

I have time to do it? Will it be rewarded? If the answers to these questions are “yes,” say “yes.” Otherwise, say “no.”

Form an “N-Committee.” This idea, taken from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity’s “The Art of Saying ‘No’” Monday Motivator,¹ suggests that you be very deliberate about seeking mentorship specifically for the purpose of deciding what tasks to take on. Your N-Committee might include your department chair, a trusted senior colleague, or even peers who are at the same stage of their careers as you are. If someone seems to be telling you often that you’re saying “yes” too much, ask them to be on your N-Committee. They will surely say “yes” (see what I did there?). Once you have your N-Committee, resolve to consult it before responding to any new requests.

Rely on your prior “yes” responses. You can’t say “no” to everything, nor should you want to. Find something that interests you, that you have time to do, and—most importantly for this particular purpose—that will be valued by your colleagues and department/campus leadership, and say “yes” to that. Then when you are asked to do something that doesn’t interest you, that you don’t have time to do, or that you are convinced won’t be valued, use your previous “yes” as a rationale for saying “no”: “I’m very sorry that I can’t take this on. I’m already doing _____.”

Think of your career as a book with many chapters. This is another recommendation from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity’s “The Art of Saying ‘No’” Monday Motivator, and adopting it can be incredibly freeing. The idea is to take a long-term view of your career: over the course of your career, you can do everything you want to do, but you don’t have to do it all at once. Your early-career years are the early chapters, and these chapters should be focused on the work you need to do to secure tenure and/or promotion. If you’re in a research-focused position, then your early chapters will necessarily focus on your research: proving and writing up results, submitting grant proposals, and the like. You’ll almost surely also want and need to pay some attention to teaching, but this may not need to be your highest priority in this section of your book. On the other hand, if you’re in a teaching-oriented position, then your early chapters will necessarily focus on your teaching and mentoring of students, and you may need to postpone some of your research projects to a later section of your book. Things like mentoring other faculty, academic leadership, and serious committee work in most cases will be reserved for your later chapters. Seek advice from your department chair and senior colleagues about how your book should be structured. This approach can make saying “no” easier, because what you’re really saying is “not right now.”

¹The Monday Motivators are a members-only resource provided by the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, <https://www.facultydiversity.org>.

Make “no” your default. This is another piece of advice from the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity, this time from the Monday Motivator “Just Say No.” As an early-career faculty member, you’ve got a lot on your plate already. When a new request comes in, search for a good reason to say “yes.” If you can’t find one, channel your inner toddler and just say “no.”



Judy Walker

Credits

Author photo is courtesy of Greg Nathan/University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

BAD Teaching Evaluations—What Now?

Harriet Pollatsek

Love them or hate them, student evaluations of teaching are part of academic life. When they are positive, we feel better. When they are negative, we feel worse. But what can we *do* about them?

Caveats

Student evaluations of teaching are deeply flawed tools. Results can be improved by strategically administered chocolate or jokes. More troubling, results can reflect students’ gender, race, or age biases.² Some evaluation forms only elicit numerical rankings, while others give students the opportunity to write in some depth about their reactions. (If yours include some thoughtful written responses, you are fortunate.)

Departments and institutions also differ in the additional means they use to assess teaching effectiveness, such as classroom visits, syllabi, teaching portfolios, and letters

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²My colleague Alanna Hoyer-Leitzel has put together a helpful webpage about student evaluations of teaching (SET) for her students that addresses this issue and encourages students to make constructive use of SET: www.mtholyoke.edu/~ahoyerle/misc/SET.html.

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by current or former students. It is impossible to offer detailed advice that fits such varying circumstances. Such advice as is offered is based not on data but on my own (many!) years as a teacher and as a reader of my own and others' evaluation forms.

Experienced teachers sometimes get bad evaluations too, but this piece is not aimed at them.

What Can You Learn from the Bad Evaluations?

Most evaluation forms can point out relatively straightforward student concerns about your teaching skills, like speaking too softly or writing illegibly on the board. To learn about deeper issues, start by reminding yourself of your goals for the students in this class—such as mastering specific content, strengthening productive mathematical “habits of mind,” fostering the desire to take another course in the department, encouraging positive attitudes toward mathematics. Before you read the evaluations, what was your own sense of how close you came to your goals? What was your own impression based on? Now, what can you draw from the “bad evaluations” about what helped or hindered the attainment of your goals? Can you relate any student reactions to exam results or other evidence you have from student work? Did you and your students perhaps view the same information differently? Can you recall office conversations with individual students that cast any light?

It can be extremely valuable to ask a trusted colleague, ideally someone who has taught the same course, to read your evaluations and help you interpret them. Among other advantages, a more experienced reader is likely to know what kinds of responses are typical and how variable student reactions tend to be.

How Can You Obtain More Useful Information?

My main recommendation is that you should proactively gather your own information to help you improve your teaching—in students' eyes and also in terms of reaching your own and your department's goals.

Within-term evaluations. I especially recommend administering your own formal and/or informal evaluations during the term. You can learn a lot from evaluations of various kinds administered at any point during the term, and you can learn it in time to take immediate advantage of it.

When I used them, I placed a box near the classroom door for students to drop their evaluations in as they left. If you or your students are worried about confidentiality, you could ask a colleague or even a trusted student to collect the responses.

