Guide to Validating Student Feedback – Teaching Evaluation

Margaret Keane & Joe Curran
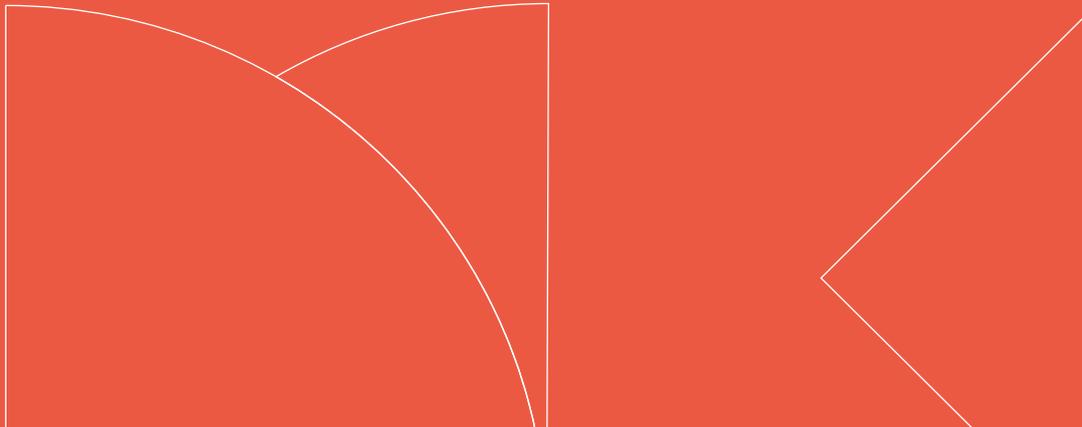Centre for Teaching and Learning, and Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative Team

▶Contents

▶Purpose of Guide

This guide:

- Highlights the importance of validating student feedback through triangulation or multiple perspectives before moving to action/change and closing the evaluation loop.

- Demonstrates a process identified in this initiative that can be used to validate student feedback, close the loop and promote a culture of feedback with your students.

- Points to potential models and resources that can help plan a broader evaluation of your teaching and learning practice or course.

The purpose of this guide is to set student feedback on teaching and learning in a wider context of evaluation in order to validate it through triangulation or multiple methods of evaluation before moving to change of practice and closing the loop and informing students of findings and actions taken.
It also points to ways to broaden the evaluation of your teaching practice through the use of formative/summative evaluation practices and resources and moving to an ongoing culture of feedback and evaluation practice for you and your students.

The guide introduces a model that outlines a second phase to the collection and analysis of student feedback as a process of evaluation practice. Figure 1 depicts this model for contextualising student feedback in a broader evaluation process that includes validation of findings and closing the loop and Figure 2 demonstrates actions involved in each stage of the cyclical process.

Figure 1: Model for Contextualising Student Feedback on Teaching and Learning (M. Keane)
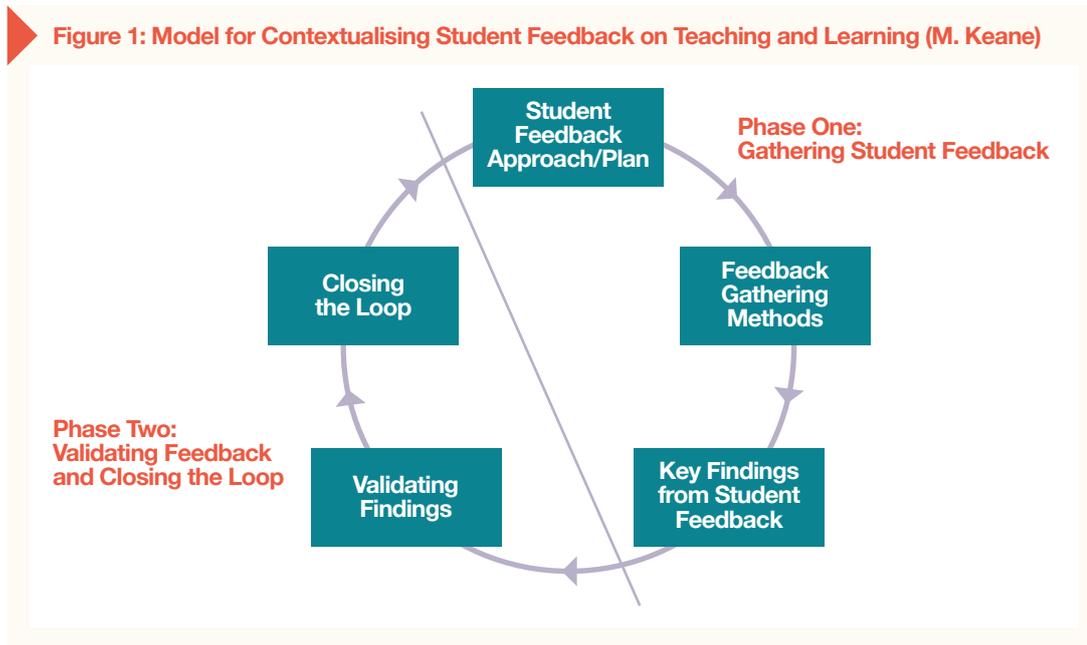

