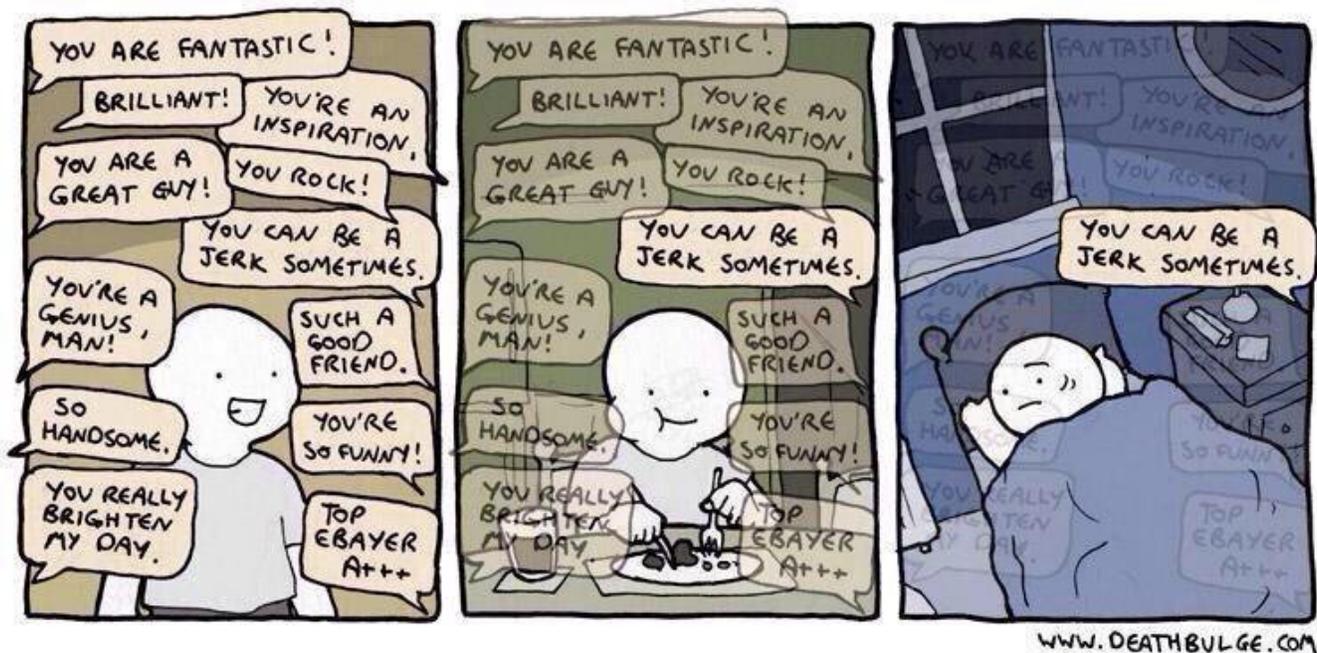


# LEARNING FORWARD

THE L&S TEACHING ASSISTANT NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER, 2021, ISSUE 2



## WOW, THESE ARE BRUTAL...

DEALING WITH STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Reading your teaching evaluations can be a painful experience, even for veteran professors. The truth is that students are not well positioned to give the kind of feedback that can help you improve your teaching. Additionally, the shield of anonymity generally allows people to say things without repercussion or responsibility. Sometimes this is great. It helps bring out the truth and protects people for saying things that, despite being hard to hear, are very important. However, it also allows people to say biased, hurtful things as well. This month we will look at some tips on how to read and make sense of your student teaching evaluations



**Reading student evaluations is like cleaning out your fridge. Keep the good stuff and throw out the spoiled stuff.**

You have to weed through them and determine what is worth keeping, and what is something you should let go. *This is much easier said than done.*

With contradictory suggestions and vague comments, determining what to keep is challenging. We also tend to fixate on the most negative comments, even when they are vastly outnumbered by positive comments.

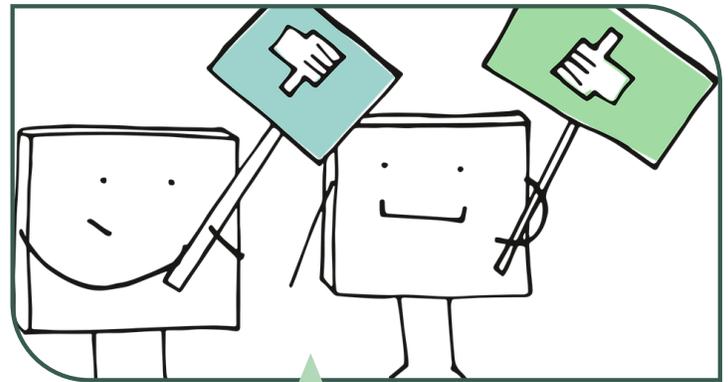
## **SOME KNOWN ISSUES WITH STUDENT EVALUATIONS**

Unfortunately, we know that students are biased in ways that mirror societal oppression, and this shows in their ratings and comments.

