

Opening the Black Box: Collecting and Using Student Feedback to Guide and Improve Instruction

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Abstract:

To complement the end-of-course student ratings of instruction, this article presents a framework for collecting qualitative data on the quality of learning and teaching in freshman college composition courses. Through letters and questionnaires completed at the beginning, middle, and end of each course, in addition to learning journals, students provided regular feedback on learning and teaching. Data analysis revealed that the instructor of these courses found the feedback helpful in monitoring, guiding, and improving instruction. The analysis also revealed that the majority of students perceived the regular exchange of feedback as having a positive effect on the quality of instruction, class communication, and learning environment.

Keywords: assessment of learning, evaluation of instruction, student feedback, formative evaluation, classroom dialogue, learning environment

1. Introduction: Student Evaluation of Instruction

Since the mid-20th century, student feedback has been used extensively in the evaluation of instruction in most U.S. colleges. The feedback is collected through end-of-course questionnaires called, among other descriptors, Student Ratings of Instruction (SRIs), and the data are mainly used for personnel decisions, such as pay raises, faculty retention, tenure, and promotion (Aleamoni, 1981; Cashin, 1988; Cashin, 1995; Cashin, 1999; Marsh & Roche, 1993; Marsh & Roche, 1997). However, based on extensive studies conducted on these evaluations (Schmelkin, Spencer, & Gellman, 1997; Seldin, 1993; Seldin, 1999; Theall & Franklin, 1990; Theall & Franklin, 2000), researchers have found that SRI data are less useful to teachers and students than to administrators due to the following:

1. The questionnaires contain global items that solicit responses with overall impressions. The evaluations are, therefore, holistic in nature, lacking in professional standards for evaluating instructional effectiveness, and are completed according to each student's standards or perceptions of an effective instructor.
2. Because the questionnaires are administered at the end of a course, they are ex post facto, making it impossible to help the very students who are completing these forms.
3. The instructors have no way of knowing whether a response is in reference to a particular situation, an individual instructional strategy, or the overall instructional effectiveness throughout the course.
4. Students respond retrospectively (and hurriedly) to the questions, making it difficult for them to remember the performance of the instructor over the span of weeks or months.

Furthermore, practitioners have found other factors that render student ratings ineffective, which include "(1) students not being made aware of the purpose and ramifications of their evaluations, (2) the anonymous nature of student evaluations, (3) the invalid analysis of SEF [Student Evaluation of Faculty], and therefore, (4) SEF in effect being anecdotal and hearsay data. Since most SEF results are prepared anonymously, an instructor has no recourse to confront his/her evaluators" (Haskell, 1997, p. 14). Although these limitations do not prevent administrators from using SRI data to make high-stakes decisions involving faculty, they highlight the need for a formative evaluation of instruction that uses student feedback to improve instruction and course design (Hoyt & Pallett, 1999; Marincovich, 1999; Ory, 2001; Wagenaar, 1995).

One way to address the disadvantages of SRIs is to provide instructors with specific, ongoing feedback from students to help maximize teaching effectiveness (Hoyt & Pallett, 1999; Lewis, 1994; Theall, Abrami, & Mets, 2001; Theall & Franklin, 1990; Theall & Franklin, 2000). Ongoing evaluation offers opportunities for reflection, learning, and growth for both students and instructors and opens channels for collaboration and feedback that is acted on in a timely manner (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Youssef, 2012). Thus, a course-integrated system that generates timely and ongoing data for evaluating the effectiveness of instruction can help instructors regularly monitor the quality of instruction and tailor it to the learners' needs within a particular course. Another advantage of such a system is the significance that students assign to the feedback. When teaching evaluation is integrated within a course, students feel that their feedback counts because the instructor takes the time and effort to read it on an ongoing basis.

Moreover, when their feedback is taken into account in making instructional decisions and students see the outcome through modifications, they assign more positive value to the evaluation of teaching. When students perceive an evaluation system as having a direct impact on their learning, they become motivated to take the system more seriously, a view confirmed by Chen and Hoshower (2003) in a study where they found that improvement in teaching was the most desirable outcome for students in a teaching evaluation system. Students will invest their time and effort to provide quality input only when they feel there will be a return on that investment. Therefore, it is necessary to provide opportunities where students can get involved in the ongoing evaluation of teaching, since "active participation and meaningful input from students are critical factors in the success of a teaching evaluation system" (Chen & Hoshower, 2003, p. 72).

An important principle underlies the use of SRIs: to know about teaching behaviors, ask those who experience these behaviors firsthand. Although, in theory, SRIs are a relatively valid source of feedback on teaching performance, the timing and frequency of the feedback from SRIs reduce that validity. A single, multiple-choice form administered at the conclusion of a course does not provide useful feedback for an instructor who is trying to maximize teaching effectiveness (Ferguson, 2001; Ory, 2001; Schmelkin, Spencer, & Gellman, 1997). This is what prompted the instructor in this case study to collect ongoing, timely student feedback that could be used to maintain effective instructional strategies and adjust or improve ineffective ones within a particular class. Feedback was initially collected using Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Cross and Steadman, 1996) but several trials resulted in a more consistent process for collecting student feedback through informal letters and questionnaires administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the course, in addition to student learning journals.

