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It is the third week of class, and things are not going as well as you would like. You are not sure what might be wrong, but the students are looking either lost or bored. How can you find out what is happening now, before the end of the semester, when students usually fill out their evaluation forms?

Using Midsemester Student Feedback and Responding to It

Karron G. Lewis

Anyone who has tried a new teaching technique in the classroom realizes the complexity of educational research. What works for one teacher may not work for another. What worked in the 9:30 class may not work in the 10:30 class. Methods of teaching that stimulated students in the 1980s may miss the mark with students in the 2000s. One of the few ways for instructors to survive all of this complexity is to continuously evaluate what is happening in the classroom.

In their *Practical Handbook for College Teachers*, Fuhrman and Grasha (1983) stress that the evaluation process must have the following characteristics if it is to improve teaching and learning:

- Evaluation must be continuous. You need to know where you have been and how you are progressing. Changing teaching behaviors is often a slow and painstaking task. Thus, you need to check regularly to monitor for improvement and be encouraged by even small signs of progress.
- Evaluation must be broadly based. To discover yourself as a teacher, you need feedback on all aspects of your teaching: methods (lectures, discussion, group work), support methods (handouts, reading lists, syllabus, homework), and assessment techniques (tests, papers, presentations). You also need to use written response forms as well as informal conversations with students, and you need some idea of what happens to your students both in and out of the classroom.
- Evaluation must be descriptive and diagnostic. It is much more beneficial to know specifics (for example, that you mumbled, used too much technical language, or left too little time for questions) than to hear that the

class is boring or useless. Thus, the questions you ask and the forms you use for obtaining feedback need to be fairly focused.

- Evaluation must reflect your personal goals. The purpose of this evaluation is for you to find out about your classes, not to compare yourself with your colleagues. How well you are doing depends on your personal goals and objectives. You also need to take into account your personal style, your discipline, and the environment in which you teach in order for you to determine how effective your teaching actually is.

Exhibit 4.1. Classroom Reaction Survey

I would like to know your reactions to today's class. Please read each of the statements below and circle the letter corresponding to the response that best matches your reaction in today's class. Your choices are:

- a. No improvement is needed. (Terrific! This works for me. Keep it up!)
- b. Little improvement is needed. (Maybe a ragged edge or two, but don't lose any sleep over it.)
- c. Improvement is needed. (Not awful, but this merits some attention.)
- d. Considerable improvement is needed. (This is causing me problems. Please help.)

Today, the instructor . . .

- a b c d 1. Limited what was covered to a manageable amount of material.
 - a b c d 2. Made it clear why the material might be important.
 - a b c d 3. Told us what we would be expected to do with the material
(memorize it, use it to solve problems, or whatever.)
 - a b c d 4. Highlighted key ideas or questions.
 - a b c d 5. Presented plenty of good examples to clarify difficult material.
 - a b c d 6. Provided enough variety to keep us reasonably alert.
 - a b c d 7. Found ways to let us know whether we were understanding the
material.
 - a b c d 8. Helped us summarize the main ideas we were supposed to take
away from class.
 - a b c d 9. Let us know how we might be tested on the material.
 - a b c d 10. Provided exercises or an assignment so that we could practice
using the material.
11. What is your overall rating of today's class?
- A. Excellent
 - B. Good
 - C. Satisfactory
 - D. Fair
 - E. Poor

12. What made you rate today's class as high as you did?

13. What kept you from rating today's class higher?

This evaluation process can be strengthened by obtaining frequent feedback, which enables you to gauge more effectively what your students are learning and how well your teaching techniques and strategies are working.

Classroom Surveys

One simple way to acquire feedback on your teaching is through the use of brief surveys or evaluation forms. These forms can be used at any time during the semester and can be tailored to ask the questions for which you are interested in getting feedback. (Exhibits 4.1 and 4.2 provide samples of this type of survey form.) The survey results can be analyzed quickly, and you can usually make immediate adjustments in your teaching that will facilitate the learning of students and address some of their concerns.