There is good evidence that establishes student evaluations are prejudiced. There are clear correlations between an instructor's gender, age, race, sexuality (among other dimensions) and teaching evaluation scores. Check out these papers for a deeper look on the role of bias in teaching evaluations: "[Why and How You Should Read Student Evaluations of Teaching](#)" and "[How to Improve Your Teaching Evaluations Without Improving Your Teaching](#)".

Additionally, students are not reliable reporters about what, and how much, they have learned. This is not a knock on students. We know from studies on metacognition that people in general aren't good at recognizing their own learning (1).

Student evaluations can also lead you to focus on the wrong things in the classroom. After your first round of negative comments, it is tempting to try and please every student. The trouble is, what students want isn't always what is best for their learning.

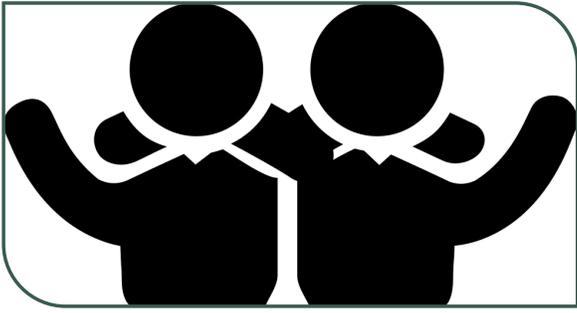


**NOT EVERY COMMENT IS ONE YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HEART**

**HOWEVER, LET'S BE CLEAR HERE, YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY READ YOUR STUDENT EVALUATIONS.**

You might be thinking: What!? Didn't you just say that these evaluations are deeply flawed!? If that's true, why should I read them at all? Despite these flaws, students can also be very insightful, and they are the ones actually experiencing the course. Many student comments offer valuable information and perspective that should not be overlooked.

# TIPS FOR READING YOUR STUDENT EVALUATIONS



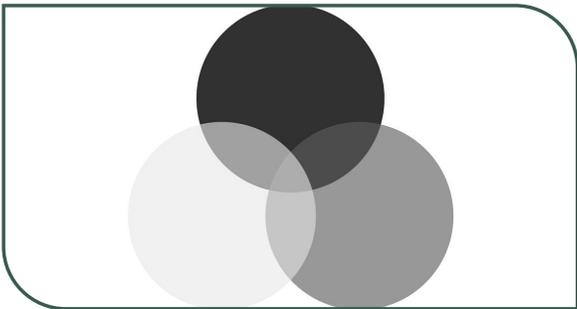
## #1 HAVE A SUPPORT SYSTEM IN PLACE

It can be helpful to read your evaluations with other instructors (and a beverage of your choosing). We can be our own worst enemies and sometimes, your peers, friends, or partners can help comfort and remind you that that one negative or hurtful comment is surrounded by ten positive ones. Even though it can be easy, don't dwell on the hurtful ones.



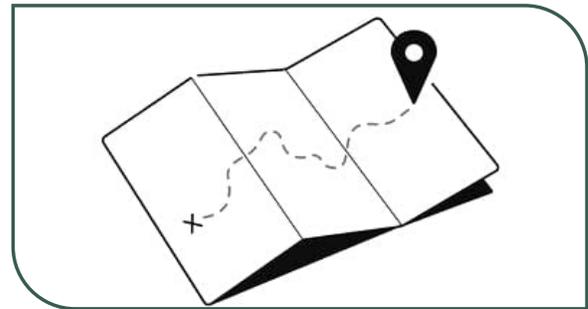
## #2 READ ONCE AND THEN COME BACK LATER

Reading comments can be a stressful, hurtful experience. It can also be an uplifting experience. Normally, it's a mix of both. Unfortunately, the hurtful comments seem to stick—they're hard to shake. Reading your evaluations once and then setting them down is a healthy way to not let them eat you from the inside out. After at least a week has passed you can come back and look at them with a bit of distance and fresh eyes.