2. Context and Methodology

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the letters and questionnaires used to provide the data in this case study were collected from six composition and critical thinking classes taught by the same instructor over the course of two years at a private university in southeastern United States. With a total enrollment of 105 students, these classes generated 290 documents in the form of three data sets divided as follows: 105 letters to the instructor (completed at the beginning of the course), 80 midterm evaluation questionnaires (completed midway through the course), and 105 final reflections essays (completed at the end of the course). Students were advised that completing all these documents was optional, and no grades were deducted from students who chose not to provide input.

The response rate in the first data set was 100% because all the students who attended the first class meeting were encouraged to write the letter to the instructor as their way of introducing themselves to the instructor. Students were informed that the letter would be read by the instructor but not graded or assigned credit. The number of completed questionnaires in the second data set was lower, with a response rate of 76%, due to student absences. The response rate in the third data set was 100% because the reflections essay based on the third questionnaire was the last in-class writing assignment in each course, and students were offered a small incentive in the form of five bonus points for completing the assignment. Using the data analysis process proposed by McMillan and Schumacher (2001), the data sets were analyzed and classified into topics according to emic and etic categories. Fetterman (2008) defines as "emic" those categories that are taken from the participants' own words and concepts while "etic" are those categories that represent the researcher's concepts. These categories were synthesized into themes and concepts to shed light on the characteristics of the learning environment.

In the following section, the illustrative samples from the data collected from students, the outcomes as interpreted by the instructor, and the researcher's findings are presented in the same order the data was collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. A zoom-out approach moves the analysis from the emic to the etic, in other words, from the learner's and instructor's perspectives (emic) to the researcher's perspective (etic).

3. Results and Data Analysis

3.1 Letters to the Instructor

3.1.1 Illustrative Samples

The following illustrative verbatim samples from the letters to the instructor present the data from the students' perspectives. The descriptor "illustrative" was used in this context rather than "representative" because the latter is based more on the demographic characteristics of the target population than the inherent qualities of the samples themselves. Since the study focused on the intrinsic qualities of the samples (i.e. the ideas they represent) rather than the extrinsic qualities (i.e. age, gender, or race) of those who wrote the samples, the illustrative samples were chosen based on the variety and thoroughness of the ideas they expressed. The narratives provided in the letters were structured because students received a handout with focus questions to enhance the effectiveness of the data used by the instructor to plan instruction to better meet the students' needs. In response to Question 1 (Who are you as a person?) students provided information about personal attributes, such as shyness, fear of speaking in public, reticence, and the need to make positive changes; and learner attributes, such as the love of learning, being a lifelong learner, and the rationale behind choosing a specific program of study.

In response to Question 2 (As a student, how would you describe yourself?) students provided the following samples: "Now I am going to college and I consider myself a good student. I am never late or absent and I always turn in work on time. I am a hard worker and am self-conscious about not getting my work done. If I do not finish, I get frustrated about myself." "As a student, I take my education very seriously. I believe education is something you earn and it cannot be given to you nor taken away. I spend a great deal of time studying, which has helped me maintain a 4.0 grade point average." "I have tried my best to be a diligent, responsible and good student. I am a student who studies and works hard to attain good grades. I like learning about different concepts and enjoy taking my instructor's knowledge experience and knowledge into my own. I strive to meet or exceed my instructor's assignments and expectations of me as their student. I take my education very seriously." In response to Question 3 (What do you believe in and value?) students provided such responses as "hard work and honesty," "a great deal of responsibility," "children and extended family," "being a kind and compassionate person," "honesty and integrity." In response to Question 4 (How do you perceive yourself in terms of writing or critical thinking?) students' perceptions ranged from strong confidence to lack of confidence in these skills. In response to Question 5 (What are your attitudes toward writing/critical thinking?) students provided information that could help with planning specific activities or assignments to meet student needs: "I do not like to write as much as I should. I like creative writing, because I can usually write about an interesting topic." "In my daily life, I use critical thinking before making any decision. I analyze the situation and weigh the pros and cons. I try to put my emotions aside because usually, my emotions are swaying in the opposite direction of what I truly need to do. For this reason, I am not a procrastinator. I like to get things done and move on to the next assignment on my personal agenda." In response to Question 6 (From your past learning experiences, what constitutes a positive learning environment for you, and what constitutes a negative learning environment?) one student wrote, "I have yet to experience limitations in my studies at ... I go to class telling myself I will excel no matter the course description. I believe it is very important to have a positive attitude in order to be successful."

Although the responses did not provide the kind of information the instructor was looking for, namely what makes a learning environment positive or negative in relation to teaching, they still provided more information about the learners. The responses also showed that students related the terms "learning environment" to their own attributes and activities as learners. This information could help the instructor make the terms of the question clearer so they would relate to teaching behaviors if this was the kind of information sought by the instructor. In response to Question 7 (What would you like to get from that course?) students provided valuable information that would help the instructor plan the objectives and activities of the course: "As a result of completing this class, I would like to be able to write an effective paper that is accurate and free of error. I would like my writings to be professional." "I would love to learn more on using critical thinking as it relates to my career." "I would like more confidence in the writing process and not have the feeling of dreadfulness when told or asked to write a paper."

