



Guide to Teaching Evaluation: Getting the Best Out of Your Reflections

Evaluating teaching is like getting regular exercise – good in theory, harder in practice. We all agree it is a good idea. While some of us are good about doing it, others struggle to find time to do it and maintain the practice. The benefits of exercise are that you become stronger and fitter. And usually people around you also benefit from the positive gains you make through regular exercise. In the same way, regular evaluation of teaching can help you become a better, more effective educator. It is part of being a critically reflective professional educator and demonstrates your commitment to quality teaching. Evaluation can provide you with both quantitative and qualitative evidence of what is working well and potential areas for improvement.

With this exercise analogy in mind, this guide is intended to describe some of the evaluation strategies that can be used by educators at an individual module level to gather valuable feedback before, during and after teaching. Amongst a range of benefits, evaluating your teaching can help you to:

- Improve or reinvigorate your teaching
- Enhance your teaching to meet student needs
- Better understand the impact of your teaching
- Develop new modules/programmes or restructure existing ones
- Support applications for awards, promotion or teaching fellowships

HOW TO EVALUATE

Importantly, teaching evaluation is not just a student survey at the end of your module. It needs to involve a number of data sources and should be tailored to meet your individual module or programme needs. Decisions are required about what to evaluate, what sources of information to use, and how to collect, interpret and act on that information. Evaluation before teaching might include having a colleague or learning designer peer review your course design and teaching materials before the semester begins.

During teaching, evaluation can provide feedback on all aspects of your teaching that has potential to benefit the current student cohort. In this respect, evaluation is iterative and responsive to student needs. This type of regular evaluation could include the use of peer observations, discussions with students, requests to see what type of notes students are taking, and insights from VLE usage.

Evaluation after teaching that usually involves a formal survey of your module where students reflect and provide feedback on their experience. A debrief shortly afterwards drawing on the results of this survey, and other data sources, coupled with a meeting of the Programme Board will hopefully benefit future cohorts. The following sections provide a little more information about how you can evaluate your module and maintain the health of your teaching before, during and after course delivery.



BEFORE TEACHING

Feedback from Colleagues

When planning or redeveloping a module, colleagues, past students and industry or community stakeholders can provide valuable input to ensure the curriculum, content and skills are relevant. Your own discipline colleagues are in a position to give feedback on many aspects of teaching, including curriculum development, teaching strategies and research on teaching relevant to your discipline. Academic developers and/or learning designers can also provide valuable advice in terms of your course design. These collegial conversations are more than just informal discussions. They are important exchanges that usually benefit from having a focus, structure and agreed follow up actions. It may be helpful to draw on something like the ABC Learning Design Framework and/or any Course Design Checklist or Guidelines to help structure these conversations.



DURING TEACHING

In-class Feedback

Feedback can be routinely gathered from students during class by asking relevant questions, requesting a show of hands, using clickers, or using an online response system. Asking a few questions informally in class can help gauge whether your teaching is 'hitting the mark'. This feedback is most useful if there is a specific focus; for instance, asking questions about whether students understand a particular concept you just explained or the requirements you described for a forthcoming assignment. Techniques such as minute papers, concept maps and the muddiest point can add variety to how the feedback is gathered. Many of these evaluation strategies can be adapted for use online as they reduce the time needed in-class and give students a chance to reflect on their learning experience.

Conversations with Students

Discussions with students often at the end of class provides more insight than using quick polls or surveys through technology. Informal conversations or follow up focus group discussions can provide opportunities to find out more about students' responses to the module content, structure and your style of teaching. Also, asking to see students' written notes at the end of class can give invaluable insights into what and how they are learning. However, you need to be careful about how you make this request and to whom as the purpose is to gauge the effectiveness of your teaching rather than score students on their ability to take notes.

Class Reps

Student selected class reps can provide valuable feedback about the course through ongoing conversations. They may also be a good way to seek advice about how best to gather other sources of student feedback during your teaching and how to share the results back with students so they know that their input has helped to improve the module.

