

Editorial

Student Evaluations
of Teaching*There Is More to Course Evaluations
Than Student Ratings*

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With the end of the academic year nearly upon us, my advice is: Do not rely only on student evaluations of teaching for making decisions about course revision and judging the quality of your teaching. Student evaluations are important, but they are an insufficient source of information about your course and teaching.

Course evaluation may take place within the context of program evaluation, with reviews of courses done on a cyclical basis as part of a school's self-study for accreditation or as required by the institution. Those types of evaluations, though, typically do not provide the feedback we need as teachers to make decisions about course revisions such as changing teaching methods, student learning activities, assignments, and other aspects of the course. You should evaluate your own courses and teaching both formatively and summatively. Set a time midpoint in the course to review each of your classes, the learning activities in which students engaged, assignments done to date in the course, and other aspects. You can ask yourself 3 questions: Are students learning what they need to in the course? What teaching strategies and learning activities were effective? What should be changed for the rest of the course? You can ask students to assess your course at midpoint using similar types of questions: Are students satisfied with the extent of their learning in the course? What is going well in the course, and what recommendations do they have for the remainder of the course? Share the feedback with students and discuss what changes you will make, if any, based on their input. When doing a midpoint course evaluation, you need to be willing to make at least 1 change in the course or explain to students why none of their suggestions can be implemented.

At the end of the course, it is important to evaluate the course more systematically. Here are a few questions to

guide your review: Did students learn what they needed to in the course and, if not, why not? Is the content current and evidence based, or does it need to be updated? Do your teaching methods engage students actively in the course? Are the learning activities appropriate for the outcomes, do they help student learn, and do they promote higher-level thinking? Are there sufficient examples, cases, and other strategies for students to apply concepts they are learning to clinical situations? Are expectations of students appropriate and clearly communicated to them? Is there sufficient time spent on learning the key concepts in the course? Review each course assignment and identify the related course outcome it is helping students meet. If you cannot find an outcome, then that assignment may not be needed. Map out other important areas to evaluate for the courses you teach.

To provide additional input on your course, ask a colleague you trust to review your course and instructional materials, observe your teaching, and provide feedback. This feedback from peers is another source of data for making decisions about course revision and for improving your teaching. If you teach online, give that individual access to your online course. Peer review of your materials and observations of your teaching are intended for formative evaluation only—they should not be shared with department chairs or promotion and tenure committees.¹ Feedback from peers is for you alone.

What about student ratings of courses and teachers? Students offer a unique view because they engage with you and other students for the entire course. They can rate their satisfaction with your course and teaching methods, how well the course was organized, your ability to explain material clearly, whether the assignments fostered their learning, your fairness in evaluation, and your enthusiasm. Students, however, cannot judge the accuracy, depth, and currency of the content—they do not have the knowledge base to make those judgments—but colleagues can review the content for you as part of peer review.

All nurse educators should be aware of the research on student evaluations of teaching. These studies reveal

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variables that can affect how students rate your course and teaching, and the findings may help you interpret your own ratings. Most of these studies indicate that student evaluations of teaching are not affected by the teacher's age, gender, race, personal characteristics, and research productivity.² The student's age, gender, and grade point average and the time of day the course is offered also do not appear to influence ratings by students of your teaching effectiveness.² However, student ratings are affected by class size. Annan and colleagues³ review of the research indicated that the larger the class size, the lower the student ratings. In another systematic review, there was a tendency for smaller classes to receive higher ratings, although it was a weak correlation, and for graduate courses to be rated higher than lower-level courses.² Studies have shown that required and mandatory courses tend to be rated lower than electives.^{2,4}

A word about student comments: Most rating forms invite students to provide narrative comments about the course and teacher. While often these comments are positive and offer valuable feedback, other times they are not constructive. Some comments may even be contradictory: half of the students indicate an assignment increased their learning, and the other half say it was a "waste of time." One of the problems with narrative comments is they are not organized in any way. A strategy is to group your evaluations according to the overall course rating; that is, 1 group has the highest ratings of the course overall, and the other group has the lowest ratings. This provides a context for student comments. You can review the comments of students who rated the course as excellent or gave it the highest numerical rating and have suggestions for improving the course compared with students who were dissatisfied with the course

and rated it low overall. You also can read through the comments and sort them according to some categories you develop, for example, organization of the course, clarity of explanations, interactions with students, feedback, and enthusiasm. This allows you to identify consistent comments and patterns of comments that might lead to improvements in your course and teaching approaches. Lastly, keep student comments in perspective. They are not the only source of data on your course and teaching effectiveness, and they reflect student views at 1 point in time. Often students realize only later why a course and assignments were critical to their learning.

A new meta-analysis of studies on student evaluations of teaching revealed no significant correlations between student ratings and learning outcomes.⁵ Let's focus on how best to guide student learning and less on student evaluations of teaching.

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