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Resource: The Torch or the Firehose
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Evaluating You: Feedback

You are evaluating your students steadily: the questions you ask in class, their problem sets, their exams. But it goes two ways—they are evaluating you as well. Do you want to know what they think?

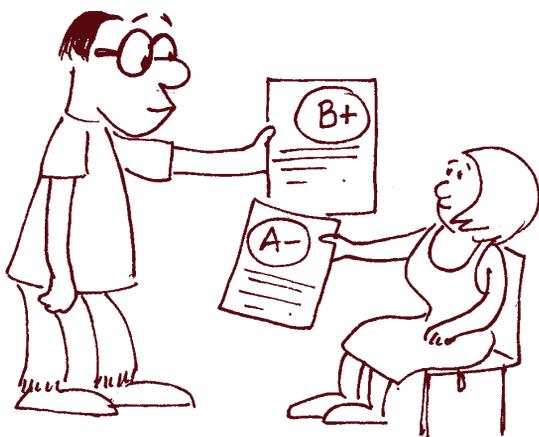
Let's face it, many teachers do not. They may say it's undignified, inappropriate, students lack the understanding and judgment—but the most important reason is probably to avoid getting hurt. Still, feedback can be such a help to improvement that all teachers should try to overcome any natural inclination they may have against it.

Try a Bull Session

Of course, when you look at your students, you'll see their expressions of perplexity, delight, or boredom. That's a form of evaluation. But you can get a lot more information by taking time out now and then to discuss with your class how they feel things are going. Listen quietly and carefully to what they say. For once, just listen; don't argue. But you can tell them how you feel about things, too—after all, some of the fault is theirs if the class is dull. However, don't criticize them too much. Maybe they'll have some ideas on how to improve things. Ask them. You'll have to assure them by your manner that you really want feedback and aren't going to give a C- to those who stick their necks out.

If they are too embarrassed to discuss the recitation, give them a few minutes to write down (anonymously) what they think, then discuss their comments with them during the next recitation hour.

Once or twice during the term you might invite the students to discuss broader aspects of the course—its pace, the text, the assignments, grading, administration, whether they feel motivated to study it, its difficulty, and so on. Sometimes you can pick up this sort of information by coming early to the classroom and chatting with the students there.



Other evaluation processes

- Give out a questionnaire in mid-semester to get feedback on how to improve the recitation. A similar questionnaire at the end can help you improve in the future.
- Now and then, two minutes before the end of a recitation, pass out 3 x 5 index cards and ask students to write what they still don't understand from that hour. (They don't have to sign their names.) Collect these and review what they haven't understood at the next recitation. (Or you can send the class an e-mail if it's a relatively simple point.)
- Bring a cassette tape recorder to class one day, and listen to the playback.
- Have your recitation videotaped, so you can see yourself as others see you. A trained professional, an experienced teacher in your department, or a knowledgeable friend can offer comments. (MIT has a formal program for doing this. Contact the Teaching and Learning Laboratory at tll@mit.edu)
- Your department may keep videotapes of good recitations that you can look at to get ideas from.
- Ask someone in the department whose teaching you respect—perhaps another recitation instructor—to observe your class.
- Set up an e-mail list of everyone in your class and write your students asking for comments.

We should fill out evaluations every day—the T.A. was far more prepared today than she ever has been before.

