Large Class FAQ: Feedback

1. How can I get midsemester feedback from students about the course?

A number of people in a recent lunch discussion reported collecting feedback from students as a way of gauging how well they were doing as well as providing a context in which students could reflect on their own learning.

- On the first day of class, Art Anderson (Architecture) passes around a sign-up sheet for students interested in one regular extra weekly meeting. He makes it clear that this is NOT for extra credit, merely for students who want additional opportunities to learn and give feedback on how the large class is going. The meeting time is always the same, but the place shifts as the small group visits sites of architectural interest on or within walking distance of campus. Rather than feeling this extra hour is a burden, Anderson enjoys the interaction with students and uses the time to plan his next lecture.

- One faculty member reported that as a result of the discussions she had the class do minute papers everyday. She only collected a few each time (i.e., each student would hand in only one per semester).

- A number of participants report that they have students fill out open-ended assessment surveys in groups. This gives each student an opportunity to interact with classmates and also reduces the instructor's paper shuffling. For example, Jill Patterson (Nutrition) asks these questions of student pairs: What suggestions do you have for the instructor that would help your learning? What suggestions do you have for other students in the class? What suggestions do you have for yourself? She reports the results of these surveys on her class listserv. If students are working in teams anyway, regular surveys can help the instructor keep tabs on how groups are functioning, as well as how they are responding to assignments and instructor-led activities.

- John Lowe (Chemistry) designed a feedback questionnaire to help students analyze and reflect on their exam performance.

- Student feedback can also be folded in with other assignments that you routinely collect, such as homework or exams. For example, Pat Koch (Biobehavioral Health) attaches a bonus sheet (worth less than 5% of the total) to each exam she gives asking students to choose from a list of topics covered on the exam the one that provided them the most beneficial learning, and how they intend to apply that learning in the future. In addition to supplying her useful feedback, the bonus gives her students an opportunity to do some writing on a forced-choice exam.

- One tip for writing open-ended questions was to remember that you get what you ask for. For example, asking students what they like least about you or the course can invite random and unhelpful criticism. Positive questions such as "What would you like to see added to the course to facilitate your learning?" stand a much better chance of providing constructive student responses.

- Participants agreed that forced-choice feedback forms that ask students to respond to statements using a number scale can offer a good overview of how helpful students are finding course activities, assignments, and instructional methods. (CELT offers a 40-question, machine-scanned midsemester survey that you can order by calling 863-2599). Instructors who use these forms often supplement them with open-ended questions. Jim Eisenstein (Political Science), for instance, works with a Continuous Quality Improvement team in his Pl Sc 001 class to design regular feedback surveys that combine scale-rated statements with open-ended questions.

- Terry Engelder (Geosciences) meets with a small group of students for feedback on how the class is going. If you want to do this over lunch, consider telling your students about the Take Your Professor to Lunch program and let your students know that you would be interested in participating.

- On the midsemester feedback survey, ask students for tips based on their other large classes. Let's face it, these students may have more experience in the large class setting than do many instructors, so why not take advantage of their combined experience?

2. How can I make the process of collecting frequent feedback more manageable?

- Read only a random sample of minute papers (or any short response sheet), or read sequentially only until patterns begin to emerge in the responses.

- Report back to your class by providing some kind of summary of midsemester survey comments. This helps students feel their feedback is being taken seriously, and it puts outsiders in line. If you teach the same students in sequential courses, you can report the previous semester's SRTE results back to them, as well.

- At midsemester, schedule small groups to see you during office hours to gather their input.

- Seek enrolled student volunteers to act as a CQI team to gather and analyze feedback and present their findings to the rest of the class. Some participants have gotten support from the Schreyer Institute for Innovation in Learning to train CQI teams. Students on such teams get one credit of independent study for their efforts. (In the College of Business, CQI teams are made up of students doing a one- to three-credit internship.)

- Simplify the grading of homework. Some luncheon participants use a check, plus, minus system. In an interesting variation, one participant quantifies the system on a 0-2-4 scale where 0 is given to students who hand in nothing, 2 is given if the student has made a reasonable effort, and 4 is given if more than half of the homework problems are solved correctly.

- Have students e-mail you their assignments. If you have Eudora Pro, you can use filters to sort these notes, forward certain ones to TAs, and partly automate responses to students.

- Set up an on-line course "chat room" and make yourself available there during certain office hours. If you don't want to go that far, simply announce that you will be checking e-mail and responding to student notes during your office hours. (One participant stressed, however, that you must also make it clear to students that an e-mail note is NOT a substitute for coming to class!)

- Make use of on-line surveys and quizzes. There are two readily available testing programs that will help you do this. Through the Center for Academic Computing, there's "Quiz Wizard," and through Schreyer Institute's Testing Services, there's "Test Pilot." Here is a brief comparison of the two. Test Pilot is good for those who either a) already have a large bank of test questions, perhaps in Word format, that they would like to have Testing Services load into the system, or b) don't want to learn a new system. For more information, call Testing Services at 863-2802. Quiz Wizard, on the other hand, is fine if you don't mind inputting the questions/answers yourself. If you like to have complete control over the quizzing or like playing with new technology, this is the option for you.

3. How do I respond to midsemester feedback?

- One group at a recent luncheon pointed out that collecting the data is not nearly as important as what you do with it. In other words, don't collect data unless you are prepared to act on it. These participants felt that an adequate response would be a brief report to students on what is news to you and what you intend to do about it. If the data are unclear on certain points, you can follow up by asking for more specific information. In general, the consensus seemed to be that the more often you collect feedback, the less formal your reporting will need to be.

- Some mentioned the frustration of getting such varied responses to particular questions that they didn't know how to respond other than sharing with students that individual needs vary widely (on pacing, for instance). Such reporting is valuable, even when there is no suggested course of action.

- Finally, it was noted by one group that talking with and responding to students about how the course is going facilitates communication and breaks down barriers of anonymity in large sections. Most would probably agree that this is a good thing.