Summary

This article offers perspectives on the formation and implementation of teacher feedback that promotes instructional improvement. According the authors, despite the ever increasing literature available on improving instruction and best practices, few members of science faculties in higher education actually make use of these techniques. In part, this failure reflects inadequate training, limited understanding of best practices, and a lack of institutional support for the implementation of advanced teaching and learning methodologies. Effective use of best practices is also hampered by certain misperceptions common to higher education; for example, research shows a broad discrepancy between the number of instructors who self-report as employing active learning in their classes and the actual level of usage of such methods. What emerges from these considerations is that the brief or occasional efforts made to introduce research based teaching practices to faculty are simply incapable of producing meaningful change.

One possible solution to the problem mentioned above, according to the authors, is to provide faculty with more and better instructional feedback. Though higher educational institutions seem too increasingly recognize the need for “substantial and formative instructional feedback,” the majority of what teachers receive in this regard comes from student evaluations. Unfortunately, this type of evaluation not only provides little in the way effective instructional guidance, but also has a variety of additional limitations. Student evaluations tend to have low participation rates and generally result in low evaluation scores. They also lack useful information of “learner-centered” elements of the course, and are viewed with skepticism by instructors, especially if they are tied to retention or tenure decisions. Most importantly, student evaluations rarely offer “concrete ideas for improving instructional effectiveness or learning outcomes.”

Another source of instructional feedback common at many colleges and universities, the peer review, is unfortunately also inadequate to the task of promoting real improvement. Too often such reviews focus on content accuracy or other field specific elements. Even if peer evaluations are focused on instruction, those conducting them usually lack the expertise to effectively assess teaching practices or craft suggestions for improvement. As a result, peer reviews often have no meaningful impact on instruction, and worse still, can lead to conflict between faculty members.

Given the limitations of the types of feedback proffered to faculty at most institutions, the authors suggest a shift to a more effective approach to instructional guidance. In order to facilitate this, they present an overview of the characteristics of effective feedback drawn from the extent literature. Effective feedback, suggest the authors, “clarifies the task in a specific, timely manner, with a consistent message that informs recipients how to improve.” Without clarity as to what needs to be changed or the objective in mind, the feedback is unlikely to promote improvement. The greater the specificity of the feedback and the sooner it is provided, the more likely that it will be impactful. Thus, it may be useful to
create a model for feedback that discusses concrete examples of the instructor’s strengths and weakness, and provides clear objectives for improvement.

Effective feedback also operates in manner in which encourages the instructor, increase motivation, prompts efforts to improve. As such, the tone and context of the feedback matter. Most importantly, feedback “should be positively framed, but not generically positive.” Feedback that references specific positive behavior exhibited by the instructor and areas/actions for improvement is more likely to be received by the instructor in a way that spurs efforts towards improvement. Second, feedback should be shaped by the experiential level and confidence of the instructor. Ultimately, the purpose of the feedback is to bolster the instructor and guide him or her towards improvement. In order to do this, feedback addressed to those instructors with less experience or confidence most likely needs to be couched in gentler, reaffirming terms. Unfortunately, the most commonly used feedback devices at the higher educational level often do the opposite.

The final characteristic of effective feedback, according to the authors, is that it is perceived by faculty as having greater rewards than costs. Current methods of feedback tend to fail in this regard because they are usually mandated, and “are intended to assess competency...and are not perceived of as coming from a credible source.” If, as the authors have suggested, feedback can only lead to instructional improvement when faculty buy into it, then a new model must be adopted and implemented. Feedback in such a model should be seen by faculty as having real value and coming from a competent, credible source. Faculty members are also likely to be more receptive of feedback when the person providing it is respectful and focused on providing help. These elements can be achieved when feedback is given by trained instructional consultants or faculty mentors, and when the feedback is confidential and developmental in purpose.

Having laid out the requisite characteristic of effective feedback, the authors turn to a discussion of both the barriers to developing a new model and some possible solutions to overcoming them. Much of what currently prevents the adoption of a more useful framework of feedback stems from certain traditional aspects of higher education. For example, very few faculty members ever receive any instructional training when they are in graduate school. As a result, they are often unaware of either best practices or the body of research discussing them. It also tends to undermine their receptiveness to feedback, as they deem it unimportant. A second obstacle to the adoption and employment of better feedback flows from institutional elements. In most cases the resources available to provide expert assessment and feedback is extremely limited. If instructional consultants do exist at a given college or university, they rarely operate “in-house” in each department. Additionally, the reward structure at most institutions of higher education largely devalues teaching in favor of research and publication, thus diminishing faculty’s buy-in.

The ultimate solution to these obstacles would, of course, revolve around institutional investment into the resources that would allow for broadly available feedback from well-trained experts. If institutions hope to use instructional feedback to improve instruction then they must also develop models that reinforces the openness of faculty towards outside input and motivates them to make changes. Beyond efforts at the institutional level, the authors offer some innovative ideas for overcoming the challenges
discussed throughout the article and, at the very least, developing greater interest in instructional feedback. One compelling idea is to form faculty learning communities which create positive, collaborative, collegial environments for instructional feedback in which participants play the role of both consultant and recipient. Another potential solution is peer coaching. Unlike peer reviews, which occur as singular events tied to job status, this method involves regular observations of peers’ classes with feedback on a variety of course elements. Finally, they suggest the development of feedback networks involving a, hopefully, growing number of faculty, staff, and administrators which help to build instructional guidance resources at an institution and a culture of teaching and learning reform.

The article concludes with what the authors perceive to be areas for additional research. Most pressing, they argue, is work that focuses on the use of feedback at the higher educational level, as much of what exists studies the K-12 system. They also call for greater efforts to effectively define key terms such as active learning, more work on models for conducting observations, analyzing feedback data, implementing it in a way that reflects best practices, and determining the types of feedback that are most conducive to greater receptiveness and willingness to change. Finally, they acknowledge the need for more work on what might appear to be the most critical question: does feedback produce the types of change that actually lead to improved student outcomes.

Applications

While other summaries written for this database potentially offer greater direction on the actual formatting and conducting of feedback evaluations, as well as the means of imparting the findings to instructors, this article discusses the overarching concerns and conditions that should shape the use of such tools at the higher educational level. In this sense, the article is most readily useful to those at UDC who are engaged, at the institutional level, in promoting advanced teaching and learning and devising the mechanisms by which those efforts can be disseminated throughout the faculty. For such people, this article presents a number of suggestions integrally related to the successful use, or lack thereof, of feedback as means of improving instruction. Equally useful, though not covered in detail in this summary, the article presents two tables of considerable value: one of which cross-references qualities of effective feedback, its practical characteristics, and suggestions to develop feedback models that incorporate them; and a second that provides additional resources for providing/delivering feedback. It also has an extensive works cited for those who wish to do further research on the subject. The article does offer information useful to faculty, however. Specifically, the ideas for the creation of faculty learning communities and peer coaches present options to increase the role of instructional feedback that do not rely on institutional support. While such support, at least in the form of some input from those at the university who truly are experts in instructional consultation, would be helpful, such mechanism could nonetheless bolster efforts to improve instruction on a broad scale as well as further develop an institutional culture attuned to and accepting of advanced teaching and learning.
Citations of Interest


