

# Making Student Feedback Fun

by Daisy L. Breneman

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As faculty, we often extol the virtues of feedback to students: It's about growth! It's about improvement! It's an act of caring! But, the reality is, especially during pandemic semesters like these, when our mental and physical energy is already tapped out, it can be really, really hard to think about getting feedback from students. Especially for [marginalized faculty](#), feedback can be fraught. For example, many studies have challenged SETs (Student Evaluations of Teaching), in particular, the ways that they can be [biased and unfair](#)—and, of course, there are [many other ways](#) for us to evaluate and reflect on our own teaching.

That said, feedback from students on their learning experiences matters. Knowing more about our students' experience is helpful for many reasons: we can adjust how we are facilitating their learning; we can [demonstrate we care](#) about our students and their learning; we can encourage them to take ownership of their learning; and, the act of providing feedback is itself a good learning opportunity for students. Such opportunities can offer students, and us, space to reflect, articulate meaningful insights, and offer [formative feedback](#) on their learning. Feedback is also about relationship: when we are [connected to others](#), as we are when we teach, we want to know about their needs, and whether their needs are being met, and how we can respond to those needs. But knowing how to [gather](#), receive, and [respond to](#) feedback is itself a learning process, one that should be guided by questions about what we hope to gain (purpose), who our students are (audience), and what is prompting us to gather the feedback (occasion).

While we might solicit feedback at various opportune moments in the semester, feedback really starts at the start of the semester. Having students develop and articulate their learning goals, generate community norms, and connect with each other at the start of the semester is a valuable part of the feedback process. As [Episode 18 of the Faculty Focus Podcast](#) emphasizes, it's important to build a culture of feedback in the classroom, from the start. There are multiple options for [gathering feedback](#) in courses, many of which can be combined. For example, faculty might use various approaches to anonymous and student-specific feedback, group and individual, written and “focus group” style. Offering space for students to talk to each other can help them support and challenge each other, and arrive at consensus.

All these approaches require an openness to feedback. In their book [\*Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well\*](#), Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen explore why receiving feedback is so hard and offer strategies for making the most out of the opportunities feedback offers. They focus on receiving because, while feedback might not be given at the right time, in the right way, or by the right person, we can still learn from it. And receiving feedback is actually a skill that we can practice. One of the many helpful strategies offered is “first understand,” or “shift from ‘that’s wrong’ to ‘tell me more’” (Stone and Heen 2014, p. 46). Feedback from students should be an ongoing conversation and a learning opportunity for all involved.

And receiving and responding to feedback doesn’t mean we have to do/change everything students are asking for. We do have content and teaching expertise, and we have designed our courses intentionally (hopefully!). Sometimes the things students don’t want to do are what they most need to do. Learning isn’t always about the things we want or the things that make us comfortable; sometimes students resist the very things they benefit from the most, such as [high-impact learning practices](#). We can’t (and shouldn’t) give students everything they want. “No” can be a very caring answer. Legitimate concerns have also been raised about the ways we might be fueling a complaint culture by too much attention to [student satisfaction](#), and how the [customer service model of higher education](#) has negative implications for faculty, students, and society.

As we frame our discussion of feedback with students, we can focus on how certain features of the course design support and facilitate learning—not how much a student does or doesn’t “like” something (after all, higher ed is not [Burger King](#)). But we can also be honest and transparent with students about why we might make certain modifications (such as changing the format of the tests we’re giving) and why we won’t make others (such as getting rid of tests altogether). It’s not an easy balance, but we can be [responsive](#) to students while also staying true to our own values, expertise, and intentions.

Here’s the thing: I lied in the title. Feedback’s probably not gonna be fun. We don’t want to downplay [the challenges](#) of receiving the sometimes [difficult \(and, okay, harsh\) feedback](#) that students have, to the point where many colleagues I know won’t even look at their course evaluations—they’re that traumatic! (And let’s not even bring up [RMP](#)). Especially during the pandemic, sometimes [students channel their frustrations](#) about the lifes’ [challenges](#) by lobbing complaints at faculty. Our students may not know how to deal with the range of emotions they may be experiencing as learners; after all, they are facing not only the discomforts of engaging with challenging ideas, but also the struggles of being human in such chaotic and painful times.

We can certainly empathize with them, even if they are directing some of their frustrations toward us.

We can also reframe those communications by being grateful our students [trust us](#) enough to communicate with us, even if that communication is sometimes [hurtful](#). That said, it's important to have boundaries and to recognize [the difference between feedback and abuse](#). We can respond with empathy, care, and grace, while also [protecting ourselves](#). Feedback can be an act of caring. If someone offers feedback, it means they care enough about the person (or situation, or institution, or community) to want to make it better. Sometimes feedback hurts, and sometimes it's hard. But it's always [a gift](#). As Stone and Heen point out in their book's subtitle, we can benefit from feedback, "even when it's off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and, frankly, you're not in the mood." By embracing feedback, and creating a culture of care around it, we can at least try to make it bearable, and to make the most of the opportunities for learning and growth.

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