Exhibit 4.2. Teacher Evaluation Form

Teacher's name: _____ Date: _____

Directions: Circle Y (yes) if the statement is **always** or **usually** true.

Circle N (no) if the statment is **never** or **seldom** true.

In multiple choice statements, check the appropriate space.

1. This teacher speaks clearly Y . . . N
2. This teacher explains things clearly Y . . . N
3. This teacher is stimulating and interesting to listen to. Y . . . N
4. The material presented is well organized Y . . . N
5. This teacher assumes the students know more than they actually do Y . . . N
6. This teacher's explanations are:

a. ___ too technical	b. ___ too simplified	c. ___ satisfactory
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7. Time spent on lecturing:

a. ___ too much	b. ___ too little	c. ___ satisfactory
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8. This teacher helps me understand the subject matter Y . . . N
9. This teacher encourages participation Y . . . N
10. The class (under this teacher) was paced:

a. ___ too fast	b. ___ too slow	c. ___ satisfactory
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Overall Evaluation

1. My learning in this class is **enhanced** by:

2. My learning in this class is **hindered** by:

3. Suggestions for improvement:

Exhibit 4.3. Teaching Analysis by Students, Form B

Instructor: _____ Class: _____

Date: _____

Instructions to Student

In this inventory you are asked to assess your instructor's specific classroom behaviors. Your instructor has requested this information for purposes of instructional analysis and improvement. Please try to be both thoughtful and candid in your responses so as to maximize the value of the feedback.

Please read each statement carefully and decide the extent to which you feel your instructor does not or does need improvement. Please respond to each statement by selecting one of the following:

- A—No improvement needed (very good or excellent performance)
- B—Little improvement needed (generally good performance)
- C—Improvement needed (generally mediocre performance)
- D—Considerable improvement needed (generally poor performance)
- E—Not a necessary skill for this course.

Please make your decisions about the need for improvement on the basis of what you think would be best for this particular course and your particular learning style. Try to assess each behavior independently rather than letting your overall impression of the instructor determine each individual rating.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S PERFORMANCE IN . . . (Please circle the letter corresponding to your response.)

1. making effective use of class time A B C D E
2. making clear the purposes of each class session and learning activity A B C D E
3. integrating the various topics treated in the course A B C D E
4. making clear the distinction between major and minor topics A B C D E
5. adjusting the rate at which ideas are covered so that I can follow and understand them A B C D E
6. clarifying material which needs explanation A B C D E
7. wrapping things up before moving on to a new topic A B C D E
8. assigning useful readings and homework A B C D E
9. maintaining an atmosphere which actively encourages learning A B C D E
10. responding to questions raised by students A B C D E
11. inspiring excitement or interest in the content of the course A B C D E
12. using a variety of teaching techniques A B C D E
13. taking appropriate action if students appear to be bored A B C D E
14. asking thought-provoking questions A B C D E
15. getting students to participate in class discussions or activities A B C D E
16. relating to students in ways which promote mutual respect A B C D E
17. explaining what is expected from each student A B C D E
18. making clear precisely how my performance will be evaluated A B C D E
19. designing evaluation procedures which are consistent with course goals A B C D E
20. keeping me informed about how well I am doing A B C D E

(over)

Section II—(Please circle the letter corresponding to your response.)

21. How much do you think you are learning so far in this course?
(Please tell **why** you responded the way you did in the space to the right of the options.)
 - a. A great deal
 - b. A fair amount
 - c. Very little
 - d. Nothing
22. In your judgment, how important is what you are being asked to learn in this course?
(Please tell **why** you responded the way you did in the space to the right of the options.)
 - a. Very important
 - b. Somewhat important
 - c. Not very important
 - d. Not at all important
23. In comparison to other instructors you have had (in high school and college), how do you rate the effectiveness of this instructor?
(Please tell **why** you responded the way you did in the space to the right of the options.)
 - a. One of the most effective (top 10%)
 - b. More effective than most (top 30%)
 - c. About average (middle 40%)
 - d. Not as effective as most (lower 30%)
 - e. One of the least effective (lowest 10%)
24. So far, what is your overall rating of this course?
(Please tell **why** you responded the way you did in the space to the right of the options.)
 - a. Excellent
 - b. Good
 - c. Satisfactory
 - d. Fair
 - e. Poor
25. What specific thing would help you most to better understand the material of the course?