Not only can such evaluations provide valuable information, but also these efforts demonstrate to your students that you care about their learning and their perceptions of what helps them learn.

You might informally query the effectiveness of a particular in-class activity in helping your students understand a new concept:

- You could ask students to write on one side of an index card (1) *What worked best for you in today's activity?* and on the other (2) *What was least successful for you in today's activity?*

Another possibility is distributing a short questionnaire with one or a few multiple-choice questions, inviting students to elaborate on their responses. Here are some samples phrased to go with the response options 1 = agree strongly, 2 = agree somewhat, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree somewhat, 5 = disagree strongly. Some questions might have the additional benefit of making clearer to students what your goals are for particular pedagogical choices.

- *The instructor's comments on my written work help me see where I went wrong and offer useful advice.*
- *Preparing to present material in class helps me understand it more fully.*
- *Answering reading questions before a class helps me get more out of that class.*

Beyond evaluations. Two actions mentioned earlier deserve emphasis. I recommend taking them in many ways and at many times during the term, not just in connection with within-term evaluations:

- Demonstrate to your students that you care about them. A good place to start is by listening to them.
- Make clear to your students what your goals are for particular pedagogical choices you have made, especially for choosing to challenge them. This gives them a framework for thinking about what they are learning and how they are growing.

While mastering the “skills” of teaching can help move us toward our goals, often the biggest impact on our students, especially in the longer term, comes from something “softer”—showing them that we value them and their learning.

Classroom visits. These can be of several kinds.

You can ask a colleague to observe a meeting of your class and discuss it with you afterward. Ask them to notice not only how you present information but also how you ask questions, listen to students, and respond to them. Also ask your colleague to pay attention to what individual students do during the class period.

If your institution has some kind of center to improve teaching, you can consult with them to arrange for someone to observe your teaching and offer advice. This has the disadvantage that the observer may not be familiar with the content of your class. But you may appreciate the greater distance, as well as greater experience, that such an observer brings to the task. (Such a center can also help you devise and even administer within-term questionnaires for your students.)

If suitable facilities exist at your institution, you can arrange to have your class videotaped, and then you can observe yourself. If you haven't done this before, brace yourself; from personal experience I know that this can be a shock.

Finally, you can ask permission to observe a colleague's class and discuss it with them afterwards. Watching someone else can give you ideas that you can adapt to your own purposes in your classroom.

How Can You Minimize Harm to Your Career?

Efforts like those described here will not only help you reach your teaching goals, they will demonstrate to your colleagues that you are committed to becoming an effective teacher and are taking steps to make that happen.



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Credits

Author photo is courtesy of the author.

Handling Negative Student Evaluations

Deanna Haunsperger

We put in hours preparing for what will be one hour of class time, hours grading and making constructive comments on homework and exams, hours working with students in our offices. Yet a negative comment written by a student in one minute on a midterm or end-of-term evaluation can feel devastating. We want to feel that our work is appreciated; we want our students to like us; and if you are tenure-track or undergoing regular reviews, a small collection of negative evaluations can have real consequences. What should you do if you find yourself in that situation?

Get Ahead of the Problem

The best way to handle negative evaluations is to hear them during the term while the class is still in session. It's much easier to address and resolve things that your students

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believe are problems when you can still respond directly in the class. For that reason, ask for feedback from your students throughout the term. This can be as informal or formal as you like: pass out quarter-sheets of paper at the end of class with the words "Keep, Stop, Start"³ on them to find out what they like about class, what they want you to stop, and new ideas they have for improving their learning experience; check their understanding of a certain topic in class; inquire about the class dynamics; see if they feel comfortable asking questions. Check in with your class once a week or throughout the term as you find helpful, but at least once in the middle to catch any problems that are occurring while they can still be corrected. Students are much less likely to give negative feedback after the course is finished if they felt heard during the term.

Use what you learn to make adjustments to the class and point out to the students that you're making a change because it was requested on the evaluations. Explain why some adjustments are not feasible for your class, if that's the case. Students appreciate being heard, and that may cause them to invest more into the class and to take more ownership of the class.

If students complain about bad classroom dynamics, like some students routinely interrupting other students who are speaking, a problem often suffered by women in a mathematics classroom, you can have a classroom discussion about the importance of building a safe community in your classroom so that all students feel respected and comfortable enough to speak up. If you're not sure how to deal with some particular classroom dynamic, ask a trusted colleague to sit in on your class and give you feedback or to help you figure out how to lead a discussion about the issues.

If students are concerned about the workload of your course, explain to them that their education is a full-time job (if that's the type of school you're at), so they should be spending 40 hours per week on their courses combined. That means that on your course, they should be spending approximately $(40-n)/m$ hours on homework for your class each night, where n is the total number of hours they are in class each week for their regular academic classes, and m is the number of regular academic classes they are taking. If, on average, the class is spending much more time than that, then you should adjust your expectations for their workload. If an individual is spending much more time than that, then you should discuss with that person opportunities at your institution for individual tutoring or study skills counseling. Just having a conversation about your expectations for workload (best done on the first day of the term) alleviates some disgruntlement about length of homework assignments.

³This idea came from a conversation with Rochelle Gutierrez recently; she uses "Go, Stop, Start."