Episode 18: Establishing a Classroom Culture that Fosters and Encourages Student Feedback

SPEAKERS
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Tierney King 00:01
This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King., and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. As an instructor, giving feedback might come easily. You do it day in and day out when grading papers, offering insight to student responses or peers, and proofing assignments. But what about receiving feedback? Receiving feedback as an instructor can be nerve wracking and stressful, and it undoubtedly can impact your confidence as a teacher. But what if there were ways that no matter the feedback, good or bad, you could learn to use it constructively, and also better prepare your students to provide feedback that would make you a more effective teacher. In today's episode, Lolita Paff will start by explaining how there's often a disconnect between what students are measuring in feedback and what instructors hope students are measuring with their feedback.

Lolita Paff 01:10
When it comes to feedback about course quality, students and teachers aren't necessarily using the same yardstick. How hard is it to get a good grade is typically the student concern and priority. Faculty are more concerned about developing students' critical thinking skills. Students are concerned with the level of difficulty and the workload. Faculty consider those to be an integral part of higher education. Faculty know learning takes time and considerable effort. And students may focus more on grades than learning. Interpreting student comments and feedback needs to take these divergent perspectives into consideration.

Tierney King 01:51
So how can you take these perspectives into consideration when sometimes they come off a little more harsh than you expected? Here, Lolita Paff gives an example of a comment or feedback from a student, and how to alleviate some of the disconnect that can occur between students, the instructor, and the overall feedback.

Lolita Paff 02:11
"The teacher didn't do his job." These comments suggest conflict between how students and the teacher see the teacher's role and learning in the course. Much of their prior learning experiences may have taught them that it's the teacher's job to do the talking, leaving them the choice of engaging with the subject or not. Active learning strategies, like group work and in-class problem solving, remove that

choice. They don't have that opportunity to sit and passively absorb. They're being asked to do something that is perhaps making them feel a bit uncomfortable. Similarly, they may resent preparatory work. Sometimes they say that they're being asked to teach themselves. If we put the classwork into context, that should help reduce the resistance and the frustration. Sometimes it's as simple as a name change. Calling it homework puts students in the frame of mind where that should be a supplemental practice after the teacher has taught. If it's preparatory work and you call it a warm up exercise, then students realize that, well, a warm up happens before. And the resistance level begins to fall. So what you call things really does matter. Some other ways to minimize the student push back to expectations before class or engagement during class is to explain why first exposure outside of class is necessary. Making the preparatory work low stakes. Assessing the prep work leniently for effort rather than accuracy, or as part of a formative assessment, not as a summative. Often, students don't have very many opportunities to do work for the sake of learning, where it doesn't hurt their grade if they mess it up. They need free spaces to explore that with the content and wrestle with it and not be penalized if they get it wrong. All of these approaches reinforce the message to students that learning requires active engagement. Active learning strategies are designed to help them learn, not for the teacher to shirk responsibility.

Tierney King 04:29
As you work on closing that disconnect, you suddenly transition to online teaching, which poses itself as another hurdle. How do you get useful feedback as an online teacher? How do you gain insight from your students over a screen? Here, Ann Taylor offers some insight on feedback in the online realm and tools you can use to gain feedback when teaching online.

Ann Taylor 04:52
So what do you examine in the online realm? Remember, good teaching is good teaching. But in the online realm, we specifically want to look at things like your interactions with students. Are you giving good response time? Are you available to your students? Do they feel like you're accessible? Do you come across as a caring faculty member in things like emails and written discussion posts? It can be tricky to do. How good are you with the technology? The use of technology is something that you'll probably get more and more familiar with over time. When you first start out, it can be maybe a little clumsy. So that's something that you want to look at. You want to see how comfortable you seem, and where you might need to improve some of your skills. Importantly, you want to look at the impact of your pedagogical strategies. How are you teaching? Again, remember, delivery is very different than course development. By the time you start teaching an online course, typically, all the lecturing is done. You already put all of that into words, into video, into audio, whatever your style is. Now, we're looking at how well are you doing things like facilitating online discussions? How well are you giving feedback to your students that are helping them progress through the course? Again, we go back to the interactions. How are your interactions with your students throughout the course? Are they facilitating student learning? And then finally, we look at things when we look at our own online teaching, like our overall administrative management of the course. This perhaps can be one of the trickiest things. We've got students who are either across campus taking the course online, or across the world taking the course online. So how can we do this all informally? You want to get good feedback on your teaching so that you can improve so that you can make sure you get the job next semester. What kind of feedback can you do? What kind of feedback can you do, receive, solicit informally? My favorite

