

# ASSESSING TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

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**BOOKLET**

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# **Assessing Teaching Effectiveness**

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## Assessing Teaching Effectiveness



Most teachers who take their craft seriously have questioned their teaching effectiveness and how to go about improving teaching. The endeavor to become a more effective teacher suggests that no matter how good your teaching might be, it can be better. Great teaching today may not be great teaching tomorrow as teaching is dynamic with ever-changing variables (e.g., new students, new courses, new texts) that can influence what we do as teachers and how well it works (Knapper & Cranton, 2001). Given that teaching is such a complex set of tasks conducted under a multitude of conditions, it is virtually impossible to achieve temporary, much less sustained, perfection in teaching. Although perfection may not be within reach, improvement and mastery of many aspects of teaching is well within our grasp. Whether you are interested in improving your teaching for personal reasons or professional reasons, teacher evaluation strategies must be carefully selected to help you identify and reach your teaching goals (Davis, 2009; Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011).

When designing your courses, you probably begin with learning objectives and then make decisions about the text, readings, and assignments for your students to complete. Although critical, these elements of course design alone are not sufficient for a truly effective course. Indeed, establishing rapport, developing fair and effective student assessments, and deciding how best to engage students in the learning process are also essential. All of these elements of course design can be evaluated and potentially improved. Although most teachers would agree that teacher evaluation is important, an evaluation plan regarding your teaching may not always be included in your course design. However, the time and effort to discover

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and employ strategies for teacher evaluation in your courses is important for you and your students. After all, improved teaching will likely lead to improved student learning in your classroom. Below I outline why it is important to evaluate teaching, who can evaluate your teaching, and when and how you can evaluate your teaching.

### Why Evaluate Teaching?

The reasons for teaching evaluation can be conceptualized as largely personal or professional. In the context of teaching evaluations we often refer to personal motivations for evaluation as formative and professional motivations are summative. Formative evaluation of teaching emphasizes personal reflection and growth related to student learning-finding new and better ways to convey information to students, helping them to appreciate the subject matter, and empowering them to become self-learners.

Formative evaluation, is aimed at improving teaching and focuses on two questions:

- Am I an effective teacher?
- How can I become a more effective teacher?

Summative evaluation is often used by administrators in decision making about professional status and merit-salary for faculty. Summative evaluation emphasizes accountability and addresses three questions:

- Am I a “good” teacher relative to my peers?
- Is my teaching an aid or hindrance to tenure and promotion?
- Is my teaching worthy of merit salary or promotion?

Interestingly, both formative and summative evaluation often entails many of the same assessment tactics. Indeed, if teachers focus primarily on becoming better teachers through formative evaluation, then improved summative outcomes will likely follow.

### What Is To Be Evaluated?

When we consider teaching and its evaluation, we generally think about what we do in the classroom: the clarity of our lectures, the extent to which we engage students in discussion, and so on. Obviously, teaching involves more than classroom performance. We prepare for hours in advance of class, we create and grade exams and other assignments, and we meet students during office hours, to name but a



few components of teaching that occur outside the classroom. Inside as well as outside of the classroom, students should be learning something about our subject matter and teachers should control the learning environment so that students can achieve that goal-and the outcome of this process is also relevant for evaluation. This broader perspective of teaching encompasses four dimensions: course organization and preparation, classroom performance, approachability and availability, and assessment of student learning.

### Course Organization and Preparation

In evaluating our teaching, we often overlook course organization and preparation and focus on classroom performance. How we prepare and organize our courses is inextricably related to what it is we actually do in the classroom, and thus what students learn. Generally, our courses are organized around what we wish our teaching to achieve in terms of learning outcomes. So, when thinking about how to organize and prepare for a course, the first question to ask is, “What is it I want my students to learn?” Once this question has been addressed, three other important questions must be entertained to evaluate course preparation and organization:

- Are these outcomes appropriate to the level and content of the course?
- How do I connect these outcomes with specific course activities?
- Will these outcomes stimulate intellectual growth and enjoyment of learning?

Answers to these questions should appear in your class syllabus and unambiguously convey to students the following aspects of course planning: student learning outcomes, the nature of the subject matter, the kinds of classroom learning activities you will use, how you will engage students, your approach to testing, and your classroom management practices.

