Marincovich, M. (1999). Chapter 3: Using Student Feedback to Improve Teaching. *Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching: A Practical Guide to Improved Faculty Performance, and Promotion/Tenure Decisions.* Peter Seldin and Associates. Bolton, MA: Anker, 60-64.

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Although the literature on the evaluation and improvement of teaching stresses the importance of mid-term evaluation (Centra, 1993), too many teaching evaluation systems are entirely preoccupied with judgments. Most teaching centers can offer faculty various ways of obtaining formative (improvement-oriented) feedback, either on their own or with the help of the center. In addition to different kinds of written mid-term forms, many of us offer the so-called SGID (Small Group Instructional Diagnosis, Clark, 1979), a structured mid-term interview of a class with the students divided into small groups, which provides specific feedback on what the students like about a course, what they feel needs improvement, and their ideas on how to carry out the improvement. Although this method takes approximately 20 minutes of class time, it has the unique advantage of exposing students to what their peers think of a course's strengths and weaknesses. Any official teaching evaluation system should make sure that faculty know about the availability and the desirability of mid-term approaches. Yale is again a case in point; the Yale College dean's letter regarding the summative evaluation system also mentions that course improvement forms, intended for mid-term use, will be sent to the faculty by the registrar along with their preliminary class lists. Faculty should also know that professors who do mid-term evaluations can achieve higher end-of-term evaluations (Overall & Marsh, 1979; Cohen, 1980).

Although on my campus the SGID, the ME Peer Review, and faculty self-designed questionnaires have proved the most popular types of mid-term student evaluation, there are other models for obtaining useful student feedback. At a National Science Foundation-funded workshop for new (up to three years' experience) engineering faculty hosted at Stanford in August 1998 by three colleagues and myself, we found that these faculty responded positively to the suggestion of teaching circles or quality control circles. As described by Tiberius (1997), such circles involve the recruitment of student volunteers from a class who agree to meet with the professor regularly in order to convey feedback from themselves and their peers on how the class is going. The fact that the student volunteers are not representing simply their own reactions but are supposed to have canvassed their peers means that students can engage in a level of frankness to the faculty member that they may not feel comfortable or secure about as individuals. We should also not underestimate the benefit to the students of being such serious and influential participants in the instructional process.

Let me emphasize, however, that the results of any alternate student feedback system should remain formative and confidential. Otherwise, alternative student feedback systems may suffer the same fate the end-of-term evaluations have. As Centra (1993) points out, the end-of-term ratings began as formative feedback; they became summative when colleges and universities found themselves needing an objective and quantifiable source of data on teaching that would help them make sensitive and important personnel decisions.

Let me add one other final word of caution. Faculty who devise and follow up on their own methods of obtaining student feedback should be careful not to operate in a vacuum. Their sincere efforts to strengthen their classes can backfire if they respond casually to what they think they are hearing from their students. I have worked with several faculty who had earlier done their own mid-term questionnaires and had changed their courses significantly because of what they had thought were important student suggestions. In the end, however, they had invested serious amounts of time without getting any more favorable student end-of-term evaluations. For example, one junior faculty member had received complaints about being disorganized. Because one student had suggested that he give the class complete lecture notes, he invested literally hundreds of hours in doing comprehensive and even elegant notes. The students then complained that the class was boring because the professor was closely following the lecture notes he had given them. His student evaluations ended up no higher than when he had started out.

On the basis of my own experience, Boice's (1991) work on "quick starters," and the work of many other experts (Stevens, 1987; Centra, 1993; Brinko & Menges, 1997; Tiberius, 1997; Menges 1999), I would offer the following guidelines to faculty who decide to solicit student feedback on their teaching:

* Specific, concrete, behaviorally oriented information is most useful in trying to improve your teaching (Murray, 1984; Wilson, 1986; Geis, 1991; Menges, 1999). If the questions on your institution's student evaluation forms do not provide this kind of information, you may need to acquire it through other types of student feedback.

* Don't go it alone unless you have already established a successful record for interpreting and acting upon your student feedback. Instead, consult a peer, your teaching and learning center, your teaching assistant(s), or a group of interested students. Check with them before you invest large chunks of your time in significant changes to your course.

* Take the tinkering approach (Stevens, 1987). Make small, modest changes and don't abandon a change the first time it doesn't seem successful. Tinker with it, making little adjustments, and see if it can be made successful after all.

* Although one student's suggestion can seem especially insightful or interesting, be aware of investing too much significance in any single opinion. Concentrate on the issues that seem problematic for large number of students or for a subset of students with particular needs. Try especially hard not to take it to heart if only one or two students are particularly critical. Every teacher has such students at some time or other, and the reasons for their discontent may lie more with them than with you. The one exception is if only one or two students are brave enough to tell you that you are making racist or gender-discriminatory remarks. This kind of feedback must always be taken seriously.

* Start conversations with your colleagues about how they handle difficult situations that you're struggling with. You don't have to confess that something is a problem for you; just ask them, for example, how they know whether or not students are following them or whatever else you suspect may be hard for you. Although most faculty don't seem to begin conversations on teaching very often, most of them seem happy to engage in one once it's begun.

* Consult the sizable, and very readable, literature on teaching. Your teaching and learning center staff or any number of introductory books on teaching (three of my favorites are Davis, 1993; Lowman, 1995; and McKeachie, 1999) can help you think more broadly about your teaching situation and the options open to you.

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