In response to Question 8 (What would you like to be able to do (personally and/or professionally) as a result of this course?) students again provided information that would help the instructor plan activities to meet the students' needs although the question solicited information about the students' long-term goals and application of their learning: "This course will help me some day in getting a job. Instructors here have told me that employers are looking for employees who can write a good paper. This course should help me accomplish my goal of getting a good job." "I know there will be numerous situations that will cause for me to be on my toes in the medical field. I am sure I will be able to take the material I learn from this course and apply it to my career." The responses to Question 9 (How would you like to be feeling at the end of this course?) further clarified the students' attitudes toward the course or subject matter: "At the end of this course, I would like to feel as if I were an experienced writer, who has been writing professionally for years." "I am already enthused about this course, so by the end of the term, I am sure I will have grasped more knowledge to help me enhance my critical and creative thinking." The responses to Question 10 (How might this course help you grow, personally and/or professionally, and what can you do to achieve this?) provided information about how student wanted to apply their learning and their role as learners. For example, one student wrote, "I want to use my writing processes to think and learn critically. For the professional I'm going to have to know how to develop logical arguments and not sound like I don't know what I'm doing. I just want to learn how to be professional, not just me, but I also want my work to be professional.

To achieve this I must maintain regular attendance, be prepared, be organized, and stay focused." The responses to Question 11 (What can I, as an instructor, do to help you benefit from this course?) provided valuable data that directly related to instructional skills and areas for professional growth: "To help me benefit from this course I need you, as an instructor, to give me 100 percent also. It helps when instructors can give students individual attention. That's why I love small class sizes. I just need you to give me coursework that relates to the learning objectives to help increase my writing abilities." "As an instructor, you have pointed us in the direction of using critical thinking by asking questions. You ask questions about personal experiences that may or may not relate to the experiences of the book. I believe you're helping us understand the material better from your own personal level rather than just definitions from the book. I think the material you present to us will help us understand the importance of thinking for ourselves." "I think your style of teaching is just what I needed. You have a wealth of knowledge and a gentle, encouraging hand to help guide me in the right direction."

3.1.2 Data Analysis

The initial questionnaires provided information to the instructor about student needs and expectations that needed to be taken into account during planning and implementing instruction. The needs and expectations were classified according to two major categories: instructor qualities and learning environment characteristics. Based on these data, students' needs and expectations were divided among three aspects of the learning environment: technical, professional, and affective. The technical aspects represented the course content that students needed and expected based on the course description, its placement within the curriculum, and its relevance to their program of study. For instance, such aspects as "sentence structure," "citation of sources," "basics of writing," "grammar and punctuation," were essential to a composition course and their recurrence in the students' responses would make it imperative for the instructor to address in class even if they were not already listed among the course objectives. Besides the technical aspects, the letters and the follow-up group discussions about students' positive and negative past learning experiences also reflected students' perspectives on the desirable or undesirable qualities in an instructor and the favorable or unfavorable characteristics in a class or learning environment. Each of these characteristics belonged to one of two domains: professional or affective. The professional domain included the skills that students expected to find in an effective instructor and could, therefore, be the focus for the improvement of instruction and course design. The affective domain included personal traits that the instructor might not be able to change through professional development but could use for guidance in creating a learner-friendly environment. The following section summarizes the findings based on the data collected from the initial letters and questionnaires.

3.1.2.1 What Students Need, Expect, or Appreciate in an Instructor

On the professional level, student responses indicated that they value these professional traits in an instructor: knowledge and expertise in subject being taught; providing structure to the course; facilitating teacher-student interaction, i.e. interactive teaching; providing visuals or examples; giving opportunities for group discussion.

Providing hands-on learning; making efficient use of time; providing students with study guides; providing feedback to students; providing relevant, focused, and pertinent information; and being able to write legibly. On the personal level, student responses indicated that they value these personal traits in an instructor: challenging students; voice projection; effective communication skills; encouragement and understanding; positive or constructive feedback; patience; enthusiasm about the subject matter; stimulating interest in the subject matter; motivating; inspiring confidence; being approachable; showing a positive attitude; being uplifting and genuine; willingness to help; and allowing for extra credit.

3.1.2.2 What Students Do Not Appreciate in an Instructor?

On the professional level, student responses indicated that they do not appreciate these professional traits in an instructor: inability to relay information; assigning busy work to students; lacking control over the class; providing insufficient or no explanations; inadequate pacing of course, i.e. either too fast or too slow; excessive lecturing; lacking organization; and poor spelling. On the personal level, student responses indicated that they do not appreciate these personal traits in an instructor: lack of interaction; taking students' abilities for granted; sarcasm, disrespect, and lack of empathy; intimidating attitude; lack of flexibility, care, or understanding; and closed mindedness.

3.1.2.3 Characteristics of a Positive Learning Environment

Student responses indicated that they would consider their learning environment positive if it includes open discussions; relevant research and coursework; and a variety of learning tools, such as games, visuals, and group activities. Furthermore, the responses indicated that students would consider their learning environment positive if it encourages student participation, creates an atmosphere of comradeship, and is interesting.

3.1.2.4 Characteristics of a Negative Learning Environment

Student responses indicated that they would consider their learning environment negative if it lacks structure or schedule, has too much structure, and has too many distractions or disruptions. Additionally, the responses indicated that students would consider their learning environment negative if it is pointless, a waste of time, too easy, or boring.

There was more agreement among students on the professional qualities expected from an effective instructor than on the personal traits that students found desirable or undesirable in an instructor. Because the latter traits belong to the affective domain, i.e. the realm of feelings, impressions, and personal preferences, what might be desirable to one student might be undesirable to another. For example, some students included such traits as openness, flexibility, or strictness on their "negative" list while others included them on their "positive" list. The same happened with course characteristics; some considered structure, research, and group work favorable and others considered them unfavorable.