### Classroom Performance

To become an effective classroom teacher demands expertise in your field. Expertise is certainly necessary, but not sufficient, for effective teaching. Being able to communicate that knowledge clearly and enthusiastically is also key to effective student learning. Classroom performance includes not only your expertise and your ability to communicate, but also your ability to create a learning environment that maximizes student learning. What we teach cannot be disentangled from the environment in which we teach it. Thus, becoming a successful teacher hinges on our abilities to establish rapport, an interpersonal dynamic that increases the likelihood

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that students will pay attention to, and understand, what we teach. Essential aspects of rapport building include, among other things, learning students' names, using relevant examples when possible, treating students respectfully, using appropriate humor, and starting and ending class on time (Buskist & Saville, 2004).

### Approachability and Availability

An important consequence of effective classroom teaching is that our demeanor in the classroom influences our students' willingness to initiate one-on-one contact with us outside of class. If students perceive us to be supportive and caring, then they may also perceive us as being approachable outside the classroom. If we are not seen as accessible by students, then our students may be avoiding outside of class contact with us that may be important for their success in our classes. You may be unaware of such a situation if you do not include approachability and accessibility in your teaching evaluation strategies. Questions to ask to assess your approachability and availability include:

- What is my interactive style with students?
- Do I encourage students to meet with me?
- Am I in my office during my office hours?
- Do I pay attention to my students when they are talking to me?
- Do I respond promptly and courteously to student phone calls and e-mail?

### Assessment of Student Learning

Perhaps the most overlooked factor in the evaluation of teaching is how we assess students' learning. As teachers, we often rely on student assessments of various kinds to inform conclusions about student learning. Assessments help us to answer questions like: Have my students learned? What have my students learned well and what have they misunderstood? Have my students retained information and skills over time? Although the answers to these questions are critical to providing feedback about student learning, they are likely just as informative for teachers, as student learning is a primary indicator of effective teaching. Our student assessments strategies can be evaluated across a variety of dimensions; however, teaching evaluation often omits student assessments entirely. This oversight is perplexing because the ultimate goal of teaching is, of course, to facilitate student learning. Do you have a logical rationale for assessing how well you are accomplishing this goal? Before answering this question, first consider several related questions:

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- What is the relation of your assessment protocol to your student learning outcomes?
- How frequently do you assess student learning and why?
- What formats do you use to assess student learning and why?
- How promptly do you return graded materials?
- How much feedback do you provide students regarding their learning?
- What procedures do you use for remediation?
- Are your assessment and grading procedures fair?

Entertaining these questions makes plain the dilemma: Does our approach to assessment of student learning reflect our commitment to helping students become more effective learners or is it merely convenient for us? When our goal as teachers is student learning, the way we draw conclusions about that learning is important and establishing effective practices in student assessment is vital to improving our teaching.

### Assessment of Teaching: What Are the Choices?

Although all teachers would likely agree that teacher evaluation is important, when designing a course an evaluation plan is often overlooked. Your preparation and organization, classroom performance, approachability and availability, and assessment of your students' learning are all possible aspects of teaching to evaluate. The question, of course, is how best to go about the task of evaluating the many aspects of teaching I have noted thus far. Who provides the evaluative data, when should the evaluation be conducted, and what assessment technique(s) should comprise the evaluation?

### Who Provides Evaluative Data?

Students are our most common source of evaluative information (Lewis, 2001). Although the validity of data from student evaluations has been called into question (e.g., Greimel-Fuhrmann & Geyer, 2003), student evaluations continue to be used as a primary assessment tool for most teachers and administrators. Nonetheless, additional forms of assessment, such as self-assessment and peer consultation, can provide useful supplemental information. For example, both self-assessment and peer consultation are likely to be superior to student evaluations in providing feedback regarding developing appropriate student learning outcomes, developing and revising syllabi, understanding the relationship of student learning outcomes to student learning, and creating effective formats for assessing student learning.

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### When Should Evaluations be Conducted?

Evaluations are most often given at the very end of the semester. The advantage of these evaluations is that it provides data about your teaching over the entire course. The disadvantage is that the group of students provided those evaluations will not experience any direct benefit of their feedback. The alternative to end-of-the-semester evaluations is to evaluate your teaching earlier in the semester such as at the mid-term. That way, the end-of-the-semester evaluation can be used to gauge how successfully you resolved any important issues about your teaching that you discovered by analyzing the mid-term students evaluations of your teaching. Our students frequently voice their appreciation of our willingness to incorporate their suggestions provided on earlier evaluations into improving the classroom learning experience for them.