techniques when I teach are things like one-minute papers where you ask your students, maybe at key points in the course, maybe it's the end of a lesson, maybe it's the end of a unit of study. You ask them to write and submit to you a one-minute paper just talking about what they got out of that previous chunk of content. What's going well for them? What they're still confused about? What maybe they'd like to see more of? Another technique is called a muddiest point paper. Again, very short, like a one-minute paper. You would give them one minute to write that. The muddiest point, you say, all I want to know is: what is a sticking point for you. We just covered our unit on the origins of species. What still seems muddy to you, confusing? What could I help elaborate on? There are many, many ways you can do formal reviews. Students, surprisingly, give great meaningful feedback if you ask them the right questions. They're not the right people to give you feedback on the content of your course, but they completely are capable of giving you feedback on how well you're coming across to them and how well you're facilitating their learning. The Self-Evaluation of Education Quality, the SEEQ, is one such tool commonly done at mid semester. Developed by Dr. marsh, this is a widely used and vetted instrument that you can give to your students customize, and they'll give you some very helpful feedback. The SALG, the Self-Assessment of Learning Gains is another such tool that I've used in my courses, usually at mid semester.

Tierney King 08:50

No matter the tools you use to conduct student feedback, the most important element is how are you going to use that feedback? And more importantly, how can you use that feedback immediately? In this seminar, Brian Udermann explains how he uses and asks for student feedback from students throughout his courses.

Brian Udermann 09:10

So in regards to that, using feedback to improve teaching and then actually have that help us in the classroom, three factors can really help with that process. One is, does the feedback from students reveal something new to the instructor? So, is the feedback from students telling an instructor something they didn't know already? So, let's say students are providing feedback pretty consistently that maybe an instructor is kind of short, or they're mean sometimes, or they're just not super pleasant. And an instructor had no idea that was the case. And they're reading this in the feedback. And they're like, oh my gosh, I need to go back and take a look at how I'm responding to students in emails, or in discussions, or in the feedback that I'm giving to them on assignments and various assessments. And they might be like, oh my gosh, that's actually true. So again, does it reveal something new? Two, is an instructor motivated to do something about it, or make it better, or improve? So, there is certainly a continuum here of instructors really wanting to improve their teaching and doing almost anything they can and are able to do to make that happen. And then there are some instructors who are kind of middle of the road. And they might do some things if it's not too much work, or effort, or energy. And then again, their instructors may be on one end of the continuum where they're really not all that interested in making improvements in their teaching. So, does the feedback reveal something new? And is the instructor motivated to improve? Number three, does the instructor have skills to improve? So that's a big one. So. students may be providing feedback about technology use or it'd be great to see you create more videos for a class or whatever that might be. And an instructor maybe just doesn't have the skills in order to make the changes that the students are suggesting Yeah, I truly believe that the thing that has helped me improve my teaching more than anything else, has been feedback from

students. And I'm sometimes surprised by how many instructors don't use feedback from students. You know, sometimes instructors might not think they actually need it. I came across this study, not too long ago, and it was it's a little bit of an older study. But these authors reported that 92% of instructors rated their teaching as above average. So sometimes, some instructors can think maybe, they're a little bit better than they are, or they might not need to improve, when in reality, I think we can always be striving to be a little bit better and to improve what we do in the classroom for the sake of our students. So, I'm in a process right now—I'm in a class right now. And this week I'm actually asking for some student feedback. And what I usually do is talk about what students said last semester. You know, here's some feedback that I received from students last semester. And here are some changes that I made based upon that student feedback. And then I would request feedback from students this semester, make some changes, share the results with them. But I do think it's important to tell students that you value their feedback. You want their feedback. You use their feedback to help you be a better instructor. And again, share some of the feedback that you've gotten in the past from other students and even some changes that you've made based upon that feedback. So that right there tells students like not only is this instructor just going to get this information, but there they're likely going to use it to make some changes in their teaching in their classes. If you think about it, who's in the best place to truly provide feedback to instructors on their teaching? Is it a department chair? Is it a colleague? Is it a student? In my opinion, the students are in the best position to provide feedback to instructors. Hey, here are the things that I really like or the things that you're doing well. Or here are the things that you could potentially do different to kind of help me as a student, and things that could potentially improve your teaching. So, students are I think, again, in the best position to provide feedback to instructors to help them improve their teaching, which ultimately helps improve student learning. You know, I think doing this pretty consistently through throughout your class, and when you teach, just getting feedback and using that feedback to improve teaching, it creates a little bit of a different culture in courses. And it's kind of a—I think of it as creating a culture of feedback. I see that as a win-win. I already talked about why it's important, or the benefits of gathering feedback and the positives that can bring or lead to for students. So you know, when you're asking students those benefits, that's certainly a win. And the other win is for the instructor. You're hearing things maybe that are positive that you can continue to do. And you're also hearing things maybe that you can change or tweak or revise, to improve your teaching and improve certain student learning. So I love to think about this idea of creating a culture of feedback, creating a culture of feedback, and how that's a win-win both for the student, as well as the instructor.

Tierney King 15:17
Whether you're driving to work or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.