The letters to the instructor had a positive effect on the learning environment. Students expressed their satisfaction with the opportunity to express themselves on an individual basis and appreciated the responses the instructor wrote on each letter. Many of them were surprised that the instructor actually read their letters because they were used to instructors who assigned "busy work" to students with no intention to read it. Therefore, the instructor emphasized from the first day of class that she was going to read everything the students wrote because an essential part of student-instructor communication was to hear (or read) what students were saying. The letters also revealed that students' past learning experiences affected the expectations they brought into each new learning experience. For example, those who had previous ineffective or negative learning experiences came to the course with low or negative expectations. The letters also revealed that those whose first letters to the instructor reflected a positive outlook on life and learning tended to maintain that outlook throughout the course, exerted more effort, and their final reflections indicated that they benefited more from the course than those who started the course with an indifferent or negative outlook on life and education. These conclusions are evidenced by the quality of work submitted by students and their reflections throughout the course and on their mid-term evaluations and final reflections essays.

3.2 Mid-Term Evaluation Questionnaire

3.2.1 Illustrative Samples

The Mid-Term Evaluation Questionnaire was based on the criteria proposed by Gibbs, Simpson, and Macdonald (2003) to evaluate the effect of the level and amount of student effort and teacher feedback on student learning.

The students' anonymous responses to the midterm evaluation questionnaire provided a numerical indicator of the level of student satisfaction with the quantity, quality, and frequency of the assessment and feedback they received in the course. While the initial and final questionnaires provided qualitative data on teaching and learning, the mid-term questionnaire was a source of both qualitative and quantitative data. All of the 80 questionnaires completed provided quantitative data; however, the number of comments students chose to provide, if any, determined how much qualitative data was generated by the questionnaires. Samples of these comments are listed in the following section after each statement that students had to rate on the questionnaire.

3.2.1.1 Quantity and Distribution of Student Effort

In response to statement 1 (The tasks, such as tests, quizzes, essays, projects, etc., that are assigned to students for grading or assessment require adequate time and effort from students) students provided these comments: "We have enough time to complete our quiz"; "It's good to test and put to use our critical thinking skills"; "I would prefer a multiple choice format for tests/quizzes"; "I like this because you're able to refresh yourself as to why it's right or wrong immediately after taking tests or quizzes"; "Quizzes were harder than I thought they'd be. Essays we had plenty of time for"; "Essays are good. I like to write essays because when there is a topic I'm interested in, I put a lot of thought and detailed in-depth information"; "And what a challenge. Most people, so laden with work, are looking for the 'easy way'"; "Many small quizzes help to reinforce material"; "Took time on what was needed, skipped quickly on areas where help was not needed"; "This course was very quick, so you have to use your time well"; "It is good and positive effort that I feel is put into our work to give us a more relevant assignment"; "I try to do my best and that means even though I may not do well on one test, I am still giving 100%"; "Assignments took a lot of thought—having a peer review and a rewrite took more time but was very helpful." In response to statement 2 (These tasks distribute student effort evenly across topics and weeks) students provided these comments: "The last paper we have to write will have to be done this weekend, and we do not know what the subject matter is. In my opinion, we should have had only 2 papers to write over the course of a 4-week course"; "A lot of discussion in class is very beneficial"; "Two papers (essays) are a great amount"; "I like to be able to study and test on one subject before moving to something else"; "The research paper felt rushed, and I feel like I could have done better with more time; [The instructor] did an excellent job of assigning the tasks so we could manage them, though"; "I enjoyed building up my research to one subject and doing my case study where I got to focus on one person"; "The student effort somewhat falls with some of the class. They play them, 'Oh, I didn't know'"; "Some topics I have to read and study more than others"; "I felt we had more than sufficient time to complete tasks"; "Writing assignments followed suit with daily learning."

3.2.1.2 Quality and Level of Student Effort

In response to statement 3 (These tasks engage students in productive learning activity) students provided these comments: "I've noticed majority will participate in activities but you do have the few that let others do the work"; "Anytime a student puts forth an effort he should and better be learning. If he is not learning then he is not trying"; "Creative writing essay allowed for creativity. Even though I am nervous speaking aloud, group presenting is helpful"; "I feel that you gave enough time for class participation but usually it was always the same people participating"; "The group activities helped me tremendously"; "It is beneficial to review other people's work. Helping those correct errors made my writing better"; "Projects were interesting and fun"; "Kept our attention." In response to statement 4 (Assessment communicates clear and high expectations to students) students provided these comments: "There was much feedback as well as positive and constructive reinforcement"; "Only expectations that are good and applied on our own"; "I like that we are corrected and given a chance to understand our mistakes."

3.2.1.3 Quantity and Timing of Feedback

In response to statement 5 (Sufficient feedback is provided by the instructor, both often enough and in enough detail) students provided these comments: "Excellent with that. In addition to teacher, peer review was helpful as well"; "Excellent ideas, comments, and availability"; "Both with peer review and with teacher grading papers"; "Excellent, personal and helpful. Thank you"; "I love that you give positive feedback often. It keeps me motivated"; "You always give informative and positive feedback notes"; "Feedback has been excellent and often, as needed"; "The instructor has been very helpful and is very knowledgeable of the materials being taught"; "If we have any questions, you are usually eager to answer them. Your love of English is apparent"; "Questions are always answered clearly and feedback is provided"; "I think you made a great effort in answering people's questions"; "This area is what made this course a very useful course."