Source: Adapted from the Teaching Analysis by Students (TABS) of the Clinic to Improve University Teaching, University of Massachusetts at Amherst (1974). Use of TABS B is granted to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Teaching and Learning Center by Glenn Erickson, director, Instructional Development Program, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, Rhode Island. (Minor modifications of TABS B made by Joyce Povlacs, instructional consultant, UNL Teaching and Learning Center.)

The Teaching Analysis by Students (TABS) form also provides information on what is going well and what could be changed to make learning more effective (see Exhibit 4.3). One of the benefits of this form is that the last four questions request that students indicate why they rated the question the way they did. These responses can provide specific information and possible ways to help the students learn more effectively. By adding up the

number of students who indicated that “little or no improvement is needed” and those who indicate “improvement or much improvement is needed,” you can create a bar chart or a table of the percentage of students who chose each response to share with the students. Sometimes students are surprised at the results of this analysis. Frequently, a very vocal but negative student may realize that he or she may be the only person who thinks things are not going well. On the other hand, you may find a particular area, such as your communication or interaction style, that may be hindering student learning.¹

To obtain feedback from your students concerning their learning, consider using classroom assessment techniques (CATs) in student evaluation feedback (Angelo and Cross, 1993), discussed in the article by Lieberman, Bowers, and Moore in this volume. These may be used frequently and can elicit specific feedback about what students are learning (or not learning) and how you are facilitating or hindering that learning. Some faculty members use one-minute papers or what is referred to as the Muddiest Point CATs at the end of each class session.² This information enables them to keep on top of student misunderstandings and questions and indicates to students that the instructor is concerned about their learning.

Several other quick yet highly informative feedback methods can also be used frequently. One asks the students to provide one or two things that you should start, stop, and continue. Encourage the students to provide very specific suggestions (see the article by Svinicki in this volume for ideas for specific feedback). Another quick possibility asks students to respond to the following questions:

- What in the class so far has helped your learning the most or do you like the best?
- What in the class so far has hindered your learning?
- What suggestions do you have to alleviate the problems or concerns listed in the second question?

Procedures for Obtaining Midsemester Feedback

Midsemester feedback is a tool to give teachers and students information on how the class is going and what might be done to make it a better learning environment. These techniques provide a way to find out what students are thinking before the end-of-the-semester evaluation. If you use these techniques, you have to be willing to respond to the information you receive. If you ask a question, be sure you can handle a negative as well as a positive response to that question. If not, do not ask it.

Prepare your students. At the beginning of the class period or at the prior class meeting, let them know what you are going to do and why you are asking for information. Their responses need to be as anonymous as possible, and you need to assure them that this is only to help you improve the learning environment. One faculty member I know uses CATs at the end of

every class and asks students to sign their names. He then can individualize feedback and use the filled-out forms to take attendance; they count as part of the students' participation grade. This procedure does not seem to have had any ill effects on the feedback or on his final evaluations.

Be sure the students understand the procedure for filling out the survey. Especially with the Class Reaction Survey and the TABS form (see Exhibits 4.1 and 4.3, respectively), go over the response options. They are not the same as most other surveys include; they ask whether improvement is needed rather than rating the item from Excellent to Poor.

After the students have responded, collect their responses, and read through them immediately after class if possible. Analyze the responses by noting how many times the same types of problems crop up and how many students responded to each response option. As you read the responses, consider how you might make changes, if indicated, and why you might not make some of the changes students request. Jot down your thoughts as you analyze the materials to help you compose the response you will share with the students.

