



Getting Better: Checking in with Students to Improve Teaching & Learning

End of Semester Student Evaluations (ESSE) provide no insight on how we can improve our teaching as the semester progresses. ESSE provide data on the collective student perception, and they do not provide insight on student learning (even though they are used as a proxy to measure teaching effectiveness). Because we collect at the end of the semester, ESSE create little incentive for students to offer constructive feedback. Knowing these potential limitations, we should consider the advantages of periodically checking in on our teaching effectiveness and student learning to determine what is and is not working. These survey are often administered at mid-semester, but can be administered periodically throughout the semester. We make discoveries on improving our teaching practice and encourage students to reflect upon what behaviors promote deeper learning.

Advantages to Surveying Students:

- Create opportunities for reflection upon teaching and learning
- Improve teaching, student learning, and end of semester evaluations
- Potentially reduces anxiety about ESSE
- Potentially build confidence in yourself
- Develop an ability in students to provide constructive feedback
- Demonstrates that you care about student success
- Improve your teaching practices and student learning behaviors

In addition, we may also be able to appeal to student motivations. Students who seek a safe and supportive learning environment appreciate when faculty take time to check in on their learning; students develop a sense that they are contributing to their learning. When you conduct an evaluation, for example to seek student input on a new topic, assignment, or reading, you gain their perspectives, you also create opportunities to discuss relevancy, practice transparency, and discuss disciplinary expectations or reasons for rigor and high standards. What is more, if we pose useful, reliable questions, we can uncover student confusion or working assumptions that might otherwise go unnoticed that undermine learning.

Consider using the results to offer a more well-rounded picture of your teaching in performance evaluations even if it is not requested, nor required by the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). In your performance evaluations, you can speak about how you used the results to improve student learning experiences and revise your teaching practice. Being able to discuss these results are more persuasive if you can refer to data or your executive summaries to support your claims.

Three Types of Student Surveys with Hyperlinks

1. Teaching effectiveness

Focus will be on what you are doing to promote or hinder student learning, and with that insight make course changes if necessary. Avoid making significant changes and be sure that you are not violating expectations set out in your syllabus. In addition, you can use the results to generate a conversation about your teaching and learning activities or assessments. Examples below: Start-Stop-Continue, One-Point Raise; Checklist with Open-Ended; Two Open-Ended; Three Open-Ended; Open-Ended with Likert; Individual Class Lesson; Classroom Reaction Survey; "One Minute Paper;" The Muddiest Point; Snap Shots; Quick Thinks; 3-2-1

2. Formative assessment

Provides feedback about how students are learning and identify potential struggles. These may or may not be assigned low-stakes grades, for example, in the case of "clicker" questions during a lecture. They provide insight on teaching effectiveness, especially when patterns emerge in the results.

Examples below: "One Minute Paper;" The Muddiest Point; Snap Shots; Quick Thinks; 3-2-1; Knowledge Confidence Surveys



3. Metacognitive or self-regulated learning

Distinctions between metacognitive and self-regulated get blurry. Linda Nilson suggests that metacognition involves self-awareness of how one thinks. Whereas self-regulation “encompasses the monitoring and managing of one’s cognitive processes as well as the awareness of and control over one’s emotions, motivations, behavior, and environment as related to learning.”¹ Self-regulated surveys encourage students to report and think their learning behaviors and study skills.

Examples below: Start-Stop-Continue, Three Open-Ended; Open-Ended with Likert; “One Minute Paper;” The Muddiest Point; Snap Shots; Quick Thinks; 3-2-1; Knowledge Confidence Surveys; Pre- and Post-Exams or Quiz Surveys; Post-Exam or Quiz and Post-Grade Survey

Some surveys achieve one or more of the above goals. Explore online surveys that encourage students to explore their tendencies to procrastination

Anonymous?

Whether or not you should make the evaluation anonymous depends upon a couple of factors. If you are seeking honest, unrestrained feedback on your teaching, you should ensure the highest degree of anonymity. Bring pre-printed forms to an in-person evaluation. Ask all students to use a blue/black ink pen or pencil. Be sure that if you are using an electronic form that it is set to anonymous. If the feedback is focused on student learning through a formative assessment or a metacognitive exercise, anonymity may ensure frank responses, but may not allow you to identify individual students who need assistance. If you want the students to make the decision, indicate that names are optional.

