RESPONDING CONSTRUCTIVELY TO STUDENT FEEDBACK

Responding to Students' Comments

Frequently so much attention is focused on the methods used and on the distribution and collection of data that the final and most important stage of the student evaluation process is often neglected. Development is only possible when steps are taken to analyse students' comments and incorporate their suggestions into applied strategies for change (Edström, 2008).

Keane and MacLabhrainn (2005) provide some pointers to approaching students' comments. These include:
Keeping in mind factors such as student, course and teacher characteristics and any other contextual factors that might explain a particular response
Considering if there are any sources of bias that may have influenced how or why a student answered as they did
Being aware of any situational explanations that may help to explain comments
Ensuring that the number of respondents is adequate to be reliable and representative
Gathering information from additional sources – this will provide an indication of whether the comments received are valid concerns, or simply the grievances of a disgruntled student

Advice from Stanford University states that the first consideration when reflecting on feedback is "What did I hope to accomplish in this class?" and "How well do I think the class met these goals?" Such reflection helps to put student comments in perspective and provides a basis for comparison for the more unexpected comments. Rather than approaching comments en masse they should be categorised for ease of interpretation. Three methods of categorisation are presented below:

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

- The first stage is to broadly sort comments into those that emphasise strengths of the module and those that focus on weaknesses
- Within these two categories the comments that are voiced most often should be placed at the top, and less frequently raised issues at the bottom
- These can then be grouped thematically (i.e., whether they address assessment, delivery, feedback etc)
- This will help to put idiosyncratic comments into perspective and identify the most important areas of strength and weakness.
- Issues that have been raised most often should receive priority consideration

APPROACHING AND CATEGORISING RESPONSES

This example gives an account of one method suggested by Riener (2006). It advocates a break between an initial review of comments and attempts to categorise feedback into meaningful themes to be addressed.

> First, I read through the evaluations carefully and let them sink in. At this point, any negative comments or below-average ratings stand out in stark relief and hurt my feelings. I am defensive and dismissive. This is natural. I remind myself that this same thing happens with many of my students who try hard for a particular assignment and are disappointed with their grade and my comments. Then, I put down the evaluations for one week.
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> Second, at least one week later, I read through the evaluations again. I am more able to take the negative comments objectively now, without being defensive. I seek to determine first whether they are concerned with the planning of the course, with the execution of the course, or with my teaching style in general (rather than focusing on what personal defect led that student to make such a criticism of my teaching). This step allows me to classify each comment without responding to it.
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> Third, after addressing particular comments, I try to identify main themes—in areas of success, as well as areas where there is room for improvement. The goal of this step is to distinguish between representative attitudes and particular concerns or the preferences of a single student. Returning to individual comments, I can now see if they are instances of a larger concern or instances of individual learning styles. Comments not attached to a main theme can now present interesting case studies. In the past I have found that they can represent how the pace or the difficulty of the course does not satisfy all the levels student in the course.

Comment Categories and Possible Affective and Productive Responses[1]

This table can help to prioritise comments, establish which are relevant and constructive, and help to consider possible responses. Suggestions for change should result from the productive, rather than the affective, response.

[1] Based on a resource developed by University of Oregon on responding to course feedback

Student Comment(s)	Affective Response (How you feel about the comment)	Productive Response (How you could use the comment)
Unrelated Comments "I wish you would have occasionally worn something other than blue!"		
Mixed Reaction Comments Half the class wrote: "I love the small group activities" / The other half wrote, "I hated all the small group stuff."		
Unexpected Comments You thought the class went well but student ratings and comments placed you below the departmental average.		
Teaching-Specific Comments "You went way too fast; You just read your lectures to us; You talked to the board all the time; You never really answered our questions."		
Effort-Related Comments "You worked us WAY too hard in this class. There was too much reading and you had us write too many papers."		
Assessment-Related Comments "There was far too much assessment; We had too much to submit in the last week."		
Fairness Comments "You were completely unfair & didn't students the same."		
Vicious Comments "This was a complete waste of my time and money. This instructor should be fired."		

IMPLEMENTING CHANGES

Positive or negative comments alone do not automatically lead to module improvements (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001). Lecturers have to translate comments to tangible changes in module design, content, delivery, or assessment though they have traditionally received little support in this process (Richardson, 2005). Focus should be directed not on teaching 'performance', but on how changes can improve students' learning experience.

