

USING COURSE EVALUATIONS TO IMPROVE YOUR TEACHING

*Heather Pelzel, Director of LEARN Center
Eric Loepf, Director of Learning Technology Center (LTC)*

*Prepared for the 2022 Celebrating Teaching and
Learning Conference at UW-Whitewater*

REVIEWING COURSE EVALUATIONS: THE DRINKING GAME

by STEPH JEFFRIES

If you are female, drink one shot immediately. From an underrepresented community: one shot. Both: three shots, because intersectionality. Each shot will help you lower your expectations for fairness before you read through the comments.

Drink if someone complained about mysterious course policies that were clearly explained on the syllabus.

Drink if your "enthusiasm" score is your highest metric. Even the students who thought you sucked admit that you are excited to be there and/or like your job.

If students note that you are "arrogant" (as in being knowledgeable in your field, as your Ph.D. might suggest), drink.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The instructor had a nice haircut.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The instructor knew how to cook.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The instructor had a good singing voice.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shaving cream was used.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dogs were permitted in class.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The instructor had a masculine nose.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Note: Assume we have evaluations in hand

- There are important conversations about course evaluation administration process (dates, modalities, etc.)
- Our focus is what happens once we have the data/feedback in hand
- Course Evaluation Advisory Group (CEAG) provides guidance on the administrative side



Session Plan

- Four steps to make the most of your course evaluations
 - Prepare students
 - Sit down with your feedback informally
 - Formally organize your feedback
 - Identify adjustments
- Bonus recommendations
- Looking to the future



Step 1: Preparing students to evaluate (well!)

- Discuss evaluation process with students
 - *Why do students complete them?*
 - *What role do course evaluations play in the instructional process?*
 - *What kind of feedback would be most helpful?*
 - *Who sees the feedback, and when?*
 - *Encourage fair and constructive feedback, including positive + negative experiences*
- Invite small groups to design their own tool
 - Content, delivery, transparency of expectations, compassion, access, etc.
 - Encourage students to identify *and explain* assessment categories (e.g., what does “accessible” mean?)
 - Process distinguishes assessment of *teacher* from assessment of *teaching*
 - Invite class to vote on a preferred rubric, use it as supplemental feedback

Step 2: Sit down with your course evaluations

- **Pick a good time:** when you will have enough time to digest at least some of the information, have privacy, and can give yourself some mental 'space' to analyze the information
- **Track quantitative results:** Consider how the summary rating received for each item fits with your own teaching goals and your department's expectations for teaching; Look for patterns in students' comments: identify trends, note what you have done well and what needs improvement
- **Take your experience into account:** If you are new to teaching, the school, or even the course, you may still be learning about various aspects of being a professor, such as course design, teaching skills, student interaction, and departmental expectations
- **Take the context and characteristics of your course into account:** Research shows that student evaluations often are more positive in courses that are (1) smaller rather than larger, (2) elective rather than required and (3) in which they do well rather than do poorly

Step 3: Classify Comments (Option 1 - Table)

<i>Type</i>	<i>Comment Substance</i>	<i>Action</i>
Extraneous	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Off-topic• Irrelevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discard
Affirmative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Show what (students think) is working in your class (e.g., pedagogical strategies, expectations management, materials selection, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify specific items that can be expanded in future (e.g., assessment strategies, lecture format, policies)• Consider trade-offs (e.g., less rigor)
Constructive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Illuminates pain points (e.g., points of confusion, misalignment with objectives)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify specific items that can be modified in future (e.g., assessment strategies, lecture format, policies)• Consider trade-offs (e.g., additional workload)
Reportable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifies concerns that are related to class, but not under instructor's direct control (e.g., curricular sequencing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share comments with chair, dean

Step 3: Classify Comments (Option 2 - Grid)

Rating	Knowledge of Subject Matter	Organization	Student- Instructor Interaction
Strongly Agree			
Agree			
Neutral			
Disagree			
Strongly Disagree			

Place Student
Comments
Here

Note: Italicize positive comments.


