Acting on evaluation: Twelve tips from a national conference on student evaluations

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To cite this Article Griffin, Ann and Cook, Vivien (2009) 'Acting on evaluation: Twelve tips from a national conference on student evaluations', Medical Teacher, 31: 2, 101 — 104

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/01421590802225788

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01421590802225788
Abstract
Institions in higher education routinely collect evaluation data from students on a wide range of issues relating to the quality of their learning experience. However, it has been recognized that often this data is under utilized in enhancing teaching quality and that there problems in ‘closing the loop’ which are common across higher education programmes including medicine. This paper reports on the outcomes of a national workshop held at University College London intended to gather good practice ideas and innovations on how to effectively use collected evaluation data from students. A range of strategies was generated by participants including centralization of systems, the need for flexible and spontaneous approaches, a culture of student participation and staff and student dialogue. The outcomes from the workshop are set out as 12 top-tips and are intended to be workable ideas to support the practice of medical teachers and those responsible for quality assurance processes in ‘closing the loop’.

Introduction
A conference entitled ‘National Conference on Student Evaluations: Dissemination and Debate’ took place at University College London in October 2007. It was a collaborative venture between Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry and Royal Free and University College Medical School, with funding from the Higher Education Academy and University College London. Despite its medical orchestration, conference organisers actively welcomed all sectors of higher education to attend. The conference dealt with many issues pertinent to current evaluation dilemmas; looking at questionnaire design; measuring educational climate; on-line technologies; the students’ voice – the how and why of student participation; the ethics of handling data. This paper reports on ideas generated from an afternoon workshop about how we could become more effective at ‘closing the loop’, that is, how to act on feed back: a complex process that involves analysing; reporting; taking action; and letting the academy know what has happened in response to issues arising from student evaluations.

Closing the loop: why is it such a problem?
The problem of ‘closing the loop’ is not new, but it does seem to be persistent. Over 13 years ago Powney & Hall (1998) identified that institutions demonstrated great variability in their response to acting on evaluation data and this was causing increasing student dissatisfaction. We have seen over the intervening years strengthening and more rigorous standards in quality assurance procedures in higher education, yet there is a lack of evidence that students’ feedback results in institutional change and this was highlighted by the National Student Survey (2007) available at http://www.hese.ac.uk/learning/ass/data/2007. Quite simply, students need to see the outcome of their feedback (Cook & Carroll 2006) and this is the key to their engagement. The fact that institutions continue to encounter problems in doing just this appears at odds with the growing and accepted concept of the student voice and satisfaction. Seeking student input has led to a growing corpus of information resulting from their engagement, momentum and collaboration in shaping a co-
authored, learner-centred curriculum (Fielding 1999; Wiers-Jensen et al. 2002).

Data is certainly collected. Questionnaires are by far the commonest method of getting feedback from students (Abrahams & Friedman 1996; Cowan 2004; Elliott 1999). Student evaluation questionnaires (SEQs) are commonly used to assess the quality of teaching; a central tenet of educational quality (Hill et al. 2003) but not, however, the sole aspect. Many different factors, ranging from: accommodation; travel; library resources through to social and pastoral support (Powney & Hall 1998) are also key to quality. SEQs fulfil many roles: teacher reward or remediation; curriculum renewal or review; improving teaching and student learning and as evidence of good practice for external agencies, the Quality Assurance Agency and, in the case of medicine, the General Medical Council.

How can we make sure the data we collect is used for quality enhancement? To do this we need to close the loop and consider addressing each of the five steps in the feedback loop (see Figure 1). We consider each step in this cycle has its own unique problems and we offered it as a model to guide delegates’ discussion in the workshop.

The workshop: acting on evaluation

The workshop sought to identify why closing the loop is so problematic, explore ways of improving the situation, hear best practice and disseminate these findings. After a brief orientation and introduction to the concept of the feedback loop delegates were split into three groups, each with a facilitator and given three tasks:

1. Reflect on how their institutions handled student feedback;
2. Identify barriers preventing closing the loop (using Figure 1 as a prompt);
3. Generate and feedback to the whole workshop their ‘top-tips’ for acting on evaluation.

The delegates at the conference echoed the problems highlighted in the literature; an analogy of trying to turn the super-tanker around in mid-seas with adverse weather conditions was used to describe the challenging and multi-faceted task of accomplishing curricula change in the light of students’ feedback. Despite this the participants generated 12 ideas, based on their own experiences or inspiration, which would be useful for anyone to consider who routinely handles student data.

Workshop outcomes: twelve tips for closing the loop

Tip 1. Unify the process

Delegates felt there had to be an institution commitment to the process of ‘closing the loop’ in terms of both funding and philosophy. A single unit, which articulated a central school policy, was recommended in order to produce a cohesive and coherent approach. It should be responsible for the whole process, as it was more likely to deliver a co-ordinated steer. Questionnaire design could be standardized with the appropriate use of both qualitative and quantitative data and a central administrative process would avoid duplication and minimize student fatigue. Clear lines of responsibility, standards, and actions to be taken by key members of staff, were seen as vital in driving the evaluation wheel through 360 degrees.

Tip 2. Employ a flexible and spontaneous approach

To complement SEQs, with their fixed mode of administration, the employment of more immediate, direct and easy methods of student evaluations was suggested. For example, open meetings were recommended to facilitate the process and gathering of students’ opinions as well as having the advantage of being a visible illustration of the value the institution places on students’ feedback. In order to make giving feedback more spontaneous and integral to the student experience, a generic email, such as ‘feedback@school.ac.uk’, was postulated. Information technology could further be harvested to aid instantaneous responses with discussion boards and blogs. There was, however, a note of caution. Metaphorically speaking unless a member of staff replied to emails or viewed and responded to these methods, they would be seen as the metaphorical ‘unused toilet in the basement’ and discourage students’ future participation.

