

Reflections on End-of-Semester Evaluation

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Anyone teaching in higher education is familiar with the debate around end-of-semester student evaluation. Student participation is often low, student perceptions of the utility of these evaluations can sometimes deter them from actively participating and faculty frustration with the somewhat biased results adds to the dilemma. Every teacher will have an opinion on how students fill out these evaluations. I have talked to faculty who comment on how students are not properly equipped to assess faculty teaching, ticking boxes without much thought to the questions and what these questions are assessing. I have engaged in many a conversation on how the efficacy of teaching runs deeper than a score, and how comments from students on the same course experience can range from: “*this is the best course ever!*” “*What a passionate instructor, she loves what she does!*” to “*avoid this class!*”, “*too much work for a 100 level class!*”. These comments can inspire or sting and do little to constructively inform teaching innovation or re-design of course content or workload. Low participation rates and selective participation can result in a sample of outliers, also contributing the often non-representative results faculty receives. In addition, end-of-semester evaluations may be the only artifact in a faculty’s portfolio that addresses teaching and this in itself is problematic.

Using multiple approaches seems to work best¹, selecting from mid-semester feedback, reflective writing tasks, assignments specifically designed for feedback, peer feedback, teaching portfolios with end-of-semester evaluation included as *part* of the process.

At CLT, one type of mid-semester assessment² that we perform is the **Small Group Instructional Diagnosis**, which is conducted by a member of CLT and is confidential and anonymous. We ask students 2 questions; “*What helps you learn in this course?*” and “*What improvements would you like to see in the second part of the course and how would you suggest these changes be made?*”. Students work in groups and must come to a consensus within their small group on how to respond. The CLT member then conducts an all-class discussion allowing time for individual comments.

Online **Mid-semester surveys** can also be designed and administered. When students are encouraged to respond, for example in a lab or on their phones in class, this method of formative assessment may also offer insights that can result in changes the students can see happening in the course as the semester progresses. Sharing results with students-builds trust, accountability and discourse, which can be constructive when faculty follow-through. In addition, tell your students what can be changed and what cannot and why. Discuss ways of doing more of what helps them learn and try to follow-through with small fixes. Most importantly, incorporate those comments that have surprised you, into your reflective process on how to move forward with your teaching in future semesters. An additional dimension to counter-balance end-of-semester evaluations is **peer feedback**. Bringing in a trusted colleague with a bird’s eye view of the course can shed light on teaching habits that are not conducive to the learning environment you aspire to, or create a conversation space that invites peers to share ideas and constructive critique.

Developing multiple approaches with my co-teachers Maha Bali and Aziza Ellozy, we attempt to collect formative feedback in a variety of forms along the semester. **Blogs** allow students a personal space to share reflections on tasks and learning prompts, our adapted “**liquefied syllabus**” assignment³ has students reflect on the course and make concrete suggestions on improvements/re-designs of the course. In addition, we use an end of semester **guided reflective piece**. This creates a space for students to identify effective learning moments while reflecting

¹ Felder, Richard M., and Rebecca Brent. "How to Assess Teaching." New Chalktalk 10.10 (2011): Web.

<http://schools.aucegypt.edu/llt/clt/ChalkTalk/Documents/Volume%2010/Vol%2010%20Issue%2010.pdf>

² Mid Semester Formative Assessment <http://in.aucegypt.edu/services/center-learning-and-teaching/formative-assessment-learning-and-teaching>

³ Pacansky-Brock, M. (2014). The Liquid Syllabus: Are you ready? [Weblog post]: Retrieved from: <http://www.teachingwithoutwalls.com/2014/08/the-liquid-syllabus-are-you-ready.html>

Bali, M. (2014). The best assignment ever: Liquid Syllabus [Weblog post]. Retrieved from: <http://blog.mahabali.me/blog/pedagogy/best-assignment-ever-liquid-syllabus/>

on their experiences that could be adapted further for future students. We have also used an assignment where students match activities and assignments to course **learning outcomes** allowing students to see how the pieces of the puzzle fit into intended learning outcomes and big questions. **Reflective E-portfolios** also serve as a holistic overview on students' perceptions of their own learning and their ability to document and represent their learning.

Following is a guideline for a reflective paper or blog post that we use at the end of the semester. These guided questions⁴ prompt students' written reflection on the learning and teaching experience as a whole.

“Write your final reflective blog post and use at least 5 of these questions to guide you. You can include reflections to other aspects not covered in these prompts:

- What helped my learning in this course was...because...
- I would have learned better in the course if...because...
- The activity of assignment that contributed most to my learning is...because...
- The biggest obstacle to my learning was...because...
- Because of this course, I now feel I know/can do...
- Five years from now, I will remember...about this course, because... “

and

“Imagine you are describing the course to someone who knows little about it”

- Focus on your reasoning behind choosing the particular “thing” (incident, assignment, event) you are using to answer the question. Why did it matter to you, personally?
- Use personal anecdotes, link to previous blog posts, and link to external sources when it will enrich your narrative
- Focus on what has not been visible to the instructors in the course so far - what is happening inside your head and feelings rather than what you have done and shown

This, in itself, is a useful process for the student and an important exercise for faculty reflection. I have never been disappointed as I read their posts. When administered, this can highlight valuable learning experiences as well as areas that need improvement. It can be rewarding to see students identifying with learning in ways you may not have even intended. Keep in mind however that when students are graded specifically on these reflections, they may tend to lose their objective nature and may perceive this as an exercise in writing to the “test”...telling their teacher what they think they want to hear. Ways to work around this is to include multiple reflections throughout the course allowing students to develop a culture of reflection *on* learning and process. Allow these exercises to melt seamlessly into the course, encourage students to move away from the grading and facilitate moving towards student agency and accountability for learning.

End-of-semester evaluations are not enough. Start slowly and consider one additional exercise that will offer another dimension to how you assess learning in your classroom. You may just start to see learning potential where you least expect it.

If you are interested in exploring creative assessment techniques and formative assessment please contact us at clt@aucegypt.edu

⁴ Adapted from Faculty Focus, Shadiw L, and Weimer M. "A New Twist of End of Semester Evaluations." Faculty Focus. Magna, 3 Nov. 2015. Web. 3 Nov. 2015. <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/a-new-twist-on-end-of-semester-evaluations/>