The instructor always provided feedback right away”; “Feedback seems to be a top priority”; “You did very well in helping me with the assignments. Your feedback greatly affected my writing skills”; “Feedback was given whenever it was needed. Personal attention was always available”; “Very thorough.” In response to statement 6 (The feedback is provided quickly enough to be useful to students) students provided these comments: “Definitely, you looked over our rough drafts that day and told us where we needed improvement. Final drafts could be completed that night”; “If anyone had questions, they were answered right away”; “Usually within the next class, so you can learn from your mistakes”; “Prompt and accurate”; “Turnaround time on essays is outstanding.”

3.2.1.4 Quality of Feedback

In response to statement 7 (The feedback focuses on learning rather than on grades or students themselves) students provided these comments: “In most cases, the feedback enabled me to review my work and make improvements to my writing”; “Focused on encouraging student’s ability”; “Feedback on essays was very helpful. Improved grammar—told us what we were doing right too—having positive remarks on paper helps build confidence in writing skills”; “Wow. And how many teachers don’t do this”; “Learning feedback has a positive effect on grades and the students themselves”; “This is very encouraging”; “Strongly agree! You want us to understand”; “Hard to say, since I’m so focused on getting the grade to pass; my objectivity is skewed.” In response to statement 8 (The feedback is linked to the purpose of the assignment and to the grading criteria) one student provided this comment: “The feedback is also linked to general knowledge, not just for the specific assignment.” In response to statement 9 (The feedback is understandable to students) students provided these comments: “Very beneficial”; “I enjoy reading your comments”; “Some students just need to do their part and give more effort to the class”; “You always made it clear why you would receive the grade that you got”; “Understandable and helpful.”

3.2.1.5 Student Response to Feedback

In response to statement 10 (The feedback is received by students and attended to) students provided these comments: “Having you and our peers go over our first drafts was very helpful”; “I can only speak for myself, but I have been fast to act on any positive feedback given”; “I don’t think that all the students took in what was being taught. So for those people maybe they didn’t grasp everything that was going on”; “Too soon to know (5-week module).” In response to statement 11 (The feedback is acted upon by students to improve their work or their learning) students provided these comments: “Helped to improve grammar, writing style, and content”; “With what time we have, I think this is amazing”; “Some students need more motivation and discipline. Other students don’t pay attention and get mad when they don’t understand”; “I will definitely take note of my mistakes and learn from them”; “I have taken them all into account.”

3.2.2 Data Analysis

Most of the data collected from the midterm questionnaires were quantitative in nature because the questions were structured in multiple-choice format where students had to respond on a Likert-type scale. Although students had space to write comments after each question, 40 students out of the 80 who took the questionnaire (50%) chose to keep their responses to the scale, while the other 40 wrote comments following only one or two of their responses to the 11-item questionnaire. Each comment was in the form of one or two short sentences and served to emphasize the choice given on the scale. All those who added comments wrote positive feedback regarding the instructor or the course and the way it was conducted. The only critical comments were about other students in the same class who were regarded by the respondents as not exerting enough effort or not participating enough in class. An average of 93% of students either agreed or strongly agreed with the quantity and quality of the assessment tasks they performed and the feedback they received from the instructor. The area that had more students “strongly agree” than “agree” was that of feedback. Students indicated that they appreciated the “constructive,” “positive,” “informative,” and “encouraging” feedback they received from the instructor.

They also appreciated feedback that specified “what [they] did right and what [they] did wrong” and was provided in a timely manner. What helped in that respect was the instructor making sure that graded assignments were returned to students the next class when the task was still fresh in their memories, so they could benefit from the feedback. What also helped was the use of rubrics for most tasks or the explanation of expectations for those tasks that did not have rubrics which, according to students, helped clarify the grading criteria and helped them identify where they had done well and where they needed improvement.

Students also indicated their satisfaction with the peer-review process which involved both peers and instructor. The instructor's involvement in that process helped the instructor check on student progress in an informal way and added more weight to the activity. Students who needed an informal review from the instructor appreciated the personal attention and individualized feedback. Students also appreciated how the instructor encouraged them to ask questions and how she responded to them. This was part of the dialogue the instructor tried to maintain in the class and contributed to open communication between students and instructor.

Based on the feedback from the questionnaire, the instructor found that one of the areas that needed improvement was getting all students to participate in class activities. This area affected the students' sense of equity because some of them felt that not all students were putting the same amount of effort in class and "it was always the same people participating." The instructor also found that she needed to explain how each assignment or assessment task related to students' learning; in other words, more students needed to see the benefits or objectives of their assignments. Another important area was following up on the feedback to see how students acted on it to improve their learning or performance. The overall outcome of the midterm questionnaire was positive, both as a feedback instrument and as a communication tool between students and instructor. In order to maintain dialogue in the classroom, it was important that student feedback be acted on. Based on student feedback, the instructor modified some assessment tasks, such as quizzes, tests, and group activities, and discussed these changes with the students to indicate how the changes were related to their feedback. Some students expressed interest in completing the questionnaire and liked what it was designed to probe. They felt that it was student centered because it targeted what mattered to them. Some students wrote global comments at the end of the questionnaire, indicating their appreciation of the instructor's efforts at establishing dialogue in class.