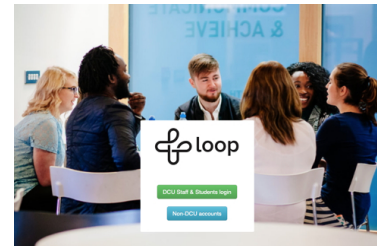


Seeking Feedback in Loop

Making use of the range of tools in Loop can provide a quick source of feedback. With just one or two clicks students can give insightful feedback about specific aspects of the module, your teaching and their understanding of specific topics. For instance, the “choice” tool allows you to create an anonymous online poll where students respond to a question and then see the results for the entire class. This is a very simple and transparent way to gauge whether your students benefited from a new innovation or specific activity during the course of your teaching.

Discussion Forums

Discussion forums in the Loop environment can help to reveal the level of interactivity and student engagement that is occurring in your module. In reflecting on your success in fostering a strong online community of learners, consider how often and frequently students post discussions and the types of questions they ask, and their responses. You may wish to check what proportion of the class are posting online and how effective your responses are to their posts in meeting their needs. Keeping screenshots of noteworthy discussion threads may be helpful in terms of providing evidence of what works and why for future planning and can be used to demonstrate how you interact with students, prompt discussion, and give feedback. Subject to removing personal information, this type of authentic data can be useful for applications for awards, promotion and/or teaching fellowships.



Quiz Analysis

As already demonstrated, student engagement in Loop can complement other forms of evaluation during teaching to help provide a richer picture. In this respect, another useful source of data can come from how students have engaged in any quizzes you have designed for them. More specifically, consider what proportion of your class are using formative online quizzes intended to support their learning and whether those at most risk of failure based on previous results, or other information, are engaging with these resources. You may wish to include a final question in quizzes you design asking students how useful the activity was in supporting their learning.

Activity Dashboards

You can review a log of student activity in Loop for your module through the Administration option. This feature allows you to check on how often students are accessing the VLE environment and the specific types of activities and resources you have designed for your teaching. Consider whether the frequency of student access is meeting your expectations and what you could try during your teaching to improve the level of usage. You can also use the “My Feedback” report tool in Loop to provide a dashboard of student grades and assessment feedback to check on student progress. Available dashboard data can help to identify trends of what is happening in your module from one week to the next and provide valuable real-time data on the effectiveness of specific teaching initiatives in terms of promoting interactivity and student engagement.

Video Resources

While recorded videos and other types of rich media can provide useful data based on number of views and how much time students spend engaging with these resources, they also enable you to reflect on your own teaching performance.



This is an opportunity for teaching evaluation that does not exist in the same way as self-monitoring in a physical classroom. Similarly, video lecture capture can provide you with a record of your teaching and unique opportunity to review and reflect on your performance, in your own time and on your own terms. You can even invite a colleague or other members of your teaching team to provide feedback on a particular recorded class as you view this together.

Peer Observations

Formative observation by peers including a Teaching Fellow or member of the Teaching Enhancement Unit can assist in understanding the nuances of teaching practice. Observation can take place in both offline and online settings. There are benefits to be gained for both the peer observer and the observed, as both have opportunities to glean new ideas and insights about teaching from a colleague. In this respect, peer observations become professional dialogues with a trusted colleague. Nevertheless, it is important to negotiate clear guidelines of what the observation will focus on and follow up with a meeting to review the feedback for future development.

AFTER TEACHING

Student Survey of Teaching

This is the formal evaluation survey used at DCU for quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes. SSOT is a standard online questionnaire that is applied to all taught modules at the end of the semester. Currently this university-wide teaching evaluation tool is distributed to students through Loop. Aggregated quantitative data collected via SSOT is used institutionally by the Quality Promotion Office to monitor quality but can also be interrogated at the programme level for accreditation purposes and module level to enhance the course design for future cohorts.

Your Own Survey of Teaching

Beyond the requirement of SSOT, there may be value from inviting your students to complete a more context specific survey relevant to your module or discipline. This type of survey allows you to design your own formative evaluation at the end of the semester, with questions which are relevant and meaningful to your needs. Of course, there is no reason why such a survey has to be left until the end of the semester as you may find a higher response rate when students appreciate your commitment to enhancing the quality of teaching for the current cohort. A number of already validated survey tools for evaluating teaching also exist that you may wish to use one of these to help benchmark your evaluation against a wider sample (e.g., COLLES). The TEU can provide more information. As a general principle you should endeavour to report back aggregated findings to your students and what actions you plan to implement based on their valuable feedback. You may even find it useful to talk with students about major points they raise about the module or your teaching to help “unpack” some of their comments.