Responding to the Students

Perhaps the most important part of conducting a midsemester feedback session is your response to the students. In your response, you need to let them know what you learned from their information and what differences it will make. For some of the items you will be able to report, "Forty-five percent of you thought that X was something that was really impeding your learning and that I need to change. I've considered what I might do differently, and here's what I've decided." Also be sure to point out the positive comments and the number of students who made them. Let the students know what adjustments, if any, you are making in your teaching as a result of the information they provided, and tell the students of adjustments they might make in their behavior to improve their learning. If you have done midsemester evaluations in previous years, talk to the students about how you have used these past comments and ratings to make changes in your classes. This openness will encourage them to be honest and more specific in their responses.

Case Study. To better understand how this process works, let's consider a concrete example of using midsemester evaluations. Here is a description of what happened to one instructor as a result of taking the time to gather data from the students while the class was still intact.

Dr. Brown was teaching a math class during the spring semester, and the end-of-semester evaluations from the students were quite low (2.3 to 3.0 on a 5.0-point scale). At the middle of the following fall semester, he decided to conduct a midsemester feedback session to see if this year's students felt the same way as last year's. He chose to use the TABS form so he could find out what students thought he was doing well and what he was

not doing so well. Figure 4.1 shows the results for the responses to the evaluation in the fall class and in the spring class, after he had made changes in his teaching and conducted the same evaluation. The items that the students rated are given in Table 4.1.

The ratings for the fall semester indicate that the students were quite satisfied with Dr. Brown's teaching on most of the items. However, over half of the students felt that changes needed to be made in the areas assessed by items 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. These five items deal with using a variety of teaching techniques and the ability to get students interested in the material. Dr. Brown discussed these results with a faculty development consultant, and together they came up with some changes in his teaching that might address the students' concerns. He also looked on the Web for resources that related to enthusiasm, various teaching techniques, and getting students involved in the class.

He decided to try using more active learning techniques (such as think-pair-share and group activities) that could be accomplished easily and without consuming much time. (In the think-pair-share procedure, students are given a problem or question to consider. They first *think* about it themselves and try to come up with a solution or answer. Then they discuss their solution in a *pair* with another student sitting nearby. After they have compared solutions and reached a level of agreement on the final solution, they are invited to *share* their solution with the whole class during an open discussion.) He decided to try asking the students to write one-minute papers at the end of class periodically to help him judge whether they were understanding the material and whether they had any questions.

He discussed the student responses and his ideas for change with his class about one week after they had filled out the feedback forms. He thus had time to think about what to focus on in his discussion and make transparencies of the graphs of the results to share. During this class session, he also asked for student comments and reactions. His openness encouraged students to participate and indicated to them that he was serious about responding to the information they had provided.

At the end of the fall semester Dr. Brown's end-of-semester evaluations were quite a bit better than they were the previous spring. During the midsemester break, he worked on incorporating more active learning strategies into his plans for the class, and around the middle of the following spring semester he again administered the TABS form to his students. The spring data in Figure 4.1 show that the percentage of students who said he did not need improvement on items 11 through 14 increased, and those who said he did need improvement on those items decreased. The only item that is a little puzzling is item 15 ("Getting students to participate in class discussion or activities"), which changed rather dramatically. He and the consultant surmised that this change occurred because he was trying to incorporate more active learning techniques, and now the students wanted to be involved even more. The overall ratings of the instructor and course

