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“We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.”

-Bill Gates

Deciphering and Responding to Learner Feedback

Learner feedback received through course evaluations is a necessary component of teaching. Evaluations allow learners to reflect, elaborate on areas they feel could be improved, and share things they felt were done well within the course or curriculum. However, receiving a “negative” evaluation from a learner can have a profound impact for those on the receiving end. Without the proper perspective, educators may head for different extremes after reading “negative” learner feedback – complete denial with no changes made to improve or utter despair leading to a whole curricular overhaul. How can educators interpret feedback, identify what is significant, and use these responses to make meaningful changes?

This month, our Dean’s Forum presentation was centered on interpreting and responding to learner feedback. Kim Filer, PhD, (Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Virginia Tech) shared during the presentation that good teaching is interpreted as “care” by learners. Enthusiasm for teaching and your specific subject matter can have a positive influence on learner perception of your teaching. Co-presenter Danielle Lusk, PhD shared their expertise on learner evaluations and strategies for improving your teaching based on specific feedback. A recording of their presentation can be found on the TEACH webpage but outlined below you will find a few techniques that Dr. Lusk shared for enhancing your teaching in response to learner evaluations.

1. Lecture style teaching:

- Organization – use outlines, concept linkages, summarization and formative assessment to help keep your lectures organized.
- Managing Content – use the 1:15 rule, activate prior knowledge and incorporate retrieval activities to keep from overloading your lecture with content.
- Asking & Answering Questions –use anonymous questioning or pause procedure to allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge gaps.

2. Learner Centered Activities:

- Plan for participation – create structured pairing or groups, implement random calling, and allow time for thinking.
- Convey importance - communicate objectives, gather student perspective, establish connections
- Techniques for synthesis – ask probing questions and help conceptualize associations.

When preparing to review your feedback, keep the below in mind to help facilitate your interpretation:

1. **Put comments into context** – Not all learners jive with specific teaching characteristics or personalities. Could the less than glowing feedback simply be the result of a new pedagogical technique gone-awry?
2. **Consider potential areas of bias** –Investigate any sources of bias that could have influenced a learners response
3. **Explore situational explanations** – Is there a specific event that incited the feedback?
4. **Gather additional feedback** – While learner evaluations are useful, peer observation and other means of teaching evaluation can help to substantiate learner feedback.
5. **Put feedback into perspective** - Always keep goals and objectives of course in mind.
6. **Tease out the constructive**– Feedback used to implement change should always be a result of productive rather than emotional responses.

In a sea of learner feedback, it may be challenging to separate the significant from the disgruntled. Use the step-by-step process below for teasing out meaningful themes from your learner evaluations.

1. Without putting up your guard, read through all evaluations.
2. After giving yourself time to reflect, read evaluations again and allow time to process each comment.
3. Categorize comments by theme – identify if they are reflective of teaching execution, style or an individual learner concern.
4. Identify both successes and areas for improvement (remember to look at the negative comments objectively).
5. Identify strategies for improvement for common themes.

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Dean's Corner

Cynda Johnson, MD, MBA

This spring 48 members of our faculty were recognized for their promotions during our annual faculty assembly. It was the first time we publically acknowledged faculty promotions. As part of the process for integrating into Virginia Tech, we spent a great deal of time updating our Faculty Bylaws and promotion and tenure documentation. In doing so, we realized we had more faculty promotions than we even realized, so this year seemed like the right time to start this tradition.

I am as proud of our faculty tenure and promotion system as any other thing that we've done here at VTCSOM. We started the school with no faculty. Now we have almost 800 faculty members, most of whom had never before been part of an academic health center. I'm energized by our faculty who saw the value of academic promotions, took the initiative, and went through the rigor of applying.

Since this was the first time we acknowledge faculty promotions, we included all of the ones that have occurred since our school began in the list below.

Congratulations and thank you to our faculty who were recognized.

Cynda