Retention, Completion and Destination Data

There are a number of data sources available at your School and Faculty level through the Student Information System (SIS) and other databases that can be used to provide additional evidence about your teaching. Student retention and completion rates are examples of data that can be requested to indicate evidence of teaching quality alongside student satisfaction and other qualitative data. Depending on the discipline, you may also be able to draw on useful data as evidence of the impact of your teaching from graduate destination surveys and industry sources.



End of Semester Reflections

An end-of semester summary and integrated review of the different sources of data and evaluation tools used allows reflection on the module and identifies potential developments for the future. This reflective summary or debrief can also inform any discussions that take place with colleagues and at the Programme Board. Although this type of debrief usually occurs at the end of a teaching cycle, consistently reflecting on your teaching at key milestones during the semester assists on-going development. Simple strategies like annotating study materials, tests, assignments and lecture slides during the semester will help identify what to keep or eliminate in the next offering.

Wider Reflections

Another part of your teaching evaluation is engaging with the literature on teaching and learning in your field as well as contemporary developments more generally. In this respect, connecting critical reflection with relevant research and theory helps to better understand what you already do and think. This type of reflection and evaluation can be enhanced by attending conferences, participating in professional development workshops, reading discipline specific teaching and learning journals and by engaging in research about learning and teaching. These types of activities which are often described as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning can help further refine the assumptions and approaches that shape your teaching practice.



Closing the Loop

Evaluation without intentional follow up action is unlikely to lead to significant teaching improvements which, in turn, enhance the student learning experience. This is known as the importance of closing the loop. Drawing on the earlier exercise analogy this would be a bit like collecting lots of activity data on your fitness device but not taking any action to change your diet, sleep and type of exercise to enhance your health and wellbeing. Put another way, developing a stronger knowledge of how to collect and interpret “learning analytics” is not the end goal, but rather how you apply this information to enhance the quality of teaching. In developing your action plan, you may choose to change just one or two aspects of your module to better evaluate the impact of a specific redesign of the course in the following offering.



TRUSTWORTHINESS OF EVALUATIONS

Cross-Checking the Data

Evaluation of teaching requires teachers to go beyond a single form of feedback, just as good practice in research leads a researcher to triangulate by using multiple methods and data sources to enhance the validity of their findings. The key point is that trustworthy evaluations need to go beyond a single data source as evidence of the quality and impact of your teaching. The tools, techniques and evaluation strategies highlighted in this guide should help you to see both the positive features of your teaching as well as identify areas for improvement.



Interpreting the Data

Like any data, evaluations require interpretation. Quantitative results can be used to give the 'big picture' or indication of trends over-time and then qualitative comments and observations from students or peers can provide the detail and insights. In this respect, the trustworthiness of teaching evaluation benefits from both use of numbers and narratives. Once you have had time to interpret and digest the results, talk through the main findings or areas you intend to develop with trusted colleagues. You may also wish to book a consultation with someone from the Teaching Enhancement Unit for another interpretation or advice on how best to respond to areas of concern.

FINAL REMARKS

To recap, first and foremost, use more than one source of data to enhance your teaching practice. When implementing changes, use your best judgement to decide whether the changes suggested by students or colleagues are realistic at a given point in time for you and your students. Be realistic about what can be done in the time available and think carefully about workload implications for both you and your students. If you are going to add a new teaching innovation, then following the principle of substitution what could you remove from the module to ensure that you do not inadvertently increase everyone's workload. Well designed and trustworthy evaluation data can be used as powerful evidence to support applications for awards, promotion and teaching fellowships. As you 'unpack' all aspects of your teaching practice use this evidence to reinforce what you are saying: whether it is around course design, teaching and learning methodologies, student engagement, interaction, assessment and learner feedback, and the development of resources. The evidence can illustrate where a change to practice was made in response to feedback and shows your development as a committed educator over-time. Finally, to develop teaching evaluation as a "habit of mind" anchor your reflections in these guiding principles:

- Identify what to evaluate
- Evaluate regularly
- Evaluate in more than one way
- Reflect on the results
- Act on the feedback