## #3 LOOK FOR COMMON THEMES

Like any survey, your comments are likely to be contradictory at least some of the time. What one student loves, another might hate. The key to navigating these contradictions is to look for common themes. Some students will love you, some...not so much. Look for elements that are repeated and have common denominators. This is where you want to focus your attention.



## #4 SEARCH FOR ACTIONABLE ITEMS

Comments that can be translated into action are those that will ultimately help improve your teaching. Once you identify your themes, look for comments that give you action items. "It was really helpful when..." "Keep doing..." Alternatively, comments that tell you to stop doing something or that something had negative effects are also actionable. Make a list of actions items to use going forward. Then give yourself permission to let the hurtful comments go and look forward to trying again!

# READERS PUZZLE

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As a student, I am really impacted by destructive criticism. This makes me afraid to critique and hinder students' learning. How to critique in a helpful way?

Getting critical feedback can be so hard! Especially when you've spent a lot of time and effort on a project. I remember being in the dance studio and feeling completely crushed and discouraged when I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not producing the work they wanted. They told me I was failing to take corrections and that I should listen better and be more thoughtful. The thing is, I was trying desperately to make the changes they wanted, but I was running against a brick wall because I didn't know how to do any better.

I can also remember gathering at the edge of the stage after a theater rehearsal. Everyone eagerly sat down and pulled out something to take notes with, and the energy was completely different. In this atmosphere getting notes was a positive thing—something to be sought after. Getting notes meant the director had noticed you and you were worth investing in. I left these note sessions feel exhausted but happy and energized to do better next time.

Here is the upshot of this reflection: Good critiques need the right context. When your students know that you really care and are trying to help them improve, they will be in a better place to absorb what you have to say. Also, critique needn't (and shouldn't) just be about flaws. Pointing out strengths and helping students use those strengths to work on their trouble spots is a great way to connect with them. So let's talk about a few things you can do to create a growth centered environment:

- Talk to your students about the purpose of commentary and explain how you hope they will take your comments.
- Let them know you want them to do well and that you are rooting for them to succeed.
- Start your comments with something positive, this helps set the tone.
- Pick only two or three elements to focus on. It's overwhelming to get too many comments. Decide what you think is most important and focus your attention on helping the student improve those elements.
- Consider giving recorded or face-to-face comments. When students only receive written feedback, they might read it in a tone or with connotations you didn't intend the comments to convey. (I used the Canvas comment feature to give audio feedback for all essays one semester and the students really appreciated it and I felt like they improved a lot more.)
- Make sure your comments offer clear directions the student can use to improve. Bonus points if you are able to give them an example of how to move from where they are to where you want them to be!
- Review your comments before sending them. Put on your student hat and ask if there is anything in your comments that isn't kind, purposeful, and instructive. If there is, just take it out and try again.

## TEACHING WINS: SARA GIA TRONGONE



SARA IS A FIRST-TIME TA IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

Years ago, I wrote a masters' thesis on critical pedagogy and taught adult ESL. As a new TA, I had a clear sense of the practices I wished to avoid—wearisomely verbose lectures, rigid agendas, cold calling, and activities geared towards regurgitation of key concepts. But as I approached the front of a classroom, I'd capitulate. Facilitating dialogue was hard; sitting among students felt awkward; asking students to revise or veto portions of my lesson plans imperiled my fragile sense of control. In the first few weeks, I fumbled about in search of the perfect technique, desperate to land upon the right tools and tricks to manufacture participation and learner-centered engagement. And then I stopped frantically Googling. I returned to Freire and Dewey. I sought the counsel of wiser and more seasoned teachers. I remembered that pedagogy is undergirded by social relationships, that the structure of classroom participation, the way students feel and how they are expected to express themselves and interact with the material and each other, must be built in stages and constantly reinforced.

I started standing in the front of the room and slowly drifting to the sides; I offered “branching” lesson plans where I invited students to vote on which of two or three pre-planned activities we'd pursue. I encouraged students to voice skepticism and build off of each other's ideas. My classroom is an odd mix of traditional and participatory practices. It is still not what I envisaged. But I am slowly building a blueprint so that the tools I use are intelligible, so that students have some sense of what student-centered learning might mean.

### GET IN TOUCH!

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU! YOU CAN USE THIS FORM TO:

- SUBMIT A READER'S PUZZLE
- NOMINATE SOMEONE FOR A TEACHING WIN FEATURE (SELF NOMINATIONS WELCOME).
- SUGGEST FUTURE TOPICS TO BE COVERED.

### CHECK IT OUT!

UNDERSTANDING AND COMBATING BURNOUT

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