Some Fundamentals

- Ask relevant, useful questions that focus on teaching and learning behaviors, not feelings.
- Avoid asking students what they “like.” Maryellen Weimer recently noted that asking what students like promotes entitlement. She recommends open-ended statements, “describe the impact of policies, practices, and behavior in the course on your efforts to learn’.”
- Solicit feedback on a particular class meeting, assignment, new teaching technique, readings, laboratory work, etc.
- Ask students about their study habits, work, and family obligations to deepen your appreciation of their situations. This might lead you to incorporate short study skill lessons into your course or work with students individually.
- Open-ended questions are easy to compose and quick to administer, however, an open-ended prompt may generate a broad range of “suggestions” that are not helpful (e.g. “too much work,” “this room is cold,” or worse, comments about sartorial habits). In that case, consider including a checklist or topics to consider.
- Explore examples and customize to your goals, style, and academic discipline.
- Avoid administering daily or weekly but consider giving more than once and tailor your survey to the goals. During the first week, I might ask students for feedback on the course structure in D2L. In the third week, I would seek input on my teaching effectiveness and include a question or two on study habits.
- Leverage technology to collect results. Google and One-Drive Forms can be easily shared in-class or online through URLs and QR Code. D2L/BOLT has a survey tool. If you are gathering formative assessments, this might be done through the use of clickers which might integrate with your D2L gradebook or numerous apps.
- Tally the results and look for predominant patterns that you can make use of and compose an executive summary.
- Be willing to share results in a timely manner with students. Whether you decide to make alterations to the course syllabus as a result, discuss those choices with students.
- Avoid becoming defensive, yet discussing the results creates an opportunity to uncover misunderstandings or discuss the goals of the assignment or course.

¹ Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students’ Self-Awareness and Learning Skills* (Sterling, WV: Stylus, 2013), 5.



Examples²

Start-Stop-Continue

Pose three questions to students. Make it anonymous.

Please respond to these three questions. The more specific or detailed that you are, the more helpful your feedback.

1. What is one thing that you want me to start doing to improve your learning and explain why?
2. What is one thing that you want me to stop doing, be specific and explain why?
3. What is one thing that you want me to continue and explain why?

A **fourth** question to consider adding that brings in a metacognitive piece:

What is one thing YOU can do to improve your learning?

One-Point Raise

Therese Huston, *Teaching what you Don't Know*, writes,³

"I learned this assessment technique from a friend who is a clinical psychologist. She uses a similar technique with her clients. In the first part of the activity, you ask each student to rate an experience on a scale of 1 to 10, and in the second part, you ask them what would raise their score by 1 point. You collect their written feedback and read it outside of class. It's very simple but surprisingly powerful. "Begin by asking students to get out a blank sheet of paper. If you've prepared for this ahead of time, you can distribute a handout with the question written at the top. Pick an aspect of the course for which you would like some feedback – maybe it's the clarity of today's class or maybe it's the interest level in a topic – and ask students to rate the course on that dimension. 'Rate how interesting today's class was for you on a scale of 1 to 10.' Next, define the two endpoints of the scale so that students have a common understanding of what a 1 meant compared with a 10. Use extremes in defining these endpoints so that the students see them as widely different and are encouraged to use the full range. Don't forget your sense of humor: 'So a "1" would mean that today's class was so painfully boring that you wish you had gone to the dentist's instead of coming to class, and a "10" would mean that today's class was so fascinating that you would choose to re-watch it, in its entirety, on YouTube.'" Some students will smile and others will roll their eyes, but you've got their attention. Chances are you won't get many 1s or 10s in your ratings, but you'll know that a 9 is very high praise indeed. ... "Once students have jotted down a number, ask them, 'Now what would raise your score by 1 point?' Some students will identify something that was under your control – they wish you had written more on the board, spent more time discussing a video, and so on. But some students will identify something that was entirely their responsibility. I've had students indicate that their score would have gone from a 5 to a 6 if they had simply gotten more sleep the night before, or from an 8 to a 9 if they had finished the reading. Because the survey is anonymous, students generally have nothing to lose by being honest. ..."

Checklist with Open-Ended Questions

Mid-Term Course Evaluation The purpose of this evaluation is to improve how the course is taught, and therefore improve your learning. I will report back to you on the feedback I receive. For the first section, please check all items that apply. If you like the way I do something but would like me to do it even more often, you can check both columns.

