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Asking Students, "How's It Going?"

Emily O. Gravett, *James Madison University*

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Recently, I finished a book called *Midcourse Correction for the College Classroom: Putting Small Group Instructional Diagnosis to Work* (Hurney et al. 2021). It's about a program on college campuses in which faculty members invite a colleague to come to their class at the mid-semester point to find out how the course is going from the students' perspectives. This is a program offered at my institution, and many others, usually through a professional development or teaching and learning center.

The book, and such programs, got me thinking about soliciting feedback from students, beyond simply what most of us are required to do in the form of final course evaluations. Think about it: course evaluations, if we even read them (and so many of my friends don't, because it's such a stressful experience), only let us know how the course *was*, how we *did*, what a group of students that is no longer enrolled with us *thought* about our teaching and their learning. Notice the past tense.

Certainly this information can be useful for future courses (I am—usually—the same person teaching Religions of the World this time as I will be next time, after all), but it doesn't exactly help those particular students in that particular course. (And I won't even dive into the controversy around the utility and validity of student course evaluations here; suffice it to say, those evaluations are one of the only times that we actually ask students, the primary recipients of our teaching efforts, what they think about those efforts.)

The point of a program like the one profiled in the book is that we can ask for feedback from students *before* the end of the semester, *before* the experience is over, when there is actually time to make changes or reroute. The small group instructional diagnoses occur at the mid-semester point. (You can check out the book to learn more about the process; it's pretty cool!) Typical questions asked of students are: "What has helped your learning in this course so far? What has hindered your learning in this course so far?" and "What suggestions do you have for improvement?" The focus is on learning, not what they like/dislike or the instructors' performance. At JMU a few years back, we also added companion questions focused on the students' own behaviors, for example, "What are YOU doing that has helped your learning in this course so far?" as a way of conveying that they are also, and I would argue, ultimately, responsible for their own learning.) Then, with this information, instructors can decide what, if any, changes or clarifications they'd like to make during a follow-up conversation with the students and for the rest of the semester.

In the absence of such a program, or colleague support, you can always ask these questions yourself (e.g., through anonymous paper forms in class, an anonymous ungraded survey on your LMS, etc.). But there are lots of other ways to check in with students and get actionable, important feedback. You might have students fill out a weekly online "how's my driving?" Google form, as one of my friends does, or you might lead an in-class discussion every so often about how everyone is doing, or you might ask students to fill out a word cloud of how they're feeling at the beginning of class on a particular day. There are lots of things we can ask about: students' moods, feelings, and stress level; whether they understood a particular concept, lesson, or reading; how that recent test or lecture went; what study strategies seem to be working well for them; and so on.

I use a variety of ways to check in with my own students and get their feedback in all of my courses. Last semester, for example, I had experimented with a great deal of flexibility around the exams (e.g., they were take-home and not timed), to try to ease the anxiety and overwhelm that I knew students were experiencing, and I wanted to know how this approach was working for them. I spent time in class after the midterm on a debrief. It turned out that many students were taking *hours* to complete their work, even though I had intended the whole thing to be over in 75 minutes. This was stressing them out more—the opposite of the effect I was trying to achieve! I took their feedback, which I would have never realized if I hadn't simply asked, and made some changes to the final exam (e.g., reduced the number of questions). Students noted in my course evaluations (as they do every semester) that they appreciated how I asked them for feedback and how I adjusted parts of the course as a result.

Indeed, research on mid-semester feedback programs demonstrates that students appreciate being asked. And, of course, this kind of feedback process can benefit us too, as we open up lines of communication with students, convey care, and possibly learn which adjustments to the course will better facilitate their learning. After all, who wants to be teaching a course that's not going well? Who wants to dread going to class every day? Who wants to be giving failing grades on projects? Who wants to be meeting resistance, but not knowing why? It often doesn't occur to us to just *ask* students when we want to know more. But we can. What do you

want to ask?

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