

Feedback and Evaluation of Teaching

It is good practice to routinely monitor the quality and effectiveness of courses and modules. There are a number of ways of doing this through feedback from students or colleagues.

Purposes of Feedback and Evaluation

Feedback and evaluation can serve different purposes, and so, it is useful to think about what exactly you want to evaluate before choosing a suitable method.

Are you evaluating:

- yourself as a lecturer or facilitator;
- course/module;
- programme;
- students;
- the school.

It is good practice to routinely monitor the **quality of courses/modules**. You can obtain useful information to help modify or re-design courses and obtain insights into the students' perspectives on the module, how it fits with other parts of the course, how much effort they are putting in and the perceived level of difficulty or interest in the topic.

Feedback can also help to address potential issues in the **delivery or organisation** of the course and discover and resolve potential problems that arise with particular groups of students or individuals (e.g. non-native language, anxieties, etc).

Feedback records can also serve useful as evidence for probation, promotion, awards or other purposes.

It is important to emphasise that student feedback is only one possible source of information and therefore provides a particular perspective. To fully evaluate the effectiveness and the operation of a course or teaching team a wider range of inputs is necessary, some of which are detailed below.

Evaluations can be carried out formatively or summatively and generally, it is advisable to have a mix of both formative and summative evaluation types, allowing you to make changes while they are still of value to the current student cohort and then assess the impact of those changes.

Feedback and Evaluation methods

Feedback questionnaires

Probably the most prevalent method of getting feedback is through the use of feedback questionnaires.

Paper-based questionnaires, if administered in class, may yield quite a high response rate. The downside of such is the amount of time and effort required in processing the data, whether via scanner or by hand.

Online questionnaires, because of their overuse (not just in the students' university experience) can mean low rates of

return. Some techniques (even just stressing the importance) to promote completion should be considered.

Pre-built, standard questionnaires in Blackboard format are available for download from the Blackboard help pages and can be readily embedded in any module. These can also be customised to include staff or schools' own preferred questions or queries. The system allows anonymous submissions, simple analysis, and offers data in downloadable, spreadsheet format.

A key aspect to bear in mind is that of evaluation overload, or **survey fatigue**. Some consideration therefore should be made to this issue and simple, quick surveys may be more suited to routine feedback

Simple in-class methods

Rich feedback can be obtained by asking open questions (paper-based or online via Blackboard) of students such as the classic three examples:

- What's good about this module?
- What's not so good?
- What suggestions do you have for improvement?

Processing data from such feedback (written submissions or online), can take time. However, in practice, common themes are often quickly identified and because the questions are open, issues which the lecturer/course coordinator may not have anticipated but which are important to the students can be revealed.

Asking these questions mid-semester when it is still possible to make adjustments to the module is a valuable approach, particularly if the issues raised are readily rectifiable. Indeed, these questions form the basis of the existing mid-semester feedback scheme (see next), but there is no reason why such feedback cannot be sought routinely rather than having to depend on the presence of an external facilitator, etc.

Mid-Semester Evaluation or Grouped Student Feedback Scheme

In NUI Galway, it is possible to arrange an independent external facilitator to take 15-20 minutes at the end of a lecture to arrange students into small groups and complete the response to the three basic questions referred to in the previous section.

As a small group activity, students need to reach agreement on the feedback they submit and after some small discussion, this usually leads to a more considered set of responses. Also, students may be more forthcoming about issues with an independent facilitator than with the lecturer concerned. The entire process is confidential which is reassuring for both students and the lecturer concerned.

Unfortunately, this process is costly. The use of an external facilitator, who collates, summarises and analyses the feedback in the form of a detailed report, requires payment which to date has been provided via CELT from a number of sources. With budget constraints this limits the scalability of the process. However, a basic version of such a process could be undertaken internally, perhaps facilitated by colleagues from within or outwith the school. Trust and confidentiality will however be important for success.

Partnerships for Learning & Teaching (PLT) - Peer Review and Observation

PLT partnerships are a very effective and informative method of receiving feedback on some aspect of your teaching practice, be it with respect to a lecture, practical session, or a review of materials or resources you provide. Typically, an academic staff member will pair with a 'critical friend' or peer who agrees to attend and review a teaching session of their choosing, and this is then reciprocated. The issues to be reviewed or observed are agreed in advance and then a final feedback discussion is held. Those who have used this approach have found it to be highly effective and a direct means of strengthening collegiality and a sense of mutual support in a non-threatening context. Partners are often paired from separate disciplines providing refreshing and alternative perspectives. However, it can also be advantageous to organise such within related cognate fields, particularly if the content of the teaching event under review is a major focus. The reported benefits are often focused on the value of observing another person's approach to teaching, rather than simply having one's own practice subject to scrutiny.

Simple Progress Checks

A lot can be gained from informal discussion with students and class representatives at the end of a lecture or in tutorial/seminar sessions.

Checks on attendance and levels of participation can help highlight issues that may need more attention or investigation.

Performance on tasks, assignments and routine assessments also of course provide some indication as to student progress, which can be combined with direct and indirect feedback.

The Class Rep system and School meetings

Student nominated/elected class representatives are normally invited to attend School meetings. Ideally, this will result in students being better informed of School-level decisions related to their education. An item on the agenda should be allocated to class representatives and student issues. It is also important to ensure class reps consult regularly with class members and act on their behalf at school meetings.

It may also be worth considering involving students at a more direct level in the other feedback methods mentioned above. One example would be to allow student reps to collate and summarise feedback from module questionnaires. This gives them a more responsible role and provides a greater sense of ownership in the process as well

as raising the quite legitimate expectation that such feedback will be considered and, where appropriate, acted upon by staff members or at the School level as appropriate.

Learning Journals

Reflective learning journals are a very useful method of encouraging students to reflect on their learning, the learning environment, and the topics discussed in class. Not only can they be a very rich source of feedback on how students are progressing through a course, they are also a valuable learning activity.

“Closing the Feedback Loop”

Evaluation of modules and courses is sometimes seen as an add-on or afterthought to a course or module, when in fact it should play a key role in the course life-cycle. The evaluation process is also an opportunity for the development of a greater sense of participation and student responsibility.

It is essential that the results of feedback and the actions taken in response to such are **communicated back to students**, in person at tutorials or lectures, via email or Blackboard. This demonstrates the value of participating in the process, shows that the School and academic staff are responsive and reflective practitioners. It may well be that some changes suggested by students are not feasible or appropriate, but in these cases it is even more important to let the students know why or what the practical constraints may be. Reporting back should be to students who participated (and not just comments to new cohorts), even if they are now moving on to another module or year of the programme.

Resources

Examples of feedback questionnaires, protocols for various methods and other relevant information are available from the CELT website (<http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt>) under Teaching, Learning and Assessment.

Details on deploying module questionnaires on Blackboard are available from the Blackboard help pages (<http://www.nuigalway.ie/blackboard>), under Staff Resources -> Assessing Learners -> Module Feedback Survey.

Summary

- What am I evaluating?
- Formative or summative?
- Quick progress check or specific in-depth feedback?
- How will I communicate the results to concerned parties?

If you would like to discuss these or related issues, please feel free to contact CELT:

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/celtwelcome/staff.html>