<p>I like the way the instructor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Gives an introduction at the start of class.<input type="checkbox"/> Balances lectures and group work.	<p>I would like the instructor to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Give more/less introduction at the start of class (circle one).
--	---

² These examples originate from a variety of sources found in publications and on the internet.

³ Therese Huston, *Teaching What you Don't Know* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 213-214.



<input type="checkbox"/> Clarifies the objective of each class. <input type="checkbox"/> Explains the relationships between concepts. <input type="checkbox"/> Utilizes the board effectively. <input type="checkbox"/> Utilizes visual aids effectively. <input type="checkbox"/> Discusses concrete/real-life examples. <input type="checkbox"/> Encourages students to ask questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Responds effectively to questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporates students' questions into lectures. <input type="checkbox"/> Is open to different points of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Shows respect toward all students. <input type="checkbox"/> Grades fairly. <input type="checkbox"/> Provides feedback on exams. <input type="checkbox"/> Varies the pace according to the difficulty of the material.	<input type="checkbox"/> Lecture less/do more group work. <input type="checkbox"/> Lecture more/do less group work. <input type="checkbox"/> Clarify the objective of each class more. <input type="checkbox"/> Explain more of the relationships between concepts. <input type="checkbox"/> Summarize the main points more often. <input type="checkbox"/> Utilize the board more effectively. <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss more real-life examples. <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage more questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Respond more effectively to questions. <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate students' questions into lecture. <input type="checkbox"/> Be more open to different points of view. <input type="checkbox"/> Show more respect towards all students. <input type="checkbox"/> Grade more fairly. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide more feedback on exams. <input type="checkbox"/> Vary the pace more according to the difficulty of the material.
--	---

For the second section, please provide your thoughts and opinions on the following questions. Please make your feedback as concrete, constructive, and specific as possible. By being specific, you can help me change the course to meet your needs.

1. What are the strongest features of this course and of the instructor? IN other words, what contributes most to your learning?
2. What specific suggestions do you have for improving your learning in the course?
3. Is the pace of the course typically: Too fast, just right, or too slow. Please explain how it's too fast or too slow in the space below

Two Open-Ended Questions⁴

Administered as a journal entry assignment, *but could easily be administered on two sides of a 3x5 card*:

1. What is helping you to learn in this class?
2. What is making learning difficult?

Three Open-Ended Questions⁵

Process

- Give at first third of semester
- Half-sheet of paper with questions on it (my recommendations) or have students provide their own and post questions on PPT.
- Anonymous or names optional
- Tabulates and shares results to promote discussion. E.g. cannot satisfy everyone at all times; some students surprised to learn that others prefer discussions or lectures; opportunity to remind students about the reason behind the course features, course objectives; implements suggestions if they make sense and discusses those.

Three Questions:

1. What are three important things that you have learned so far?
2. What are three aspects of the class that have helped your learning so far?
3. What are three things you wish were different?

⁴ From Michelle Winn, College Writing Programs, Berkeley

⁵ Craig Nelson, Indiana University, Email 2/15/2010 2:56 PM POD Listserv



Open-Ended with Likert

Your answers to the questions below will help me plan for the second half of the semester.

1. What are the most important things you have learned so far in this class?
2. What don't you think you understand well enough yet?
3. What would you like to see more of between now and the end of the semester?
4. What do you think we could cut down on?
5. What do you need to do in terms of understanding the material between now and the end of the semester?
6. How much of the reading that has been assigned so far have you completed?

100%	90%	75%	50%	Less than 50%
------	-----	-----	-----	---------------

7. How many hours per week, outside of regularly scheduled class meetings, do you spend on this class?

1-2	2-4	4-6	6-8	More than 8
-----	-----	-----	-----	-------------

8. If you have comments about the class not covered in the above questions, please use this space to make them.

Individual Class Session

Directions: Please respond honestly and constructively to the questions below by circling the responses you most agree with and writing brief comments.

1. On the scale below, please rate the *clarity* of today's session.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally unclear	Somewhat clear	Mostly clear	Very clear	Extreme clear

2. Overall, how *interesting* did you find today's session?

1	2	3	4	5
totally boring	Mostly boring	Somewhat interesting	Very interesting	Extremely interesting

3. Overall, how *useful* was today's session in helping you learn the material?

1	2	3	4	5
Useless	Not very useful	Somewhat useful	Very useful	Extremely useful

4. What did you find most useful about today's class? (Please list one or two specific examples.)
5. How could the class have been improved? (Please give one or two specific suggestions.)

