

Building on Student Feedback

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, JUL 9 2013

In the last lesson of every semester I ask for feedback from my students about how to improve the course. I do so because I recognize that, as a professor, I am getting a very one sided view of the classroom and of how the material is going over. While I usually have a reasonable handle on what worked and what didn't, there have been enough occasions where I thought an activity or issue would be wildly entertaining and enlightening that have, in fact, turned out to be decidedly average that I am open to any and all ideas about how to turn things around.

When closing out the POL 210 courses in the Spring and the Summer here at CEFAM I moved through that feedback process and two things were highlighted with regards to the Oral Presentations I had set the students. The first related to timing and the second to grading, with constructive ideas for how I could address the concerns of students.

With regards to timing, the students noted that while they appreciated the oral presentations, they came all at once in a series of classes towards the end of the semester. This meant that, for a couple of weeks, there was nothing but students listening to students in the classroom, something they felt was not quite as interesting as a professor-led class.

This stacking of oral presentations towards the end of the semester was by design on my part. For one, I hoped it would give students sufficient time to prepare for what are long and demanding classes. For another, I hoped that by leaving it later in the semester that students would have gained more knowledge from the earlier parts of the course and could apply that knowledge in more effective and interesting ways.

Taking the students feedback on board, for the semester to come, then, I am changing the timing of the presentations and distributing them more evenly across the semester. We use a 13 week semester at CEFAM and I have scheduled the first student-led class to be in Week 7, followed by another in Weeks 8, 9, 10 and 11. I am hoping that the six weeks that precede the first class will provide enough material for the students to effectively present on their topic, while concurrently hoping that the broader distribution of student-led classes over the semester will assuage some of the concerns noted in the feedback.

With regards to grading, some students mentioned that my grading criteria were not clear for the student-led presentations. While the course syllabus clearly stated that, among other things,

...students will be assessed for their effectiveness, presentation skills, class control and success in imparting relevant information...

...it seems that the students preferred something more rigid and precise than what was outlined in classes, in the syllabus, and in office hours.

Thus, for the coming year I have developed a grading rubric for Oral Presentations that I will apply in POL 210 as well as the other classes I teach where oral presentations form part of the assessment. This rubric – you can see a copy of it online here – lays out clearly my expectations for students and while I am sure it is not perfect, I am hopeful it will go a long way to ensuring students don't wonder exactly why they earned a C, a B or an A for their work in class.

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When it comes to quality control, there is much to be said for peer assessment, for deans and assistant deans, and for formal faculty reviews of teaching. All have their place and help to improve the student experience. Yet there is a lot that can be gained from listening to the students we teach, too, and building on their feedback can help improve the classroom experience, the course, and help ensure the learning outcomes we set for them are consistently achieved.

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