Figure 4.1. TABS Analysis, Spring and Fall Semesters

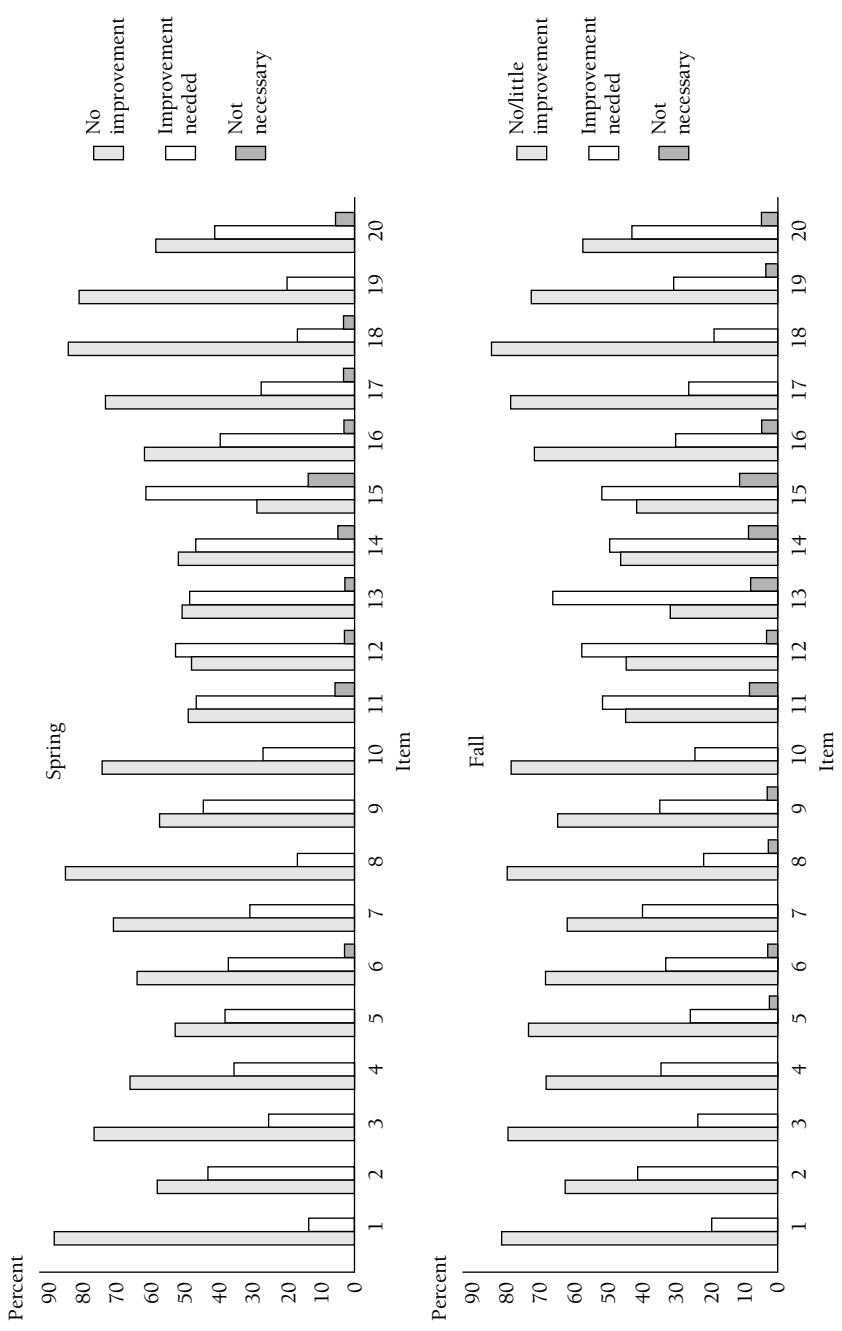


Table 4.1. TABS Items

-
1. Making effective use of class time
 2. Making clear the purposes of each class session and learning activity
 3. Integrating the various topics treated in the course
 4. Making clear the distinction between major and minor topics
 5. Adjusting the rate at which ideas are covered so that I can follow and understand them
 6. Clarifying material which needs explanation
 7. Wrapping things up before moving on to a new topic
 8. Assigning useful readings and homework
 9. Maintaining an atmosphere which actively encourages learning
 10. Responding to questions raised by students
 11. Inspiring excitement or interest in the content of the course
 12. Using a variety of teaching techniques
 13. Taking appropriate action if students appear to be bored
 14. Asking thought-provoking questions
 15. Getting students to participate in class discussions or activities
 16. Relating to students in ways which promote mutual respect
 17. Explaining what is expected from each student
 18. Making clear precisely how my performance will be evaluated
 19. Designing evaluation procedures which are consistent with course goals
 20. Keeping me informed about how well I am doing
-

showed some improvement too (see Table 4.2): a small shift toward more positive ratings.