Classroom Reaction Survey⁶

I would like to know your reactions to today's class. Please read each of the statements below and circle the letter corresponding to the response that best matches your reaction in today's class. Your choices are:

⁶ Karron G. Lewis, "Using Midsemester Student Feedback and Responding to It," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 87 (Fall 2001): 34. This is exhibit 4.1 in the article and Lewis took it from Erickson and Strommer, *Teaching College Freshmen* (1991), 105.



- A. No improvement is needed. (Terrific! This works for me. Keep it up!)
- B. Little improvement is needed. (Maybe a ragged edge or two, but don't lose any sleep over it.)
- C. Improvement is needed. (Not awful, but this merits some attention.)
- D. Considerable improvement is needed. (This is causing me problems. Please help.)

Today, the instructor . . .

a	b	c	d	1. Limited what was covered to a manageable amount of material.
a	b	c	d	2. Made it clear why the material might be important.
a	b	c	d	3. Told us what we would be expected to do with the material (memorize it, use it to solve problems, or whatever.)
a	b	c	d	4. Highlighted key ideas or questions.
a	b	c	d	5. Presented plenty of good examples to clarify difficult material.
a	b	c	d	6. Provided enough variety to keep us reasonably alert.
a	b	c	d	7. Found ways to let us know whether we were understanding the material.
a	b	c	d	8. Helped us summarize the main ideas we were supposed to take away from class.
a	b	c	d	9. Let us know how we might be tested on the material.
a	b	c	d	10. Provided exercises or an assignment so that we could practice using the material.

1. What is your overall rating of today's class?
A. Excellent B. Good C. Satisfactory D. Fair E. Poor
2. What made you rate today's class as high as you did?
3. What kept you from rating today's class higher?

"One Minute" Paper

Process

- Ask a single question that students respond to anonymously on a 3x5 card and collect during the lecture or at the end of the class.
- It may take more than one minute, but no more than five minutes.
- Can be used periodically during the course of the semester.
- Analyze the results, identifying common trends, then discuss with students for as little as 2-3 minutes in the next class meeting.

Potential Questions⁷

- What was the most important or valuable thing(s) that you learned during this class?
- The most surprising or unexpected idea(s)?
- What idea(s) stand out ...?
- How are they reacting emotionally (affective domain)?
- What important question remains unanswered?
- What idea(s) can and should be put into practice?
- How does the material connect or conflict with prior knowledge beliefs, or values?
- How it connects with knowledge from other courses?
- How it fits their existing framework of knowledge?
- You can make it a content- or concept-specific question.
- Ask them to respond to a particular teaching strategy.
- If you suspect that students' study habits interfere with their learning or class discussions are ineffective, consider posing relevant questions.

⁷ Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners*, 43.



Muddiest Point

Process

- Distribute 3x5 cards and ask students to identify the “muddiest point” of a lecture, demonstration, or activity.
- Analyze the results by identifying trends in responses, share with students in the next class period, and clarify the muddy points.

Questions and Variations⁸

- What is the muddiest point in the [lecture, film, reading assignment, etc]?
- Variations: also ask students what could be done to clear up the “muddy points”.
- Variation: Use a two column response exercise. One is labeled “crystal clear,” the other is labeled “muddiest point.”

Snap Shots⁹

Advantages

- Quick, observable measure of correct response to one or more questions.
- Questions might present a problem or concept that requires application or evaluation.
- Answers should be Multiple Choice or T/F.
- Could be adapted to determine prior knowledge and post.
- Use to review content or use to assess student comprehension of lecture or demonstrations.
- Can be used to determine participation.
- Could use IF-AT Forms to gather responses.
- Could be incorporated with a Think-Pair-Share Activity.

Process:

1. Brief lecture or demonstration (15 minutes).
2. Present conceptual question that students respond to individually.
3. Poll and record results using hands, flash cards, small white boards, clickers, smart phones, etc.
4. Do not discuss correct answer.
5. Have students meet in small groups to discuss their responses and come up with the correct answer.
6. Poll again, share results then discuss correct answer, discuss reasons, demonstrate.

“Quick Thinks”¹⁰

Process

- Use to break up lecture, review previous lesson, discover where students are struggling
- Poll for results; collect responses for participation by assigning low credit; use to take attendance
- Respond individually or allow to work in groups
- Do not ask students to repeat or demonstrate rote memorization; create a new challenge that requires application or evaluation

Samples:

- Correct the error
- Complete a sentence starter

⁸ <https://www.mghihp.edu/faculty-staff-faculty-compass-teaching-teaching-strategies/examples-classroom-assessment-techniques#Muddiest>

⁹ Elizabeth Barkley and Claire Howell Major, *Learning Assessment Techniques* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 116-121.

