

COMMENTARY

Developing New Courses and Exploring New Teaching Approaches: The Role of “Unexpected Feedback”

Cynthia Gibson

Psychology Department, Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland 21620

We have all experienced it - course evaluations or learning assessments that are surprising. In July I participated in the 2008 Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience workshop, *The Undergraduate Neuroscience Education: Interactions, Interdisciplines, and Curricular Best Practices*, and was struck by a phrase in one of the plenary sessions. Referring to faculty willingness to try exciting new teaching approaches and ideas, it was suggested that there are no failures, just “unexpected feedback” that can be used to improve, hone, change, or adjust teaching effectiveness the next time the course or topic is offered. This phrase was a huge hit, probably because it highlights the importance of thinking about teaching as a work in progress rather than a series of successes and failures.

Thinking about “unexpected feedback” reminded me of a Sensation and Perception course I recently taught for the first time. At the start of the semester I had a basic but tangential understanding of the sensory modalities and perceptual processes, primarily from teaching Introductory Psychology. But most of the topic matter was new to me. As tends to happen when developing brand new courses, I spent copious amounts of time, including every weekend of the semester, searching the literature, reading, and gathering activities and information; essentially learning the material before teaching it that week. I knew going into the course that I was not an expert and the standard professing of my expertise in lecture format did not seem appropriate to either the course matter or the situation. The students in the course were a small, smart, upper level group that would see right through my inexpert shortcomings. So, since it was a new course, why not try a new approach? The interaction with students and the entire class dynamic needed to be a partnership in learning. After all, most of the 16 students were in their final semester and theoretically able to take more responsibility and became more active in their own learning. While searching the internet for ideas and other Sensation and Perception syllabi I stumbled upon Dr. David Kreiner's Sensation and Perception syllabus posted under Project Syllabus on the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's website (<http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi/syllabi.php>). This syllabus really seemed to fit the goals and objectives I had set for the class by focusing student involvement around problem-based learning (PBL) activities. Additional searches through teaching books and the internet confirmed PBL as a good fit for the course. Dr. Kreiner very graciously and generously shared his PBL assignments with me. Class time for my course was three-prong: traditional approaches that focused on

understanding of concepts, PBL group work (about an hour each week), and focused application of each week's concepts to clinically or practically based situations.

So, the outcome.... Let's just say there was some “unexpected feedback.” Some students absolutely loved the class approach, a few hated it, and some seemed perturbed that they had to “teach themselves.” The idea that they were teaching themselves was decidedly unexpected. Perhaps I overemphasized their personal responsibility for their own learning. Was it unreasonable that they had to read the week's chapter and come prepared to Monday's classes? Should they not have been expected to answer questions about the material during class? Maybe the hour a week they spent outside of class completing short essay quizzes on Blackboard was just too much. After dedicating a majority of my time and all my weekends to the class how could they not see my contributions as clearly as I did? But wait, the students seemed to be thinking the same thing I was. How could I not recognize their contributions? And here is where the feedback is important. Careful consideration of what worked well and students' perceptions of the course are the first step in growth for a good teacher. It is important though to define criteria for determining what works. Student opinion should obviously be weighed against actual learning. Objective assessments, including quizzes and a final unannounced comprehensive evaluation created from test bank questions indicated substantial learning over the semester. Many seemed surprised that the class median on the comprehensive assessment was an 88 (data were skewed by only three poor scores). They did not realize they had learned that much - it just seemed to sneak up on them like a learning grenade.

This example brings up a dilemma that has been extensively debated in academia. Which is more important, student learning or student satisfaction? Perhaps this is not a fair question though. Student learning should be the primary goal, but the more students enjoy the process the more memorable and inspiring it will be for them. The more meaningful the material is for students the more likely they are to have long-term retention and/or be motivated to continue to explore the topics. Their feedback, unexpected or otherwise, is therefore important.

As I prepare to teach the course again, I am carefully considering all the feedback. For example, I will address the suggestion to provide more timely feedback on graded materials. Revising the course structure, however, requires more thought.

Course design and approaches intended to inspire

students to think, learn, and experience the subject matter are things we all consider regularly when preparing our classes. In this context, student feedback can help guide course improvement. The feedback can help direct the choices of applied components such as learning assessment choices (e.g., in-class vs. online quizzes) and group activities (e.g., PBL activities and discussions). Although the basic structure of a course is designed to meet specific objectives, there are many ways to amend how those objectives are met. Teaching workshops, student feedback, and objective assessments are all necessary tools that help refine courses over time. After all, what good is unexpected feedback, or any feedback at all, unless it inspires improvement?

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Address correspondence to: Dr. Cynthia Gibson, Psychology Department, 300 Washington Ave., Chestertown, MD 21604. Email: cgibson2@washcoll.edu