

PEER INTERVIEWING OF STUDENTS AS A PART OF FORMATIVE AND OR SUMMATIVE FACULTY REVIEW

JUSTIFICATION

- While quantitative evaluations by students of pedagogical quality may be useful for overall comparison among faculty, they lack the context and detail necessary to guide improvement in instructional effectiveness.
- Comments offered by students at the end of the semester concerning faculty effectiveness, while adding life and contextual detail to the quantitative evaluations, are often vague and unsubstantiated. For example, if a student indicates that Professor X is a “very caring teacher,” we know how the person was perceived by the student, but we have no idea what the faculty member was actually “doing” or “saying” leading to this perception.
- Mid-semester evaluations of the written sort are helpful in permitting faculty to make adjustments to course content and/or process midstream but, again, may be too vague to be of much use.
- Giving students the opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement of a course, or of an instructor’s pedagogy, provides a powerful opportunity for connection – contributing to a sense on the part of students that their learning is important both to the instructor and to the institution and that their opinions really matter.

PROCESS – AN EXAMPLE

- Student interviews that are a part of formative review, should be conducted by a peer (or peers) of the instructors choosing. No more than two persons should serve as interviewers. The person or persons chosen to conduct the interview should be from a discipline closely aligned with that of the instructor whose class is being interviewed. While it is not necessary that the interviewers be senior in rank, it will be most helpful if they have several years of experience in the classroom.
- Student interviews that are a part of summative review will be conducted by the departmental PTE committee in connection with peer review observation or by representatives of the committee of “professional reviewers” that we envision, or both.
- If a class is particularly large, it might be a good idea to ask the students to select a group of representatives (five to ten) to be interviewed. Alternatively, a small group of students could be randomly selected from the class in order to insure that the group is representative. If the small sub-group approach is utilized, students should be interviewed during a regularly scheduled class period in order to maximize participation.

- Whether the entire class is to be interviewed (a system that works well with smaller classes), or sampling is used, some means needs to be found to help students to develop a comfort level with the kind of candor necessary in order for the interviews to be useful to the instructor. Students feel fear about expressing their opinions knowing that the things they say will be reported back to the instructor. One way to encourage candor is to use a technique developed at the University of Washington – “Small Group Instructional Diagnosis” (SGID). Under this protocol, an instructor invites a colleague (or colleagues) to spend about twenty-five or thirty minutes during one class period in order to solicit information about the class from students. Students are formed into groups of five or six, one group member is asked to take notes, and then answer two questions:
 1. What helps you learn in this class? or What do you see as the strengths of this class?
 2. What improvements would you like and how would you suggest they be made?

After the groups have discussed these questions for ten minutes or so, the group scribe is asked to report to the class two or three answers to each question. General discussion follows with the colleague interviewer summarizing student ideas, and developing emerging consensus among the students on the most important issues. After the class, the colleague interviewer summarizes the issues for report to the instructor. This protocol has the merit of insuring individual student confidentiality while continuing to elicit the kind of useful information that can lead to instructor development and improved student learning.

- Feedback should be offered to the instructor as soon as possible after the class interviews are held. It is important that appropriate modifications be made quickly in order to show students that the instructor is listening and that student opinion counts. If a suggested modification seems frivolous, or if it is impossible for one reason or another, care should be taken to inform students of the reasons why the change cannot be made.
- The best situation is one in which peers work reciprocally over a period of years to improve their classroom approaches with student interviews serving as one component of an overall development strategy.
- In the case of summative evaluation, a similar protocol may be adopted.