¹⁰ Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners*, 40-41.



- Compare and contrast – identify similarities and differences of an event, model, theory, method, artistic work, problem, etc.
- Reorder the steps
- Reach a conclusion after presenting data, facts, events – requires inference
- Paraphrase the idea – demonstrates ability to put in own words a definition, theory, explanation, etc.
- Support a statement – present theory, p.o.v., conclusion, inference, and students use material handy to support
- Counter a statement

3-2-1

Process

- Allows students to organize thoughts and identify areas of confusion or concern
- Use towards the end of a lecture or demonstration, or in response to an assigned reading or discussion
- To save time, distribute as handouts.
- Can be completed as individuals, pairs, or small groups.
- 3-2-1 questions could be content specific or on main ideas (difference, similarities; most important ideas, supporting details, etc.)

Questions

- What are three ideas/issues from what was presented?
- What are two examples or uses for how the ideas could be implemented?
- What is one unresolved area/muddiest point for you?

Knowledge Confidence Surveys¹¹

Process

- Develop questions about content and/or skills that will be learned during the semester.
- Rate confidence in ability to answer the questions.
- Potential levels of confidence:
 - Very Confident; Somewhat Confident; Not sure; Not at all Confident
- Re-administer at the end of the semester when students will discover what they have learned.

Pre- and Post-Exams or Quiz Surveys¹²

Before the exam:

- Students rate confidence to answer questions or perform tasks (e.g. very confident; somewhat confident; not sure; Not at all Confident. Or “I do not understand the question or task.” Or “I do not understand the technical terms.” Or “I do not think I can give a correct answer.”
- Creates an opportunity to discuss objectives and for goal setting and self-testing.

After the exam

- Survey students on how they prepared and the effectiveness of their strategies.
- Have students discuss and share results to exchange strategies for study.
- Create opportunities to correct the errors or revise.

¹¹ Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-regulated Learners*, 23.

¹² Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-regulated Learners*, 63-67.



- Encourage students to write a reflection piece or compose a promise statement that discusses how they will improve study strategies.

Post-Exams or Quiz and Post-Grade Surveys¹³

Immediate Post exam Self-Assessment Questions:

1. What do you think your score/grade will be on this exam?
2. On a scale from 1 to 10, about how much effort did you put into studying for this exam?
3. How many hours did you study for this exam?
4. How did you study for this exam? That is, what study techniques did you use? For instance, did you take notes on the readings? Did you write or recite summaries of them? Did you talk about the course material with other students? Did you make and use flash cards to learn the terms (or equations)? Did you test yourself in some other way?
5. Which parts of the exams did you find the most difficult? What parts did you find the easiest? Why?

Post-Graded-Exam Self-Assessment Questions:

1. How did your actual grade on this exam compare with the grade you expected? How do you explain the difference, if any?
2. How do you feel about your exam grade? Are you surprised, pleased, relieved, disappointed, or what?
3. How many hours did you study for the exam? Was this enough time to get the grade you wanted, or should you have spent more time preparing?
4. How did you spend your time preparing for the exam? That is, what study techniques did you use? For instance, did you take notes on the readings? Did you write or recite summaries of them? Did you talk about the course material with other students? Did you make and use flash cards to learn the terms (or equations)? Did you test yourself in some other way?
5. Examine the items on which you lost points and look for patterns. To what extent did these items come from a specific set of class materials (readings, lectures, class activities, online resources)? To what extent did they focus on certain topics? Did you tend to misread the questions? Were you careless? Did you run out of time?
6. Set a goal to get a certain percentage correct in the next exam. What study strategies and schedule will enable you to earn that score?

More examples are available in TALE's D2L/BOLT organization (search content by the keyword: evaluate)

Sources:

Elizabeth F. Barkley and Claire Howell Major, *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*, Jossey-Bass, 2016.
Karol Lewis, "Using Midsemester Student Feedback and Responding to It," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (Fall 2001): 33-44.
Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills*, Stylus, 2013.
Maryellen Weimer, "Getting More Useful Written Comments from Students," *The Teaching Professor*, 16 March 2020.

¹³ Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-regulated Learners*, 68-69.