Tip 3. Prioritize actions generated by feedback

The amount of evaluation data produced can be vast and this generates concerns as to exactly what sort of feedback should be acted on. Clearly some comments, even though they arise from an individual experience can be so concerning that these need special consideration, but the vast majority of the data is of a more ‘routine’ nature. Tips for dealing with this problem were twofold. Ranking the problems in order of the most concerning to academic staff would allow them to prioritise actions. Alternatively, there was the ‘five percent rule’, a threshold to act generated by a critical frequency of comments from the student body. All delegates strongly advised that responding to every point, especially the more peripheral or idiosyncratic, was a sure way of being ‘lost at sea’.
Tip 4. Disseminate outcomes

Tips for disseminating information included internet postings, using email or virtual learning environments like CE6 and Blackboard. It was suggested a summary of the total data set should be presented, may be a ‘top-ten’ of problems, together with the action and the likely timescale for implementation. End of year reports were seen as a valuable communication to the next year’s cohort about the utility of feedback and perhaps prevented perpetuating issues that may be outside of institutional control. Effective face-to-face dissemination at lectures was also considered effective.

Tip 5. Set realistic goals

With a lot of feedback and the more singular experiences, the advice was be thoughtful about what to change. Being over-reactive, making knee-jerk responses resulted in making changes that only had to be reversed in following years. Another consideration in realistic goal setting was the time things took to change and those involved should have an achievable time frame which should be clearly articulated; some things are easy to deliver on, some are the work of a lifetime and this should be made explicit and documented for students and staff to see.

Tip 6. Make timely responses

Another aspect of closing the loop is to set deadlines for action. Matters tend to slip off the horizon unless there is an agreed time by which the various parts of the cycle are completed. If they are left to drift they soon become isolated with action becoming less likely as temporal relevance becomes trumped by other priorities. Timely feedback in the learning process is vital to student learning and timely responses to evaluation issues are equally important, especially if we want to encourage student participation.

Tip 7. Reward teachers

Sometimes there is a view that student data causes problems for academic and administrative staff. It can be viewed as being about negative experiences; issues the institution needs to sort out in order to pass external scrutiny. This, however, is not wholly true and we should reframe evaluation data in a more positive light; students often say nice things about their education and in particular their teachers. Good teaching should be acknowledged: teaching awards for individuals nominated by the student body and SIFT1 money following quality instruction were identified as two methods of best practice.

Tip 8. Reward students

There is a clear institutional expectation that students should take part in the evaluation process but, as we have discussed, without the evidence that their input makes a difference should we rely on altruism? Ways of rewarding students would be by using their skills, for example one institution requested students help in analysing free text data and in these times of student hardship paying them for these services seemed a reasonable consideration. Another institution asked students to include evaluation data in their portfolios, acknowledging the importance of student engagement and its place in a reflexive organisation.

Tip 9. Integrate student participation

Staff should be explicit with students about the role and importance of feedback and evaluation and it should be discussed with them at the beginning of the course. This would acknowledge students’ rights and responsibilities, identify the boundaries of the process and highlight the ways in which students can contribute. Student representatives, an important link between college and the undergraduate body, have, in some institutions, been engaged in disseminating feedback actions and been integral to the quality assurance role.

Tip 10. Work in Partnership

Dialogue is vital and staff involved in students’ evaluations should meet the learners, the degree of engagement and collaboration will affect the structures and results that emerge. Current evaluation practices operate at the level of ‘assigned but informed’ (see Hart’s Ladder of Participation, Hart 1997) where institutions’ ask and direct student actions, but we could consider climbing higher to a ‘participant initiated’ step, whereby student ideas are transformed into the project and academics support this process. There is some evidence (Jones & Green 2006) that this approach helps institutions deal with problems raised, it allows the student to understand the constraints under which we sometimes operate, whilst allowing them to actively engage in solving problems.

Tip 11. Create an armoury of quality

A clear message was to obtain multi-source feedback so SEQs could be triangulated with other data collected. Other methods of gathering student feedback that were recommended included think aloud interviews, nominal group techniques and focus groups, thus allowing a fuller perspective on the student agenda and having the advantage of dissemination embedded in the process. A word of caution was uttered about these methods, undoubtedly rich in explanatory material; they had in some instances over shadowed data from the SEQs and careful consideration should be given to the balance between the voice of the masses versus the voice of a few. The roles of peers, in teaching observations, and reviews provided some balance and added to the fire-power of an armoury.

Tip 12. Get the climate right

A positive climate for feedback should be a key goal for institutions, part of true learning organization culture (Senge 1990), a no-blame ethos, which encourages active participation and acceptance of feedback. Organizations and individuals do not always value students comments being considered in their most extreme as ‘Lunatics running the asylum’ (Horowitz et al. 1998). The final tip was a plea for all
of us to be trained in giving and receiving feedback, enabling us to become effective practitioners, able to set evaluation in a real world context with the ability to transform constructive feedback into meaningful, communicated actions.

Conclusions

It is clear that to truly act on evaluation there are many processes to go through and it is not an easy task. Some actions are hard to take but by doing so institutions show a willingness to contribute to and enhance their communities of practice. To participate in the ways described needs the development of proactive institutional self-assessment in the light of student data, which acknowledges the importance of all its actors and sets itself high standards.

Note

1. Service Increment for Teaching (SIFT) is funding to supplement teaching on clinical placements.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to all the workshop participants who contributed their experiences and ideas on how to close the loop and to Will Coppola, clinical lecturer at UCL and Tal Schecter final year medical student at Barts and the London for their group facilitation skills. Full details of the conference programme and presentations can be seen by visiting http://www.ucl.ac.uk/pcps/information/events/evaluation/.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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