Most of the students preferred not to add comments to their responses because multiple-choice responses require less time, thinking, and writing than narrative responses. Another possibility was that they were also aware that the instructor was going to read their responses and, therefore, preferred to eliminate the probability of being identified through their comments or handwriting. However, without the specific qualitative feedback expressed through narratives, the possibility of a follow-up on part of the instructor was also diminished. Therefore, the multiple-choice, scaled response format for the midterm evaluation was only helpful in identifying whether the majority of the students agreed or disagreed with the items on the questionnaire, which was a partial indicator of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the quality of assessment and feedback and their progress in the course. The midterm questionnaire served to enforce what students made clear in their letters to the instructor regarding their needs and expectations. It also emphasized the instructor skills or qualities they had indicated in their letters as desirable, such as content knowledge, availability, responsiveness, support, encouragement, communication, and attention to student needs.

3.3 Ends-of-Course Questionnaire and Final Reflections Essay

3.3.1 Illustrative Samples

The end-of-course questionnaire was used as a prompt for students' reflections on their learning experience. Students were encouraged to construct their responses in the form of an essay which was the last in-class writing assignment following the final exam. The instructor assigned a small amount of extra credit to the essay as an incentive for completion because without it few students would choose to stay in class after finishing the final exam to respond to the questionnaire, let alone write an essay. Although student responses to the questionnaire were written in the form of essays, the responses in the samples below were grouped according to the questions that prompted them.

In response to question 1 (Of the activities we have done in class, which one you found the most effective for your learning?) students wrote the following:

- "The activity I found the most effective was the difference between reporting, inferring, and judging. I realized there are many times when I thought that I was reporting something, when actually I was judging. It is vital to remove personal feelings when attempting to report something."
- "Of all the activities we have done in class, the one that I have learned from the most was the open discussions of random essays. Learning everyone else's point of view helped open me up to new ideas that I would not have thought about in a particular story. It was actually the first time I ever experienced this type of open discussions in an English class. It made learning fun and the whole English experience less dreadful."

- “The other activity that I thought was very effective in class was the first day when we wrote the letter to the teacher. I think that this is a great way to recognize what we need to work on and it also gives the teacher an idea what to take extra time to go over and explain in more detail.”

In response to question 2 (Which of our classroom activities did you find the least effective for your learning?) students wrote the following:

- “The least effective assignment was the moral compass. I took what category everyone considered themselves to fall in with a grain of salt. In my opinion, only about three or four people gave honest assessment of themselves. If you cannot be honest with yourself, how can you even consider honesty with another person?”
- “What I found to be least effective was the presentations. No one was paying attention. Half the class was completely ignoring the presenter. The concept of presentation and discussion is a great concept and idea if the whole class is interested and participates.”

In response to question 3 (Which of your assignments did you enjoy the most and why?) students wrote the following:

- “Without a doubt, the assignment I felt I did best on was the stress paper.”
- “Whenever someone tells me to be as creative and descriptive as I can, I get very excited. I get all by myself, clear my head and just let my mind go where ever it wants to.”
- “I enjoyed the research paper the most because it was personal and I really got into it. I did not expect to find that much supportive material about my topic.”

In response to question 4 (Which one did you enjoy the least and why?)

- “The assignment I had the most difficulty with was a group activity where we had to demonstrate effective and ineffective communication. Myself and [another student] were tasked with ineffective communication. Since I have a tendency to try and take over a conversation, I turned our communication from ineffective to one-sided. After we were done [the other student] told me I was really making her mad. I should have let her say her side before I began moving on to my next point. From that day on, I made a concerted effort to tone down my aggressiveness during an argument.”
- “I least enjoyed the grammar test and the grammar portion of the final because I am really bad at grammar. There is no way around that.”

In response to question 5 (Was the essay rubric helpful in making the expectations of the instructor clear to you?) students wrote the following:

- “The rubric was very helpful in preparing the papers because it was a guideline on what exactly was expected of us. Reading through the rubric helped me to organize my thoughts and made a better and more thorough paper. I think this should be a standard of practice for all classes.”
- “No, I personally did not use the rubric at all when it came to any of my papers; I just attached it to the papers at the end.”

In response to question 6 (Was the rubric helpful in making the grading criteria clear to you?) students wrote the following:

- “The rubric was very helpful in making the grading criteria clear. This is clearly the best way to analyze your paper and make sure you have covered all aspects of the paper. If we didn’t have the rubric then we wouldn’t know for sure if we missed anything that you wanted us to cover in detail.”
- “Yes, the rubric was clear and precise as far as grading was concerned. There was little room left for error.”

In response to question 7 (Do you think the rubric was an effective way of assessing your essays?) students wrote the following:

- “Yes, the rubric was an effective way of assessing our essays. There was less room for teacher input and judgment. You either had what the rubric called for or you did not and points were deducted if you did not. It was simple and no room for arguments.”
- “The rubric was a very useful guide in writing my paper. There wasn’t any room for confusion. It provided a detailed overview on how you were going to be graded. Therefore you knew what to expect when you turned in your paper.”

- “I do not think that the rubric was helpful to me. I didn’t even look at it because I can’t write by what is on the sheet. I think that the rubric was beneficial in making the expectations of the teacher known, but I did not look at the rubric because I write better through feelings. I can write better by what comes to my head and put it on paper without thinking of how it should be.”