Phase One:
Gathering Student Feedback

- Student Feedback Approach/Plan
- Feedback Gathering Methods
- Key Findings from Student Feedback
- Validating Findings
- Closing the Loop

Phase Two:
Validating Feedback and Closing the Loop

Figure 2: Model Explained (M Keane)

Phase One	Gathering Student Feedback	▪ Plan an approach.
		▪ Use multiple methods to gather student feedback.
		▪ Analyse findings.
Phase Two	Validating Findings Broaden Evaluation	▪ Question the validity/value of findings in the context of future actions for change.
		▪ Formulate action plan to investigate specific findings through other sources i.e. other stakeholders, systems, policy, culture, teaching observations, etc.
	Closing the Loop	▪ Formulate a plan of activities to ensure evaluated students/all students/ future students are informed of: - results of feedback; and - actions taken/intended to address it.
		▪ Create feed forward resources/examples to inform future students that feedback is heard, important and part of practice.

This model suggests the following areas for consideration, and each will be discussed with a view to offering useful suggestions or pointing to helpful resources in evaluating your teaching:

- Challenging student feedback by using **validating** questions to prompt further investigation.

- Identifying ways to respond to those questions i.e. Exploring **other information sources**.

- Creating an **action plan** to change or develop practice that responds to validated findings.

- Informing participating students/all students/future students of findings and actions taken as part of a wider process and feedback culture (**closing the loop**).

- Planning for a wider evaluation of your teaching and learning context that extends beyond the gathering of student feedback and considers an ongoing **culture of evaluation** and feedback both formative and summative.

Validating Findings, Broadening Evaluation
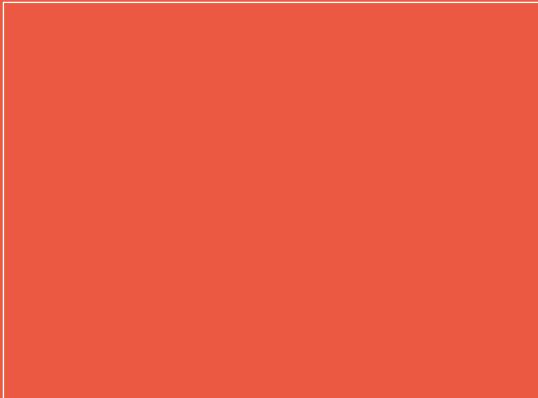
Validating findings from student feedback

As key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process, student feedback is critical to any evaluation of teaching. However, it is not the full story. It is important to consider the true context of student feedback findings and their implications for current and future teaching and learning practice through validating findings. Anson (2020) points to known problems in gathering data through surveys and suggests that the wording, ordering, response options, and other factors can influence the way responses are given, stating that '…at best, these influences add noise to the data. At worst, they result in systematic biases and misleading results.' In preparing your student feedback surveys or feedback questions, you can mitigate known issues of validity and reliability by applying good practice in creating questionnaires such as applying Peterson's (2000) BRUSO model for writing effective questionnaires which recommends questions should be: brief; relevant; unambiguous; specific; and objective. However, even with well prepared and tested surveys, it is recognised that effective evaluation of teaching practice employs multiple methods of evaluation to view the reality of teaching and learning from a variety of stakeholder and contextual perspectives.