Of course, you may wish to evaluate your teaching more than once or twice a semester-even on a weekly basis. Keep in mind, though, that even brief evaluation will take some time to administer and collect and your students may find such frequent assessment taxing, which may in turn compromise the quality of the feedback you derive from the process. Instead, you may wish to solicit feedback from your students when trying a new technique or demonstration for the first time or when making other sorts of modifications to your teaching. Two or three evaluations per semester will likely provide ample useful data for you to assess your teaching effectiveness. You may use end-of-the-semester evaluations from one semester to help make decisions about aspects of your course that you might wish to specifically evaluate during subsequent semesters.

Although most universities typically have an instrument they require for end-of-the-semester evaluations, developing your own questions for additional evaluations allows you to assess student perceptions of your teaching that the university instrument might overlook. Such evaluations also allow more flexibility in asking questions that you deem especially critical to understanding your approach to teaching.

### What Assessment Techniques Might be Used?

Techniques for assessing teaching fall into three general categories: student feedback, self-assessment, and peer evaluation. These techniques may be used alone or in combination. Each teacher should consider developing a personalized strategy as teaching assessment is not a one-size-fits all endeavor. Teachers may even consider having different assessment strategies to evaluate teaching in different courses that they teach. After all, a large introductory survey course will be a very different course



than a discussion-based or practical upper-level course. You would likely not assess your students for these different classes with the same tests and assignments, so perhaps you would not use the same evaluation plan for your teaching in both courses. No matter what approach you ultimately use, you may wish to consider compiling feedback from students, peers, and your own self-reflection over your teaching.

Student feedback may be collected in several ways, for example, through the typical paper and pencil course evaluations containing forced-choice (true/false or multiple choice) and/or open-ended items are the typical means of gather data about your teaching at most universities. If your department or university has a standard form that everyone is required to use, it likely takes the form of a pencil and paper assessment that students complete during class one day near the end of the term. As noted, you may also add questions to such a format for your own information. A combination of quantitative and qualitative questions provide students the opportunity to provide detailed feedback. Open-ended or qualitative questions potentially allow teachers to determine why students rate them poorly (or well) on quantitative items.

In addition to standardized formats, you might also consider employing in-class learning assessment techniques (see Angelo & Cross, 1993 for detailed descriptions). In-class assessment techniques (or CATs) involve asking students to engage in brief tasks, during class, with the aim of gauging their knowledge or understanding to check progress quickly and efficiently, or to specifically assess student impression of an assignment or demonstration. Whether you choose to use a CAT to check student progress or to ask students about a teaching practice, both strategies can provide useful feedback about your teaching. CATs are low or no-stakes assignments that should be briefly used for improving your teaching and your students learning. Just as CATs are low stakes for students, they are also low time commitments for teachers in terms of class time to administer and collect as well as analysis of student answers. Just a few examples of CATs include the minute paper, the muddiest point, and student-generated exam questions. The minute paper involves asking students to briefly summarize the most important point from that day's material. The muddiest point involves asking students to take a few minutes to describe the most difficult or least clear part of the day's material. Student-generated test items involves asking students to develop "test" questions that are similar in format to typical tests questions in the course. Students should also generate answers to those questions and in doing so will have the opportunity to practice answering questions on the topic of choice, which may reveal to them any misunderstanding that they might have about course content.

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Paper and pencil evaluations provide global information regarding your overall teaching effectiveness and typically center on your qualities as a teacher. CATs focus on what students learn during any given class period. An alternative to pencil and paper assessments and CATs is the use of student focus groups. Focus groups involve recruiting randomly selected students from your class to meet in focus groups outside of class time to provide feedback on specific aspects of your course—for example, clarity of lectures, testing and grading procedures, and so on. Focus groups are also useful in providing feedback regarding your rapport with students and gathering suggestions for building stronger rapport. You identify what you would like to be discussed in focus groups and construct a set of questions for the students in the focus group to consider. An impartial individual (a colleague or other) might serve as a mediator for the focus groups. This person poses the questions to students and compiles the data (anonymously) as they discuss answers to the questions. You may run focus groups for yourself, but consider that, if you do, your students may be less candid with critical feedback because you are present and their feedback is not anonymous.