Responding appropriately to feedback is a key element of an academic's professionalism (Eraut, 2004). Knowing how many, or the extent of changes to implement is a concern, as is implementing unnecessary changes because of the need to appear responsive to student views (Arthur, 2009). Once key issues affecting teaching and learning have been identified, only a small number should be selected for closer examination. It is more beneficial to successfully develop one aspect of the module than to invest time and effort in a large number of small changes that may be difficult to manage and have a negligible effect.

CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

A major criticism of student evaluation of teaching is that generally, it does not close the feedback loop (Watson, 2003). After data and comments have been analysed and implemented, results and actions should be communicated back to students. This should occur as soon as possible (Gross Davis) and doesn't have to be overly detailed.

Some of the issues raised by students may be quite easily and quickly addressed and evidence of the actions that are being taken should be made explicit to students. Other issues that arise may not be so easily addressed and may require attention and action over an extended period of time. As long as the plan of action is outlined to students and the reasons for any possible delay(s) explained students will continue to attach value to the evaluative process (Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005).

By closing the loop students appreciate the value of the importance and are more likely to participate constructively in future evaluation surveys rather than using the process to vent frustration (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008).

Several strategies can be used in providing feedback to students:

Keane and MacLabhrainn (2005)
Lecturer gives a verbal report back to the class Student rep reports back to the class Information being posted on a relevant notice board Report to committees which have student representatives on board Student newsletters Email all students involved with a report on the results A posting on a restricted-access (via password) website
Watson (2003)
Including information on improvements made in course prospectuses / student papers Summary of key results and actions on glossy leaflets and flyers Using the institution's VLE

Additional tips on closing the feedback loop from Griffin and Cook (2009) include:

Integrate student participation

Staff should make students aware of the role and importance of feedback and evaluation from the beginning of the module. In addition to raising awareness at an early juncture, this would provide an opportunity to inform them of how previous suggestions have impacted on their module and acknowledge their rights and responsibilities.

Work in Partnership

There should be efforts for the staff involved in survey should meet the learners to explore how they can contribute to overcoming issues raised by the process. One benefit of this 'participant initiated' practice is that it allows the student to understand the constraints under which lecturers are often required to while allowing them to actively engage in solving problems.

Create an armoury of quality

Gather feedback from a variety of sources so that student data could be triangulated with other data collected. The roles of peers (in teaching observations and reviews) or informal staff-student committees etc may provide some balance or insight.

Get the climate right

There should be a positive climate for feedback within the school - a no-blame ethos that encourages active participation and acceptance of feedback. Academics should be supported in their ability to:

- give and receive feedback
- set evaluation in a real-world context
- transform constructive feedback into meaningful, communicated actions.

Support for Implementing Changes

TEACHING RESOURCES ONLINE

There is a wealth of evidence-based teaching resource on the UCD Teaching and Learning website, which can be downloaded and perused at your leisure. The resources are informed by best practice nationally and internationally and have been specially prepared by the T&L lecturers in educational development, with input from other UCD colleagues.

UCD PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMMES IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Professional Programmes in University Teaching and Learning (delivered by UCD Teaching and Learning) offer faculty and staff who teach, opportunities to review and improve their teaching skills and their understanding of approaches and theories in effective higher education. Benefits for faculty at the start of their careers include the development of skills to work effectively in the classroom and draw on pedagogical theory to inform their teaching. The programmes offer more experienced faculty the opportunity to re-energise their teaching and to try out new approaches to assessment and curriculum design.

TEACHING AND LEARNING WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS

A variety of UCD Teaching & Learning workshops and events take place throughout the year. Keep an eye on the Teaching and Learning Calendar for details.

PEER SUPPORT

Peer support is an option not always explored by lecturers (Smith, Welicker-Pollak, 2008). Discussions with colleagues to establish how similar issues have been addressed in their modules, or for advice on how to change an aspect of teaching has been shown to be an effective way to improve teaching practice (Ory, 2000) and helps to create and promote a collaborative environment (Airasian and Gullickson, 2006).

SCHOOL OR COLLEGE SUPPORT

Support for development may also be available at the school or college level from your School Head for Teaching and Learning or Vice Principal for Teaching and Learning or Fellow in Teaching and Academic Development.

OTHER SUPPORT

Other providers of training and support exist within UCD such as IT Services, HR, or Library Services.

UCD TEACHING & LEARNING

For support with any aspect of your teaching practice contact one of the UCD Teaching & Learning Staff.