A common approach is to begin with gathering student feedback and to consider findings from other perspectives. Challenging your findings from student surveys etc. can help put them in context and consider if they are truly representative of how things are or should be. Using reflective or validating questions can help you examine findings in order to validate them or lead to further investigation from another perspective or stakeholder viewpoint, prior to a move to any action or change in practice.

For example:

- How does a finding truly represent the voice of all students; quantitatively, qualitatively, in respect of disciplinary or other differences of the students responding or the context within which they have responded to a given question?

- Is a finding arising as a result of a specific event in the current year that may not occur in future delivery? (i.e. occurring in an online context but not face-to-face; or as a result of say a particularly high number of students who are lacking prior knowledge/skills due to a change in curriculum choice/pathway).

- Could a finding that may only be represented by a small number of students still merit change or further investigation through other stakeholder or data sources?

- What is your own observation or instinct telling you about a finding or its representation of reality or of a need for further investigation?

Applying a questioning approach to challenge or validate initial evaluation findings can help bring your findings back to your teaching and learning context and help you reflect on them further.

Reflection on your own teaching is recognised as an essential aspect of evaluation and is discussed with other approaches next.

Exploring other evaluation sources

Literature on evaluation of teaching recommends 'collecting data from other sources to compare with the student evaluations and using more than one set of evaluation results' (Keane and Mac Labhrainn, 2005 p12). While the model described in Figure 1 suggests exploring findings from student feedback through other stakeholder or contextual perspectives, it also suggests an ongoing context of gathering feedback or observation of teaching.

Self-observation and reflection

Reflective practice has long been recognised as a critical skill in teaching and other professional practices. Most models are based on Kolbs experiential cycle (Kolb, 1984) that focuses on how we internalise our experiences and observations, relate them to what we already know and understand and take action on a new internalised conceptual understanding of how things could be in the future. Boud et al. (1985) define reflective practice as 'the intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experience in order to lead to new understanding and appreciation.' This is a useful definition as it points to the affective aspect or importance of focusing on our own instincts and reactions to teaching and learning events and observations. Bassot (2016b p2) refers to this as 'critical reflective practice' and points to the important aspect of '…paying attention to your emotional responses and being prepared to challenge your assumptions and the things you take for granted in everyday working life.' If you are starting out on reflective practice, consider Bassot's metaphorical mirrors where she uses different types of mirrors to explain different types of reflection. For example, the side view mirror of a car helps us to see blind spots and this analogy highlights the fact that sometimes we need feedback from others to help us to identify what might be a blind spot in our own practices (Bassot, 2016a p6).

While reflective practice and writing can be complex, a useful model to get started is Rolfe's simple model for reflective practice and writing. Rolfe et al (2001) set out 3 key reflective questions: what?, so what? and now what? as a 3 step approach to reflection. This is explained in the Reflective Practice Models resource listed in the resources section of this guide, along with other models.

While reflection on our own practice is often focused on contexts, events and incidences, Brookfield's four lenses model (1995) demonstrates that we can also reflect more broadly across our practice through our own self development, engagement with our students and viewing what we do from their perspective, collaboration and dialogue with colleagues, and engagement with literature and scholarship of teaching and learning. His model focuses on: Self, Students, Colleagues and Literature as key areas for reflection and evaluation of practice.

Peer Observation of Teaching

Peer observation of teaching has been a practice in teacher education since the 1960s and used in higher education for self-evaluation of teaching practice since the late 1990s. It is used in formal ways in promotion processes and tenure and informally for individuals in helping them to reflect on and evaluate their own practice and quality of teaching as well as to enhance their professional development. Many universities, including Maynooth University, offer options for staff to engage in a formative, structured and supported observation of teaching process where staff can be observed in their classroom teaching (live or virtual) and receive constructive feedback from a third party. In Maynooth, this process is managed by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and can support you with an observation of teaching from a member of the Centre or in working with a peer in observing each other's teaching. The peer observation process involves planning a teaching session, meeting with an observer and having dialogue about teaching, receiving constructive feedback (acting like Bassot's side view mirror analogy) and more importantly, reflecting on the process and your own experience of the teaching episode.