In response to question 8 (How would you evaluate the learning journal in the following areas: reflective thinking, assessing your own learning, and communication with the instructor?) students wrote the following:

- “I almost listed the learning journal as the most effective class activity. I got more out of them weeks later, when I would look back at how I was feeling. I even surprised myself with some of the things I said. The feedback I received was also helpful and appreciated. It inspired me to put full effort into them because I knew they were being genuinely read. It helped me to organize my thoughts for that day, but I am not sure that it really helped me to monitor my learning. That was the importance I took away from that assignment.”
- “The learning journal was a great tool that taught both the student and the instructor ways to improve them. After all, if we don’t improve then we don’t grow. A person must learn to do reflective thinking in order to grow and become a better person. It’s not always the other person that needs to change. Sometimes it’s the other person that is making the comment. Communication is a vital learning channel between a student and a teacher. If communication cannot be made then it is very difficult to learn and grow.”
- “I must say that I enjoyed doing the learning journal. It gave me some perspective on the class and it let me know how well I was learning on a daily basis. I enjoyed getting the feedback from you because it showed me that you cared about what we are learning and writing in our journals. It helped me also to get out my frustrations that I had for the day as well as any questions that I might have had on a specific chapter. This is a good idea and you should use it with your other classes down the line.”
- “My evaluation of the effect of the learning journal on reflective thinking and assessing your own learning is I personally did not get much from the journals in this respect, but the communication with the instructor was personal, private one-on-one feedback. It was wonderful, and again something I had never experienced in any other class. You seem to care about what we thought and wrote a personal comment every day.”
- “I didn’t feel that the learning journal was all that helpful. I would write something down to be able to turn it in and not really worry about the context. To me, it felt like a small summary of how the day went and nothing else. I am not sure if I just didn’t understand the assignment or if I didn’t put forth enough effort into it.”

In response to question 9 (In reference to the letter that you wrote to your instructor during our first class meeting, please reflect on your progress as a learner?) students wrote the following:

- “I believe my writing and verbal skills were certainly improved over the past five weeks. I am a firm believer in practice makes perfect. If not for this class I would not be likely to just sit down and write a paper, and I have never been in a class or job where I was asked to speak publicly so often. The more often I spoke up in class, the more comfortable I became. I had to give a seven minute presentation yesterday in A&P class. At the beginning of the module, we were told about it. The idea of speaking so long seemed impossible, but the practice I received in here made it a breeze. With any job I strive to attain, these two basic skills will be the most important and could separate me from other potential employees.”
- “On the first day of class we wrote a letter to our instructor stating what we would like to get out of this class. All of my expectations were met. I got to write two creative essays and throw a little humor in one of them. This is what I requested in my letter. I also wanted to learn more about grammar and punctuation, and this we also accomplished. I enjoyed writing these essays so much that the one thing I would change about the class is more essays in place of some quizzes. Although the essays were difficult and time consuming, they were much more enjoyable than the quizzes. It would have been interesting to write more essays of different types.”
- “I still feel that my sentence writing and grammar is still not very good, but I am a little more confident about writing papers. The two I wrote in this class came easy to me, much easier than I expected.”
- “I am an older student so I do not believe I became a better learner from this class. I have been in school for many years and my patterns of learning are well set in place. I do not believe I was affected in any way good or bad by any of the assignments. ... All in all my experience in this class was a pleasant one. I feel I am a better writer or at least I now know where to find the proper information to write effectively.”

In response to question 10 (If you could change anything about this course or the way it was conducted, what would it be and why?) students wrote the following:

- “If I were to change anything about this class, it would be to make the quizzes and tests in such a way as to require reading the chapters to pass it. I always made it a point to read the assigned chapters, and when I would talk to the others, most would say, ‘Why read them, the quizzes are just opinions?’ I would make about half of the quizzes and tests definitions and fill in the blank to at least verify we read the material.”
- “This course was very informative, but if I could change anything it would be the amount of essays that we had to write. Four essays were a little over bearing, but they did help to improve our writing skills.”
- “If I could change anything in this course it would be to suggest everyone turn off their computers a little more and during discussions and presentation times and for you to teach more from the back of the room so you can personally view the material that the students are going to because the filters are not working very well.”

3.3.2 Data Analysis

The final reflections essays provided more data than the standard end-of-course student ratings administered by the institution. Because the questions were more task and context specific, the information was helpful in identifying which tasks were effective or ineffective, especially when students included a rationale for their responses. Unlike multiple-choice questionnaires, where most of the responses are restricted to a number on a scale, the reflections essays provided more information on why students found one task more effective, enjoyable, or difficult than another. In general, the responses included positive feedback, indicating that students had benefited from their classroom experience and their assignments. Only 10 of the 105 essays used as a data set for this phase contained negative feedback indicating that the respondents did not learn anything from the course. Five out of the ten respondents had already come into the course with little or no expectations because they thought that a course in college composition or critical thinking should not have been included in their program of study in the first place. As indicated in their initial letters to the instructor, they did not find these courses necessary or useful for their future careers. The other five respondents found the course either “difficult,” “cut and dry,” “boring,” “lacked structure,” or “self-taught.” One also thought that “all of the activities were just tests for the instructor so she could see how to proceed with future classes.” The instructor found both positive and negative responses to be straight forward and helpful in planning for future courses and professional development.

4. Discussion: What the Instructor Learned from Student Feedback

4.1 Modifying Instruction

The regular feedback from students indicated trends that helped the instructor distinguish between the effective and ineffective tasks and adjust instructional strategies or assessment tasks when students expressed concerns about their vagueness or difficulty. Based on student performance and feedback, for example, she adjusted quizzes and tests for length or difficulty level without compromising their content or objectives. Another example was group brainstorming; when students indicated it was effective in providing ideas or topics for written assignments, she implemented the strategy in the subsequent written assignments. However, she had to exercise caution so as not to use too much of one strategy because it might turn from effective and exciting to repetitive and boring.