No matter which techniques you use to collect student feedback, remember that students are not experts in your content area, nor are they experts in teaching. Students are best poised to offer feedback about your interpersonal skills within the teaching context, including your ability to establish rapport, your approachability and accessibility, and your respectfulness. Students are also important sources of information about your pace of lecture presentation, clarity of your lectures, and organization of your notes or PowerPoint slides.

In addition to student assessment, you might also engage in self-assessment. Self-assessment techniques provide valuable data regarding all aspects of your teaching, and like student evaluations, exist in several formats. Informal reflection after class is a brief and low-investment approach to compiling information about your teaching. Informal reflection involves assessing how well we performed on any given day. One useful measure for these judgments is the extent to which students appear attentive and engaged in class discussion. You might simply ponder your class experience or you may keep a teaching journal. After each class take a few moments to note what went well or poorly and any thoughts you might have on how you might improve or change what you did that day. If you choose to write these thoughts in a journal then you have a steady stream of data on which to reflect when you get ready to teach the course again. You might also consider audiotape analysis that consists of recording a class and replaying it with a critical ear. Although this practice will require a little time, you will certainly have some insight about your teaching upon reflection.

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Review and revision of your teaching philosophy statement is also a helpful self-assessment strategy. A teaching philosophy is a brief document that outlines your values and goals as a teacher. Your teaching philosophy, as you might imagine, is a dynamic document that will develop as your experiences inform your teaching. Writing about your approach to teaching as well as your actual teaching experiences creates opportunities for reflection on your teaching life—the chance to lead an “examined life” as a teacher. Contemplating both what you do well and not so well as a teacher may provide insights into personal actions you may undertake for becoming a better teacher. Finally, comparison of student learning outcomes to actual student achievement allows you to consider how well your students are achieving the objectives you set for them and permits you to identify ways that you might help them achieve those goals. It also provides a means of assessing how well your course preparation and organization help students achieve these outcomes.

Self-assessment is critical for personal growth; however, you are likely your worst critic and you are certainly not impartial when considering your own teaching. Because students are not particularly good sources of feedback about some aspects of teaching (e.g., our knowledge of content) and we lack insight or can be overly critical of ourselves, it is also important to consider collecting feedback from peers.

Peer evaluations most often take the form of a departmental colleague visiting one of our classes and providing feedback afterwards. However, peers may also provide us useful feedback in a variety of other ways including audiotape analysis, review of syllabi (e.g., learning outcomes, content, and grading procedures), and review of your teaching philosophy.

Most of our departmental peers have not been trained in formal analysis of teaching strategies and style, so they may not often provide us with concrete suggestions for improving our teaching *per se*. However, what departmental peers do know is our content area. Thus, they often can provide helpful suggestions regarding course content, demonstrations and examples of specific topics and issues, and the relationship between student learning objectives and content. For feedback beyond content-related issues in the classroom, you might consider asking a colleague who specializes in teaching or learning or one whose teaching you admire to come and visit your class to offer feedback or advice. You might also consider contacting your campus teaching and learning center, if your university has one, as ask one of their teaching experts to observe your teaching. Peers, departmental or otherwise, may also be helpful because they know the student population we teach and can offer

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insights on how to adjust our teaching to that population. You will want to discuss your particular goals for your teaching with the colleague who observes you and be certain to prompt the observer and to help provide some structure to the feedback.

Peer consultation, in theory, seems to be an excellent tactic to compile critical feedback about some aspects of your teaching for which your students and yourself are poor sources of information. In practice, there are several caveats when consulting with peers about your teaching. First, you have on-going relationships with your peers, so it is possible that they might be reserved in offering candid critical feedback. Second, if your peer is too blunt with critical feedback, it is possible that you will respond poorly and thus your interpersonal relationship could subsequently be strained. Finally, when asking a peer to evaluate your teaching be careful to ask a colleague whom you trust and who is open-minded about a variety of teaching approaches. Be clear about the goals of your asking someone to observe your teaching and consider the peer consultant specific points to consider if you have particular areas of your teaching that you are interested in improving. Above all, be open-minded and remember that no matter how good we are as teachers, we can always become better teachers.

### How Can Evaluative Data be Used to Improve Teaching?

There are eight general guidelines that may be useful in helping you assess and improve your teaching. Each guideline emphasizes an essential point for developing a comprehensive approach to assessing and improving teaching.

