Improving Teaching through Mid-Semester Evaluations

The work of a scholar is always a dialogue; ideas and findings must be published so that peers can evaluate, suggest, and critique. Based on the responses of others, the work will develop more fully and, it is hoped, others can learn from it and build on it. The work of a teacher should also be a dialogue. A teacher whose class operates as a closed system, not open to suggestions or criticism, will never grow as a teacher. Students all learn in different ways and every class develops its own personality, so what works in one class, in one semester, may not work in another. How is it possible to know, before the end of the semester, whether a teacher is meeting the individual needs of that class or missing the mark?

TAs who care about improving their teaching will work to find ways of evaluating the job they are doing as they go along. End of semester evaluations will give them a general idea of how the class went and may help to improve the next semester's classes, but they are of little value to the students who complete them: by the time they get to evaluate your teaching they have already passed or failed the course. TAs can, however, implement their own evaluation procedure as the semester progresses.

One simple way to forestall trouble with a class is to offer students a chance to complete a mid-semester evaluation. A short and simple form tailored to the class will alert teachers to potential problem areas. Students should be encouraged to answer the questions freely, anonymously; make them understand that you value their honesty, so negative responses will not be held against them. (See page 3 for a sample mid-semester evaluation.) Use these evaluations to reassess the way the class is being conducted, to reevaluate the usefulness of the assignments. Don't allow yourself to be angered or upset by the comments; if students are blunt, take their criticisms maturely.

Asking a faculty member to sit in and evaluate a class is another way of gaining constructive feedback about your teaching. Before the observation, explain to the faculty member what the goals are for that class, give him/her a copy of the course syllabus and any relevant handouts so that he/she knows your expectations for the class. Schedule an appointment soon after the observation to discuss how the class went. Even the most well-managed classes will have room for improvement. It is also useful to give the observer a group of graded papers--an essay, short assignment, or test--so that they can comment on the types of assignments or tests that you create and evaluate your ability as a grader. It is a good policy to tell students ahead of time, if possible, that the class will be observed. One of the qualities a good observer will be looking for is how well the stu-

Videotape a class? Why? It is not required by the university or even by most programs and is not a condition of employment. TAs will not get a raise in salary or any other concrete and immediate reward for the effort. So, why bother?

There are many reasons to bother. TAs are, for the most part, conscientious and engaged teachers; they are also, for the most part, inexperienced ones. The value of having an experienced teacher view and discuss a class, offering suggestions and alternate ways to present material, is inestimable. Even for experienced teachers, having an objective observer analyze the various components of their classroom performance can help them make those small adjustments that transform a good teacher into a great one.

Think of all the effort that a teacher puts into class preparation: organizing material, considering effective ways of presenting that material, designing homework assignments and tests that work to reinforce and develop classroom work, etc. If minor problems in presentation distract students from hearing or understanding you, much effort has been wasted. A videotape review of one class can be a real eye-opener, giving a TA a student's view of the class: if you're annoyed by some unconscious mannerism or bored by the presen-
Non-traditional Students:

According to a recent study, twenty percent of all college students are thirty years of age or older, and a majority of these older students are women. These "non-traditional" students have postponed their college work for a number of reasons--family responsibilities, financial contrictions, lack of motivation, etc.--and return to school with varying goals, needs, and expectations. Many of the students in University College (school #61) are such non-traditional ones. University College students must meet the same standards as students in the other colleges and schools, but, since they are only attending part-time, students may take a longer time to complete their degree.

Although no description will accurately describe all non-traditional students, teachers can probably safely assume that their students' interests and focus will not be the same as that of their more traditional students. Campus-life--fraternities, sororities, dorm life, etc.--will not be the center of their lives. Many of these students have children for whom they must care, full-time jobs that require a significant investment of time and energy, or other commitments that absorb the bulk of their time.

Given the added demands on these students, TAs should try to work closely with them to make their academic lives easier, to insure their success in the university. Although standards should not be lowered, requirements could be made more flexible. For example, students who work often have to travel for their jobs; a too strict attendance policy would penalize these students. Although they should be held responsible for the work done in missed classes, their absence alone should not merit a lowered grade. Because these students often have very tight schedules, it is important that they know at the beginning of the semester all requirements and deadlines. Changing requirements in mid-semester or moving up deadlines for papers may cause serious problems for students with already carefully planned, tightly booked schedules. This means the teacher must be organized, must have the syllabus in order, from the very beginning of the semester. (Not only the students but the teacher too will benefit from this in the end.) By being flexible when necessary you can make a difference in the careers of these students.

Be demanding but also be understanding. Your efforts will be appreciated and rewarded; students will work hard to meet your expectations because they know you are working with them.
Do-It-Yourself Mid-Semester Evaluation

Below is a sample mid-term evaluation that TAs can administer to classes to see how students perceive the class at the mid-point of the semester.

By answering the following questions in as much detail as possible, you will help me to improve the remaining weeks of the semester. Please answer as fully and as honestly as possible.

1. Do you find the subject matter of this course easy, average, difficult? Explain.

2. At this point, what grade do you expect to get in this class? On what do you base this expectation?

3. Have you been able to keep up with the reading assignments in this class? If no, approximately what percentage of the readings have you been able to complete?

4. How much time per week do you devote to this class outside of the regular class hours?

5. Do you feel free to ask questions or make comments in this class?

6. Is the class material presented in a clear and well organized manner? Are the lectures to the point? Can you relate the lectures to the outside readings?

7. When the blackboard is used, are you able to read it? Is the presentation organized effectively?

8. Is my pronunciation always clear? My voice loud enough?

9. If you could make one suggestion on how to improve this class, what would it be?

10. Additional comments.
Mid-Semester Evaluations

Students relate to the teacher, something hard to judge if the students are distracted or intimidated by the presence of an unknown faculty member in the class.

TAs who feel threatened by having a faculty member judge their teaching may wish instead to have a class videotaped. After the taping, the TA can view the tape with a member of the TA Project and discuss what went right and what went wrong in the class. The value of having a taped evaluation is that TAs are able to see how they look to the students, and, from a new vantage point, judge the effectiveness of their presentation and the quality of student responses (see "Why Videotape?" page 1).

Why Videotape?

Videotape a class? Why not?

Having a class videotaped is quite simple. Call Alex Bachmann, Beth Griech, or Jim Orsini (ext. 7034) to set up an appointment. On the agreed-upon day, a technician from the TA Project will come to the class ahead of time, set up the equipment in the back of the room, and then tape the entire class. The TA must then call again to set up an appointment to come and view the tape at 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus. Teaching performance tapes are kept strictly confidential and cannot influence future TA appointments in any way.

Videotape a class? Why not?

Teaching Assistant Project

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