

Notes from "Talking About Teaching" session:
Writing Effective Course Evaluations Efficiently
November 16, 2009

Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchanges.

Discussants: Charlene D'Avanzo and Laura Wenk

Laura opened the workshop with a request for a "quick write" by faculty on the topic of course evaluations – about the purpose, audience, and critical issues around this important aspect of teaching at Hampshire College. These writings were then shared.

Jane remarked that faculty need to be careful with delivering negative comments in the evaluations. It is difficult to know how to give a completely honest assessment.

The role of a full evaluation vs. an excerpt was discussed. The excerpt is often the "summative" material, and the "formative" material goes into greater detail about the student.

Faculty need to consider the audience (who will be reading the evaluation?), and don't make all the students look good.

A related issue is the need to have a bottom line. Don't get drowned in a sea of details. What is the takeaway? What is the sense of the student?

The pass/fail option was discussed. At present, the choice seems to be no evaluation or a lot of words! Faculty has a preference for explaining that this is "D" quality work instead of writing "no eval."

Alan Goodman spoke about a Hub club and putting together a course called "improving the hub."

Chris Perry spoke of changing the evaluation form and structure towards more formative material. One day students will have an "e-portfolio" – perhaps within three years. Next fall there will be some early form of this.

Evaluations are both descriptive and evaluative. Either way, they are long – the evaluative parts are shorter, as faculty tend to shy away from writing long ones.

In evaluations, should there be mention of "insufficient work"? Who is the audience for this evaluation? The primary audience is the student, then parents, then graduate school. It's very helpful for faculty to see the transcript for graduate school. Central records will send a transcript to faculty members, if requested.

Tom Haxo complained that some evaluations contain an excessive amount of writing compared with the portfolio of the art student. Faculty should write less, and consolidate. There is just too much to read. The evaluations must be honest and also tactful – diplomatic and negotiable. The person to keep in mind while writing is the student. Tom proposed that the best way to check in is to sit down with the student for 30 minutes and discuss progress. There is a big problem with the “no evaluation” option.

Laura spoke about data she had collected in a student survey from her class “How People Learn.” She emphasized that students need to understand the evaluation process and course objectives. They need and want feedback. Some students have been surprised at the end of a course to learn about the objectives of the course! Students say that they want information regarding their progress towards course goals more than anything else.

Charlene mentioned that she has learned from students that they feel they don’t get enough criticism.

More remarks from faculty were about evaluations generally:

- Sometimes they are not personal enough.
- There is a tension in writing evaluations between getting more personal and focusing more on progress in general skills.
- Evaluations start to sound the same – the word “adequate” is overused.
- There seems to be a disconnect between the summative and formative skills. More particulars need to be written in the formative portion.
- There should be some way to cover easily (with check box?) the qualities of what describes the “good student” – this would cover the basics simply without needing to recap what we expect from students as “givens.” Faculty assume that students will behave in these ways (punctual, doing the work, etc.) and taking time to write about these behaviors does not make much sense.
- Some faculty take brief notes on each student over the course of the semester, and then compile these in preparation for writing the evaluation. It’s important to find a meaningful way to talk about the content of the evaluation.
- Some faculty use an excel spreadsheet – a structure for entering in each assignment, notes on its completion and quality, etc. A bland way of covering this, but it works!
- How to keep your writing fresh? Evaluations often read in a formulaic way. It’s useful to consider how the student performed on each goal, if possible.
- Jaime said that students want to know what they will be evaluated on so it is important to put the course “goals” into the syllabus.
- Question: Is commenting on student behavior appropriate? Maybe not.

- Faculty need to address the work ethic – how are we cultivating this, causing students to better engage. Should they be congratulated or told to get cracking? It often feels like an all or nothing situation. Faculty need to be honest in their comments.
- Faculty should write something for the “no-eval” as this would be very useful for the advisor and others.

We need a **faculty task force** regarding the nature of the evaluation.

An exercise in reading course evaluations in pairs was done in the workshop. The pros and cons of each pair of evals were discussed by each team of two.

Some comments from that exercise:

- How useful is detail – there can be just too many words.
- What skills were used in this course?
- Sometimes the faculty person may be critiquing the arguments of the paper rather than exploring whether the student understood the theories.
- Students want to pursue their interests further – help them understand where this will take them.
- Encourage students’ options for the future.
- If too much weight is put on the final assignment, this may not work so well for the student’s learning.
- With a portfolio (for students studying art), the work needs to be sequenced and then written about. There is a narrative way of assessing artworks.
- It’s useful to have students set their own goals. At the end of a course, they can be asked to do a self-evaluation.
- Hampshire should have a college-wide course evaluation process.

To sum up, everyone has her own way of keeping track of student progress. It is not important for everyone to do this in the same way – but it *is* important to be consistent and have some sort of organizing method in place.