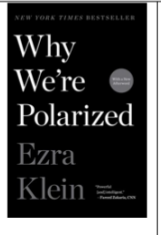

Tips for processing negative feedback

- Challenge: Criticism is inevitable; it is natural to feel defensive, dismissive
- Resolution: Put evaluations away for a week after you first read them
- Separate “productive” negative feedback and “unproductive” negative feedback
- Focus on common threads
- ***Key: Not all negative feedback needs to prompt change***

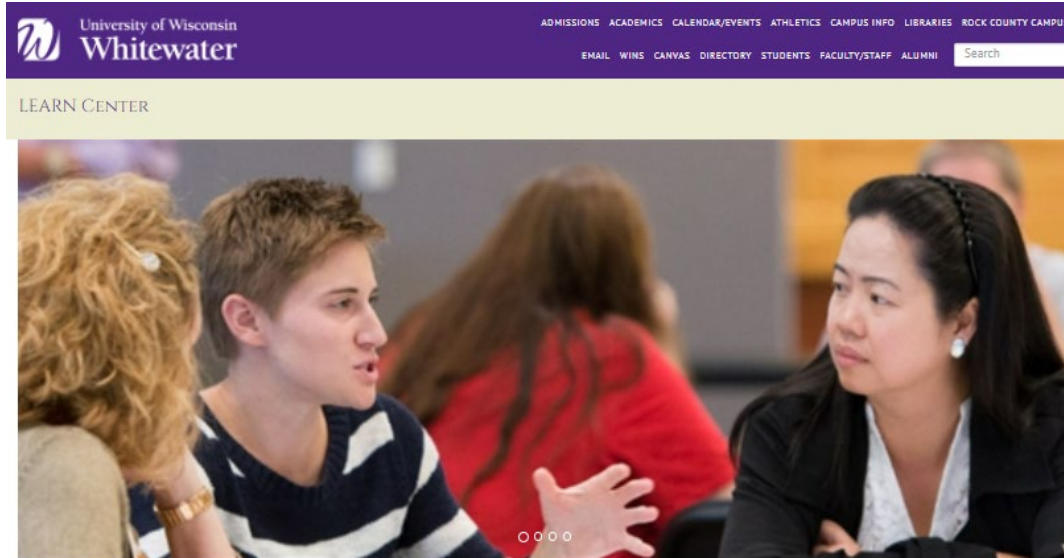


Step 4: Identify adjustments

- Ex: Annotate your syllabus (hint: start early in the term!)
 - What worked?
 - What didn't?
 - Not enough time?
 - Too much time?
 - Too frontloaded?
 - Too backloaded?
 - Distribution of points by assessment type?
- Especially helpful if you do not teach the course every semester
- Revisit revisions after a break

Required Texts		
		
<p>Loepp, Eric D Students really enjoyed discussing Mason's text, but some struggled with data interpretation (add a primer for students who haven't taken methods course?); Klein text was very well-received, but perhaps should integrate earlier in the term when introducing ideological/affective polarization initially; felt to me like we had to recover some ground that I would prefer not to; note that Klein reads faster than the other two; Cramer books also well-received, but less ideal than the other two in terms of breaking up for discussion leadership activities because chapter themes are not as distinct; some students struggled to generate original questions; overall, students reported three books was reasonable, but it was good to have dedicated book time where other assignments were not due; when it comes to reading quizzes, let's not do those in the future; the gain was minimal relative to the time investment, and a number of students struggled to produce quality reading check items; perhaps there is an alternative reading check method that students can complete <i>before</i> class, giving us more time for discussion in the room; students leaned heavily on example discussion questions, though, so keep doing that, and maybe even provide more next time; overall, I'm happy with this experience, but note that (REDACTED) were especially skilled at generating discussion; a quieter group may need a bit more nudging;</p>		

Bonus Recommendation 1: MAP it!



LEARN Center / Mid-Semester Assessment Program (MAP)

Mid-Semester Assessment Program (MAP)

The Mid-Semester Assessment Program (MAP) provides UW-Whitewater faculty and instructional academic staff with the opportunity to obtain timely student feedback on their views of what is going well and what helpful changes might be made while the course is still in progress. You'll gain useful information to strengthen the course, and students will appreciate your interest in their ideas about the course.

Bonus Recommendation 2: Create your own!

- Supplement university-issued course evaluations with your own instrument
 - Personalize for your course, pedagogy
 - Focus on specific areas of feedback
 - Areas for growth
 - New strategies
 - Follow-up with individual students
 - Unlinked from performance reviews



Looking to the future: empowering instructors through feedback

- Write down one question you *wish* every course evaluation would ask

