

Using the feedback sheet

On the next page is a master copy of the anonymous feedback sheet that I use at the end of every class session. This page is an annotated version of the feedback sheet: The annotations are in roman type, set against the italic type for statements from the feedback sheet.

If there are n students in the class, I make $n/2$ copies and cut the sheets in half. The small format suggests, correctly, that I don't need students to write me a book – just a few well-chosen phrases or sentences is useful especially when I get them from the whole class.

Please spend 2 minutes on the following questions...

I've found that 2 minutes is enough time for students to give useful feedback, yet it hardly shortens class time. However, I have to remind myself to finish the session in at 53 minutes past the hour rather than 55 minutes. Otherwise students are too rushed to fill out the sheet (fair enough).

For the same reason, I pass out the sheet well before 53 minutes past the hour. Even better, if I remember, I hand it out at the beginning of class so that students can write down confusing or enjoyable points (questions 1 and 2) as class progresses rather than reconstructing them at the end.

1. *What is the main unanswered question you leave class with today? What is the muddiest point?*

All the muddy points become the first section in my lesson plan for the next class: I begin the next class by answering the most frequent or otherwise significant questions. Eventually students realize that the sheet provides a safe place to ask questions anonymously (and they mention this feature favorably on the end-of-term evaluations).

2. *What example, teaching technique, problem, derivation, or question helped or did not help you? Please say whether it helped or harmed!*

This question gives me timely, specific feedback about activities that are most (and least) helpful to learning. The feedback helps me improve as a teacher in a way that end-of-term feedback cannot because it is too general and arrives too late.

I eventually included the sub-question about whether the example or derivation helped or harmed. Before its inclusion, students only rarely told me that vital piece of information – which made the feedback almost useless!

Empirically I've learnt that students are most appreciative when I bring in a physical demonstration or use theory to analyze a familiar but mysterious everyday experience (e.g. 'How far can birds migrate without eating?').

3. *Other comments?*

This free-form spot often produces helpful corrections, interesting references, comments about the pace, and suggestions for more applications of the theoretical material.

