguish between surface-level experiences versus more substantial experiences of teaching. There are substantial experiences of effective teaching that students, and only students, can tell us about that are useful for evaluating teaching.

What to ask students about teaching? Significant vs. surface experiences of effective teaching

A growing body of research into the science and art of how we learn points to several characteristics of effective teaching that students experience in reliably meaningful and substantial ways across a wide range of courses and course-types. These lead to what L. Dee Fink terms "significant learning experiences" (2013), which involve an integration of active learning and motivational factors. This is an approach to teaching that digs deeper than "flashy" surface-level matters of polish and style, and yet precisely because these aspects of teaching are deeper they tend to be not as visible for students. Hence, we have to look for indicators of their presence in how students talk about their experience, rather than ask directly about them. For example, we can ask: how does a student's experience of learning look and feel when the learning is substantial, when it is meaningful, and when it engages a student's drive to learn? Contemporary research on effective teaching has a consensus on certain key characteristic experiences that students have when they are engaged in well-designed "learning-centered teaching" (see Ambrose et. al.; Weimer; Doyle). These are:

- Preparation: How students experience explicit instruction that prepares them to learn
- Practice: How students experience opportunities to practice their learning in low-stakes ways
- Feedback: How students experience the formative and challenge-based feedback they get
- Reflection: How students experience their own learning growth and development

How to ask students about teaching? Effective and inclusive questions about salient indicators

What are salient indicators of how a student talks about their experience in a course that can tell us that the course was characterized by effective learning-centered teaching? Here is how these might manifest in two types of courses, and how we might ask students in such courses about their experiences:

- Reading-heavy courses: Here, we can ask: what does a **significant** experience of reading-based learning look and feel like? Not from our perspective as the person assigning the reading, but from the

perspective of a learner? A surface view of experiencing a reading-load-heavy course might lead us to expect student comments along the lines of "ugh, there was too much reading" and etc. But consider: a course effectively designed around making reading itself a significant learning experience would have reading-based activities and assignments that engage students in meaningful and substantial ways. Such as, for example, getting students to prepare for the act of reading itself, teaching students how to tackle particularly challenging types of reading, pairing reading assignments with group-study pre-class exercises or reflective prompts that get students to see reading itself as an engaging activity that they find helpful to do outside of class before coming to class -- or even, "flipping" the reading work so that the work we assume and expect students to do outside of class, namely reading, becomes something they do inside the class. All of these have a common theme: they make the main work of learning in the class a central element of the experience of learning that students are asked to focus on, to pay attention to, to reflect on, to engage, to practice, to get feedback on, and to learn from. That work then becomes something that they experience as a significant marker of the course, so that by the end of the course, we can ask them to say more about how they experienced it. We might ask, for example, in a reading-heavy course, for students to reflect on "the preparation you received for tackling the reading assignments", or on "the feedback that helped you dive deeper into the readings", and so on. That allows us to glean whether students are experiencing a course where the teacher has built a richer and deeper level of engagement with the readings than a course where the instructor simply assigned a large amount of readings and expected students to "just do the readings."

- Fieldwork-heavy courses: Here too, we can ask what does a **significant** experience of fieldwork look and feel like versus a surface-level experience? A surface view might lead us to assume students saying things about what they liked about the course. A more significant view might lead us to consider to what level students experienced preparation and practice for fieldwork, to what level students were asked to reflect on their learning and debrief their field experiences during the course, to what level students received feedback on their field practices, etc. A course that does not have those elements built into it will look and feel very different for students than a course that does. And similarly, we can expect salient indicators from how students describe their experience of the course. If we asked about those particular elements, "tell me about the preparation you received for the fieldwork, about the practice you had, about the feedback you got, and about your own reflections during the course", we will get much deeper and richer experiential accounts from students that allow us to glean how effectively the instructor designed and taught the course.

What (not) to do with what they say?

We should recognize that students write these comments, and we read what they have to say, in a context where we are all shaped by consumer mindsets toward education, implicit biases, and cultural stereotypes about what (and who) we see as "excellent" teaching. Thus, once we have gathered what students say about teaching, we must have a clear and inclusive process for analyzing, interpreting, and using the indicators of teaching effectiveness for the purpose of evaluating teaching. This process needs to consider how we might read the same experience of an effective indicator of teaching in very different ways based on how the student and how we ourselves perceive the teacher being evaluated.

Resources & References

- Ambrose, S., et. al. (2010) *How Learning Works*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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