#### Focus on Formative Evaluation First, Then Summative Evaluation

Using feedback from your teaching evaluations will help you become a better teacher and will help your students become better learners. As you become a better teacher, you and your students are likely to enjoy your teaching more and your teaching evaluations are likely to improve-and receiving better teaching evaluations means you have less to worry about regarding summative evaluation.

#### Specific Feedback is Better than Global Feedback

Global feedback such as “You’re a really good teacher” or “You need to be more approachable” is vague and not helpful in identifying ways to improve your teaching. Seek feedback that emphasizes specific behaviors that you either need to change or adopt. For example, feedback such as “You did a great job getting our term papers back to us 2 days after we turned them in” or “I sent you an e-mail 3 days ago and



you still haven't answered it" allows you to focus on the precise behaviors you need to change or maintain.

### More Feedback is Better Than Less

The more feedback you gather, the more information you will have to consider to assess your teaching effectiveness. Although the numerical information from the objective portions of student evaluations may provide an overall impression that students have of your teaching, gather as much specific written commentary from students and peers as you can. This information is useful in interpreting the numerical data and is more likely to pinpoint specific aspects of your teaching that are meritorious or need improvement.

### Take Context into Consideration

As you examine your teaching strengths and weaknesses, consider context as a potential factor influencing your approach to teaching and your students' motivation to learn. Sometimes students' willingness to study for your classes is diminished by their extracurricular interests. If so, your task is to inspire students to strive for a balance between studying and becoming too distracted by their other interests. At other times, your approach to teaching may not be appropriate for the level of the class. This point is especially true of new faculty who, coming right from graduate school, demand that undergraduates read nearly as much as they did while those new faculty did while earning their PhDs.

### Seek Consistent Themes Within and Across Evaluative Measures

As you gather evaluation information, step back and examine it as a continuous whole—look for patterns in the feedback you receive. Reflect on both critical and positive themes in your evaluations, and link valid criticisms—those comments that identify deficits in your teaching—to specific teaching behaviors that can be adjusted to improve your teaching effectiveness. However, do not focus on criticism to the extent that you overlook what is positive about your teaching. Indeed, the key to enhancing your teaching is to refine what you do well while simultaneously improving what you do less than well.

### Ignore the Lone Voice of Gloom

No matter how good our student teaching evaluations may be, students are usually not unanimous in their opinion of us or our teaching. Most of us have at least

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one student in each of our classes to whom we just don't relate very well-despite our best efforts to connect with everyone. Sometimes we do not know that this student even exists until we get our teaching evaluations back and read a comment such as: "Dr. X is the single worst teacher I have ever had. I should get my tuition back for this class". For most of us, this comment is the one that we will remember the most, even when the bulk of the other commentary is positive. You should ignore student commentary that is mean spirited or harshly critical, but without any evidence to substantiate it, and when it is offered only by a single student (this advice also applies to extremely positive commentary that is similarly devoid of substance, for example, "I loved this teacher" or "This teacher is wonderful").

### Use Multiple Measures to Assess Your Teaching

Do not limit the assessment of your teaching to a single source (e.g., students) or a specific teaching dimension (e.g., classroom performance). You will have the best chances of improving your teaching if you gather evaluative information from both students and your peers on all aspects of your teaching.

### Develop an Individualized Assessment Plan for Each of Your Courses

Adopt a reflective approach to the evaluation of your teaching. As you prepare your syllabi for next semester, begin contemplating how you will assess your teaching in each of your classes. In fact, you may wish to incorporate assessment plans for your teaching that involve your students into your syllabi. Prior to each semester, contact the Deanship of Skills Development to arrange for a peer observation. Such advance planning allows you to design assessment strategies tailored to providing you specific information about your teaching strengths and areas of improvement in each of your courses.

### Summary

The most effective way of improving your teaching is to regularly use a range of assessment tools help you learn what you are doing well and what aspects of your teaching need improvement. In outlining this process, I made the following key points in this booklet:

- Teaching assessment can be both formative and summative but focusing on the formative will likely lead to sound outcomes related to summative assessment.
- Aspects of teaching to assess include course organization, classroom performance, approachability and accessibility, and assessment of student learning.
- Sound sources of information about your teaching include your students, your colleagues, and yourself.
- When developing an assessment plan, you should consider gathering evaluative data from multiple sources, across multiple time points, and using a variety of assessment tactics.
- Focus on identifying themes in your evaluation data in order to develop a strategy for improving your teaching.

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