Staff/Department approach to evaluation

As suggested by Brookfield (1995), and the process of peer evaluation of teaching, dialogue with colleagues enhances our understanding of our teaching practice. Working with a group of colleagues within your own department or field can enhance individual reflection and development of practice. Setting up a formal departmental group to plan and oversee good practice in evaluation is a good start to sharing evaluation and feedback resources, instilling good practice and processes and creating consistency. This in turn can create a positive culture for feedback and evaluation within a department for both staff and students.

Feedback by tutors and/or demonstrators

Tutors and demonstrators are a valuable resource in all aspects of teaching and learning and can have a very insightful perspective on how a module is being experienced by students. Their experience both as students themselves and as facilitators of learning in the classroom gives them a unique perspective. Many of them take the CTL1 Module in Teaching and Learning for Tutors and Demonstrators and have good pedagogical knowledge and learning that can help in planning and engaging students in evaluation and feedback activities.

Students as partners in the evaluation process

It is becoming acceptable practice to include students in aspects of design of curriculum and assessment. As well as giving feedback on their own experiences of a module, they may have insightful ideas on how feedback can be gathered, acted upon and communicated.

Formative evaluation classroom activities

While student surveys on teaching are often a summative exercise, occurring at the end of a module or course of learning, good practice in evaluation is also about gathering formative feedback. You have no doubt been using formative strategies to assess learning throughout a module or course of learning, particularly in the current online context. These are strategies usually found under the label *active learning strategies* as they engage students in applying and reinforcing learning concepts. In doing so, they also allow lecturers/teachers to gauge students' understanding of learning during the module/course. It is worth exploring some of these activities or evaluation, to gather informal or interim feedback on student experiences of a module or specific teaching approach or concept. What is important is to have a clear purpose for what you are using it for, that that purpose and outcomes are communicated to students before and after and that you do not overburden students with evaluation activities. Online activities such as quizzes, polls, collaborative walls for sharing ideas/feedback as well as apps included in the VLE (Moodle) can be used to gather feedback on teaching during term time. Your students will already be familiar with the tools or strategy you use and will therefore be more comfortable in responding, particularly if you explain the purpose for your evaluation and how it will benefit them in the module (closing the feedback loop). However, simple, in-class exercises such as a Think, Pair, Share or a One Minute Paper can be time and resource effective and elicit very useful formative evaluation feedback and are a good starting point. Other ideas are included in the Resources section.

Closing the Feedback Loop – creating a culture of evaluation

Closing the loop is a phrase commonly used in business and refers to improving a product or process by collecting feedback from customers or users and reacting to that feedback. It has become a popular concept in higher education as students become more participatory in the teaching and learning design process. In respect to evaluation of teaching and learning, closing the loop refers to communicating to students what the collective feedback from students is highlighting in terms of their experience of a course of learning and how you or your department have; listened to that feedback, explored it further, and acted on it.

Watson (2003) outlines some of the creative ways that this can be done in a study of UK higher education institutions' approaches to closing the evaluation loop on student survey feedback: creating leaflets and flyers for use in course prospectuses and induction packs, including actions taken on feedback in newsletters and web and VLE sites. Other ways are suggested in Table 1.

Table 1: Ways to communicate findings from student feedback/close the loop

Email to students	Newsletters – module/department/institute
VLE notifications	Flyers for incoming module students
Feedback to staff/student committees/Reps	Flyers to include in induction packs
Lecture slides	Reference at induction events
Live polls in class – word clouds	Feed forward resources for incoming students
Include students/reps in the process	News items on department/university websites
Inviting past students to speak	Dedicated bi-annual update for all students

Creating an Ongoing Culture of Feedback and Evaluation

Closing the loop is key to creating an ongoing and positive culture of evaluation. By including students in the process, and clearly communicating intentions and outcomes, they are more motivated to give feedback. Taking a programme, department, or disciplinary approach allows for greater sharing of ideas and resources and can save time as well as making it a more formal process. This in turn can lead to establishing a culture of feedback that is recognised by students as a way of doing things as they recognise practices used across all of their modules. Equally, practices of communicating findings from feedback as well as examples of how feedback positively influences and informs teaching and learning practices can lend to a positive teaching and learning culture.