The written comments on items 23 and 24 indicate that the primary way Dr. Brown could help the students understand the content more effectively would be to provide more examples and work more problems in class. Because this math course is primarily a skills course, the comment is not surprising.

Discussion of the Case Study. Thus, midsemester feedback can provide a great deal of information concerning how the students feel the class is going and how much they think they are learning. By using the data gathered from this form, an instructor can discover where changes might be made to address some of the concerns of the students. Each class is different, though, so you need to remember that and not be discouraged when large changes in the students' responses are not immediately evident.

Oral Feedback: Student Group Instructional Diagnosis

Feedback does not have to be written. Using the process known as student group instructional diagnosis, a peer or someone from your instructional development center can elicit verbal feedback from your students. In this technique, the peer or instructional consultant comes to your class and asks students to form small groups of four or five to discuss the following three questions:

Table 4.2. Spring Ratings of Instructor and Course

	<i>Fall Rating</i>	<i>Spring Rating</i>
Item 23: "In comparison to other instructors you have had, how do you rate the effectiveness of this instructor?"		
a. One of the most effective	11%	11%
b. More effective than most	25	29
c. About average	48	35
d. Not as effective as most	13	20
e. One of the least effective	3	5
Item 24: "So far, what is your overall rating of this course?"		
a. Excellent	14	20
b. Good	34	31
c. Satisfactory	34	27
d. Fair	15	13
e. Poor	3	9

- What in the class so far has helped your learning the most or do you like the best?
- What in the class so far has hindered your learning?
- What suggestions do you have to alleviate the problems or concerns listed in the second question?

Each group is given a sheet of paper on which to record their responses to the questions. After about ten minutes, the students reconvene as a large group, and one member of each small group reports what the group consensus was for each of the three questions. These are written on an overhead transparency by the consultant or peer. When there seems to be disagreement, the consultant asks for a show of hands to determine the approximate percentage of students who feel one way or the other. The student feedback is then summarized by the consultant or peer and shared with the instructor. This process keeps the feedback anonymous, since the consultant or peer does not know the students. After the comments have been shared, the instructor thanks the students for their participation and discusses what changes will be made.

Conclusion

You do not have to wait until the middle of a semester to ask for feedback. Getting feedback as soon as the third or fourth week can be useful as well as informative and provides plenty of time to make any changes. By engaging in this process early, you build rapport with the students. They see that you are interested in their ideas and suggestions and that you will take them into consideration. After you have had some time to make a few changes,

gather more information, using the same form again, to see whether the learning environment has improved.

Remember the four characteristics of the evaluation process discussed at the beginning of this article:

- Evaluation must be continuous.
- Evaluation must be broadly based.
- Evaluation must be descriptive and diagnostic.
- Evaluation must reflect your personal goals.

By keeping these characteristics in mind, you will be able to design feedback mechanisms that will help you constantly improve your teaching.

Notes

1. Additional midsemester feedback forms may be found on the Web site of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Texas at Austin: www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/getfeedback.

2. To use a one-minute paper, the instructor stops class two or three minutes early and asks students to respond briefly to some variation on the following two questions: "What was the most important thing you learned during this class?" and "What important question remains unanswered?" Students write their responses on index cards or half-sheets of paper and hand them in. The instructor quickly goes over the responses, summarizes the number of "most important things" and analyzes the questions, and then takes two or three minutes at the beginning of the next class session to address these responses.

The Muddiest Point is probably the simplest CAT to use. It provides high information return for low investment of time and energy. At the end of class (or at the end of a topic or unit), ask the students to jot down a quick response to the question, "What was the muddiest point in [a lecture, a discussion, a homework assignment, a play, or a film]?" The instructor reviews the answers and explains the one or two muddiest points further.

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