The instructor also had to be careful with the interpretation and use of negative feedback. Although she took all feedback into account, she had to distinguish between the feedback based on students’ personal traits and that based on instructional effectiveness. For example, some students found collaborative learning activities effective, and others found them ineffective. In that case, she had to distinguish between the ineffectiveness related to the organization or content of the activities and that related to students’ learning styles or social preferences. Trying to adjust instruction to meet the different learning styles was among the challenges she faced when she decided to attend to all student feedback, especially in widely heterogeneous classrooms and within the short time span available for accelerated courses.

4.2 Plans for Professional Development

The cumulative feedback collected at different stages in each course for a number of courses provided the instructor with a clearer picture of what she needed to focus on for her professional development plans. For example, based on the students’ feedback, classroom management was an area that needed improvement. However, this was particularly challenging because, as Gravett and Petersen (2002) found, students’ calls for more instructor “control” were contradictory to the dialogic, participatory environment that she was trying to promote in her classes.

Therefore, she found that she needed to create a balance in classroom management that would uphold her role as a facilitator of learning and member of the learning community in the classroom while avoiding being perceived as a “passive” instructor who lacked “control” over the classroom, as reflected in the negative feedback of the 10% of students who suggested that the instructor needed to “show who was in charge of this class.”

4.3 Communication with Students

By providing more opportunities for the exchange of feedback between the instructor and students, the ongoing feedback process significantly improved communication in the classroom. Through the letters to the instructor and the learning journals, the instructor was able to communicate with students on an individual basis. She was able to provide personalized feedback discreetly to students, without having to share it with the whole class, something that students found very effective. Communication was also one way for building rapport with students, which she felt was helpful in motivating students, as indicated in their final reflections essays. However, maintaining communication with students through writing required more time from the instructor outside the classroom because the more feedback students provided, the more they expected from it. This was both an advantage and a challenge: an advantage because it brought the classroom closer to the desired outcomes of the process, namely more student participation and investment in the feedback process, and a challenge because it meant more work for the instructor.

On the positive side, the open dialogue in the classroom helped create an atmosphere of trust, where students felt comfortable sharing their reflections, comments, and suggestions with the instructor, an outcome similar to the findings of both Cook-Sather (2002) and Wells (1999). Even the relatively small number of students who gave negative feedback agreed that communication was handled well in the classroom and felt safe enough to share their non-anonymous negative feedback, even during the course of the term.

4.4 Overall Perception of Learning Environment

Based on 90% of the responses on the final reflections essays, the majority of students showed an overall positive perception of the learning environment. They attributed that to the instructor’s prompt attention to their reflections and feedback and her responsiveness to their learning needs. The open environment for the safe exchange of reflections and feedback seemed to work well for the students who fully participated and contributed to that environment. Many students indicated that they learned more from their classmates than from their textbooks, especially when it came to multi-culturalism, diversity of beliefs and perceptions, and approaches to problem solving. They also indicated that what they learned through the mutual sharing of experiences and feedback was more than anything they had learned in lecture courses.

There were extraneous factors that affected some students’ perceptions of the learning environment, such as room assignment changes, room temperature, weather, students’ family or personal issues, and school or administrative issues. However, these students indicated that they realized that these issues were out of the instructor’s control and, therefore, tried to prevent these issues from interfering with their learning. These factors, however, seemed to affect only their short-term perceptions of the learning environment whereas the long-term perceptions remained largely unchanged. Although these factors had an effect on the immediate learning environment, most students showed in their reflections that they were able to separate the personal aspects from the technical or professional aspects of the course.

5. Conclusion

Students come with diverse learning styles that lead to different needs and expectations. This requires a lot of planning to incorporate a variety of instructional strategies, classroom activities, and assessment tasks that can target as many learning styles as possible. However, when learner-centered instruction becomes the sole goal of the instructor during planning and implementation, a paradigm shift needs to take place from focus on institutional goals and needs to learner goals and needs, leading to a dynamic, evolutionary form of pedagogy/andragogy (Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003). This evolutionary pedagogy/andragogy would be more successful in classroom contexts where the emphasis is on learning and where the primary purpose of students, besides getting a grade or a degree, is to make learning gains. It would be less effective in classrooms with students who enroll in college programs with the sole purpose of getting a degree in the shortest amount of time and with the least amount of effort, i.e. students who have only the end in mind, regardless of how much they gain from the learning process itself.

The ongoing exchange of feedback may not be effective in all learning contexts or for all instructors due to several factors, such as instructor philosophy, priorities, approach to teaching, or personal traits; student motivation, priorities, approach to learning, or personal traits; class size, structure, or makeup; or institutional philosophy, priorities, or resources. However, it highlights the importance of the students' and the instructors' experiences within the learning environment and emphasizes learning and growth as the primary goals in a college classroom. While the ongoing feedback process is not presented as a single solution for the ineffective end-of-course ratings of instruction, it provides a glimpse into the operation of the classroom and the perceptions associated with it. One of the goals of this study was to shed light on the classroom dynamics that Black and Wiliam (1998) termed as "the black box". Thus, practitioners and researchers are encouraged to implement the process in different contexts to provide more practical and theoretical support for it. Another goal was to contribute to the growth of the teacher and learner by presenting a model for collecting student feedback that was more teacher- and learner-friendly than the end-of-course student ratings of instruction.

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