Even if this is not possible to begin with, you can as an individual take a more formal approach to your evaluation practice as part of continuous professional development and to enhance the quality of the learning experience for your students.

▶Resources and Further Reading

Reflective Practice

- Barbara Bassot's Metaphorical Mirrors explained:
  https://eportfoliohub.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Reflective-Practice.pdf

- Reflective Practice Models, UCD:
  https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/reflective_practice_models.pdf

- When and how to reflect, DCU:
  Guide to Teaching Evaluation: Getting the Best Out of Your Reflections

- Reflector's Toolkit, University of Edinburgh:
  https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection

- Reflective Practice Models, Providence College. Reflective Practice. Faculty and Staff Toolkit.

Peer Observation of Teaching

- MU Teaching Evaluation process:
  Centre for Teaching and learning/Teaching Evaluation

- UCD. An Introduction to Peer Observation of Teaching.

- Gosling, D. 2002. *Models of peer observation of teaching*. LTSN Generic centre (now Advance-HE)
  now available at:
  https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267687499_Models_of_Peer_Observation_of_Teaching

- Gosling, David. 2009. 'Beyond the peer observation of teaching', in David Gosling and Kristine
  Mason O'Connor (Eds) Published by SEDA, Paper 124.

Activities that could be used for formative feedback

- Professional Development Service for Teachers:
  Active Learning Methodologies

- LIT
  Compendium of Active Learning Strategies for Student Engagement

Closing the feedback loop

- Closing the loop examples, UCD:
  https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/Closing%20the%20Feedback%20Loop.pdf

- Sarah Watson Paper:
  Closing the Feedback Loop: Ensuring Effective Action from Student Feedback

References

Anson, J. (2020). "Research Methods in Psychology". OER Commons. Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education, 21 Feb. 2020. Web. 07 Jul. 2021. https://www.oercommons.org/authoring/60156-research-methods-in-psychology

Bassot, B.(2016a). The Reflective Journal. 2nd Edition (p6). London: Palgrave.

Bassot, B. (2016b). The reflective practice guide: an interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection. Abingdon: Routledge.

Boud, D. *et al.* (eds.) (1985) Reflection. Turning experience into learning, London: Kogan Page

Brookfield, S. D. (1995) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

Gosling, D. 2002. *Models of peer observation of teaching*. LTSN Generic centre (now Advance-HE) now available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267687499_Models_of_Peer_Observation_of_Teaching

Gosling, David. 2009. 'Beyond the peer observation of teaching', in David Gosling and Kristine Mason O'Connor (Eds) Published by SEDA, Paper 124.

Keane, E., and I. MacLabhrainn. 2005. Obtaining Student Feedback on Teaching & Course Quality. Nottingham: Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching Briefing Paper, 2. [Google Scholar]

Kolb, D. (1984) Experiential learning. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

McMahon, Barrett and O'Neill, (2007) 'Using observation of teaching to improve quality: finding your way through the muddle of competing conceptions, confusion of practice and mutually exclusive intentions', Teaching in Higher Education, 12:4,499 - 511 DOI: 10.1080/13562510701415607

Peterson, R. A. (2000). Constructing effective questionnaires. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D., & Jasper, M. 2001. *Critical reflection for nursing and the helping professions: A user's guide*, Palgrave Basingstoke.

Watson, S. (2003) Closing the Feedback Loop: Ensuring Effective Action from Student Feedback. Tertiary Education and Management 9, 145–157. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023586004922

Guide to Validating Student Feedback – Teaching Evaluation

About this guide

Guide to Validating Student Feedback – Teaching Evaluation

Margaret Keane & Joe Curran
Centre for Teaching and Learning, and Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative Team

How to cite this guide: Keane, M. and Curran, J. (2021). Centre for Teaching and Learning, and Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative Team. *Maynooth University Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative: Guide to Validating Student Feedback – Teaching Evaluation*. Maynooth: Maynooth University.