Activity: Dealing with Mid-term Evaluations

Activity Type: Homework, discussion

Goals: To help discussion leaders process the anonymous evaluations that their students provide mid-quarter.

Abstract before class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send email before midterms, reminding students to activate mid-quarter evaluations</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send email before training, reminding TAs to bring in printouts of evaluations</td>
<td>5 min</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Abstract during class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction, pass out worksheets</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAs fill out worksheets, compare final categories with neighbors</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss common comments, student wants vs needs, responding to comments.</td>
<td>10 min</td>
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Time needed: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Evaluation worksheets
- (optional) You may want to create a “sample” evaluation with student comments from your past discussions. It isn’t uncommon for a TA to forget to bring their evaluations, and this allows them to participate in the activity. Be sure your “sample” contains both positive and negative student comments.

Before class:

1. Have discussion leaders activate their evaluations.
2. Pass out evaluation worksheets. Have students bring evaluations to discussion.

In Discussion:

Welcome! You all remembered to bring your evaluation printouts with you, right? If you didn’t remember, I have a “fake” student evaluation set you can use.

Today, we are going to process student evaluations. Faculty often have a very difficult time with these, because the few negative responses are so much more powerful. We are going to take away the power of a negative evaluation by scoring your student comments and grouping them into categories, so they just become numbers instead of personal attacks.

I’m passing out a worksheet for you to use now, and we are going to look specifically at the student comment sections. Everyone has a worksheet? Okay, the first batch of student comments is addressing the question “Provide comments about the instructor’s effectiveness as a teacher.”

Most student comments can be organized into one of four categories of teaching:

a. subject (material choice, level of material)
b. organization (how material is presented, how discussion time is used)
c. interaction (how well you interact with students as a group or one-on-one)
d. enthusiasm (attitude towards material and teaching)

Use colored highlighters or a numbering system to mark each type of comment. In the boxes on your worksheet, record the number of comments you received of each type.

(Give TAs time to work on these. Some will score more carefully than others. Time is tight, so help them finish this part in about 5 minutes)

Okay, I know you haven’t fully completed this part yet, but you understand how it works now, and have gathered some data. So let’s move on to the second batch of student comments. This question is a bit more free-form: “Is there anything specific the instructor might do that might help you?” What I’d like you to do is skim the list of responses and note the kinds of things that are most commonly asked for. Do this in, like, a minute. Then write these requests in your worksheet, and go through again and tally the number of times students ask for these things. I’ll give you another 5 minutes. Go!

(Again, keep things moving briskly)

Let’s talk a little bit about the sorts of things that students asked you for. Are there any on your list that you don’t feel super sympathetic about? (TAs respond, you write list on the board).

Okay, good. What are some examples of requests that you think are reasonable? (write down) Which are you not sure about?

Student requests can be borne out of laziness or an honest appraisal of what helps them learn. A good understanding of pedagogical theory helps you recognize the difference. Here is a quick summary:

Lazy requests: things that students may want that you know doesn’t help learning:
- Cover more material
- Summarize lecture material
- Provide study guides
- Hold review sessions
- Lecture more
- Less group work
- Fewer student presentations
- Tell them what will be on the exam

How many of you got students asking for less group work? Yes, they always do that. Many of them do indeed find group work to be frustrating and a waste of time. But part of your job as an instructor in an active-learning classroom is to explain why you are maximizing their learning by having them do things that are difficult and uncomfortable.

Valid requests: things students may want that you may consider changing:
- Make discussion material more relevant to lecture material
- Draw on board more
- Lecture less
- Slow down explanations
- More demonstrations
- More sample exam problems
- More study techniques
- More variety in discussion activities
- More time to ask questions

Okay, we are out of time (we are always out of time!), but hopefully you have a better sense how to organize your evaluation data and make sensible decisions about what to work on and what to keep. Some general advice to end with:

1. Don’t try to change too many things. If you have a weakness in both organization and enthusiasm, chose one to work on for the remainder of the quarter.
2. Give your students feedback on their evaluative work. Thank them for their comments, and discuss what you will change.
3. When you decide to NOT give them something they want (study guides, less group work), explain to them why.
4. Consider using your report on your evaluations as a natural segue into teaching them how to make study sheets or lecture outlines for themselves. These make good discussion activities.
Dealing with Mid-Quarter Evaluations

1. Survive the first reading
Before we go any further, know that even the best teachers get negative comments. It’s normal to be depressed or angry after reading them. Remember that negative comments do not deserve more response or respect than positive ones.

2. Organize comments
Question: Provide comments about instructor’s effectiveness as a teacher

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment Type</th>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>Final count</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
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<td>Interaction</td>
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<td>Enthusiasm</td>
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3. Organize requests
Question: Is there anything specific the instructor might do that might help you?

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4. Interpretation:
(From #2) Which area of teaching are you best at? Which needs the most work?

(From #3) What request is legitimate and deserving of your attention? What request will you explain is not in their best interest?