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Improving Teaching Through Video Feedback and Consultation

New instructors often harbor doubts about their performance in an unfamiliar role. At most universities, they only receive feedback at the end of a course and from one source (students). However, such information is not sufficiently timely or broad in scope to be helpful. We suggest that more useful feedback for beginning faculty and graduate teaching assistants can come from the use of video.

Video can validate other sources of feedback (e.g., students, peer observers), without the need to rely on the memory of others for an accurate account (Prentice-Dunn & Pitts, 2001). Videotapes also give the instructor a student's perspective of the class and help establish the mindset necessary to change an ineffective style (Plotnik, 1997). Reviewing tapes with a practiced instructor redirects the novice instructor's attention away from personal mannerisms to student learning (McElroy & Prentice-Dunn, 2005; Meyers & Prieto, 2000).

One of the most robust findings in the educational research literature is the effectiveness of videotape feedback (Paulsen & Feldman, 1995; Weimer & Lenze, 1994). Several studies reveal that viewing oneself is associated with improved instruction (e.g., Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989). Indeed, Meyers and Prieto (2000) described dramatic changes that often occur following self-observation. However, consultation with an experienced instructor may be a crucial component of improvement (Dalgaard, 1982). For example, in one meta-analysis, instructors who received both student rating results and consultation improved to the 74th percentile of instructor ratings at the end of the term (Cohen, 1980), compared to the 58th percentile received by those receiving ratings alone. Thus, it appears that video and consultation are a potent combination for fostering improvement.

Preparing the New Instructor

Krupnick (1987) noted that although videotape can be an invaluable asset, it has the potential to do harm unless preparatory steps have been taken. Foremost among these steps is to convince instructors to record representative teaching and not a class specifically planned for the benefit of the camera. Teachers who almost exclusively lecture may spend the entire session conducting a group discussion. Instructors who favor a variety of techniques may revert to a lecture because they assume that the consultant wants to see "traditional" teaching. Thus, establishing that the video is intended as a snapshot of one's daily teaching and not a command performance is a necessary first step.

Another aspect of setting the stage for fruitful interaction is to counter the frequently held belief that teaching is

not amenable to substantive changes. New instructors often fail to see that the excellence of their favorite professors came with considerable effort and some failures. Sviniki (1994) offers a concise rebuttal to the enduring myths about teaching that may block motivation to improve. Instructors should read such articles to establish the mindset that effective teaching can be developed.

Before viewing the tape, the recorded instructor should be warned of the tendency to become focused excessively on appearance. Most of us implicitly carry the image of videos as the highly polished products seen on commercial television. Thus, we are ill-prepared for the cosmetic distortions that come with even the most advanced portable equipment available for college classrooms. One look at the video often reveals a voice that is higher pitched than previously thought, hair that is askew, or eyes that appear to have dark shadows beneath them. Thankfully, such “video-induced despair” (Krupnick, 1987) can be minimized with forewarning, repeated viewing, and from seeing that the consultant focuses instead on organization, explanations, and the reactions of students to the material.

Timely viewing of the video is important so that thoughts and feelings about the class are fresh in memory (Davis, 1993). Although some consultants (e.g., Krupnick, 1987) recommend watching the video with the instructor, we have found that new teachers appreciate the privacy of first viewing the tape alone.

Checklists focus the instructor’s analysis of the video. For example, Davis (1993) offers 4-10 questions in each of the following areas: (a) organization and preparation (e.g., Do you state the purpose of the class and its relation to the previous class?), (b) style of presentation (e.g., Do you talk to the class, not to the board or windows?), (c) clarity of presentation (e.g., Do you give examples, illustrations, or applications to clarify abstract concepts?), (d) questioning skills (e.g., Do you ask questions to determine what students know about the topic?), (e) student interest and participation (e.g., Do you provide opportunities for students to practice what they are learning?), (f) classroom climate (e.g., Do you address some students by name?), and (g) discussion (e.g., Do you draw out quiet students and prevent dominating students from monopolizing the discussion?). Other checklists focus on lectures (Diamond, Sharp, & Ory, 1978) or specific teacher behaviors (Weimer, Parrett, & Kerns, 1988).

Conducting the Consultation Session

The meeting between the new instructor and the consultant should always begin with a reminder of the collaborative nature of the session. We also find it useful to briefly review the instructor’s course goals and the topic and objectives of the recorded class. Prentice-Dunn and Pitts (2001) provide several guidelines for the session:

Focus on the Positive First

Questions such as “What did you see on the tape that worked well?” or “What did you observe that you liked?” force the student to think of strengths and counteract the tendency to be inappropriately self-critical. Although new

instructors sometimes appear surprised by this line of inquiry (and may even need assistance initially), a balanced approach makes it likely that any problems discussed later will not be met with defensiveness.

Allow the Instructor to Take the Conversational Lead

Krupnick (1987) and Geis (1991) advise that the new teacher take the conversational lead during the meeting. Such a strategy works best after setting the positive tone for the session. Although the consultant will always have a list of issues to be discussed, it is common to have most of these matters first raised by the instructor.

Give Positive Feedback in the Grammatical Second Person

Brinko (1993) states that compliments given as “you” statements will enhance self-esteem. For example, feedback phrased as “You really encouraged several of the quieter students to speak” is preferable to “I noticed that several of the quieter students participated in the discussion.” The former statement attributes the behavior to the teacher’s effort rather than leaving the cause ambiguous.

Frame Negative Aspects of the Performance in Terms of Improvement

Negative information can be especially aversive when the feedback is about complex skills that are practiced in public. To the novice instructor, evaluative audiences appear at every turn. Thus, handling negative feedback requires particular care.

The initial period of the consultation session devoted to successes prepares the instructor for a question such as “What would you like to improve?” Such phrasing avoids the sting to self-esteem that comes from using terms such as “wrong” and “incorrect.” In addition, having the instructor supply the answer reduces the tendency to react defensively when a problem is identified by someone else.

Just as a compliment is more powerful when couched as a “you” statement, so too is information critical of one’s presentation (Brinko, 1993). Instructors better receive feedback presented in the first person or third person. Examples of appropriate comments include “I followed much of the summary, but then expected more coverage of the final topic” and “The students may have had difficulty following the final part of the summary”.

Given the tendency for beginning instructors to be self-critical, the consultant should present negative comments without resorting to strong terms. In addition, the consultant should explicitly distinguish between minor and major issues for the instructor’s attention. For example, the instructor may judge remembering to scan the entire classroom as equal in importance to providing an organizational scheme for a lecture, unless the consultant makes the distinction.

Combine Your Reactions with Those of Students, if Available

Geis (1991) observed that “a particular message gains credibility when it is one of a series of similar messages, from a variety of sources” (p.11). The consistency between the students’ and consultant’s lists of strengths and

weaknesses is often remarkable and impresses the novice instructor that evaluation is not a haphazard process.

When inconsistencies do arise, the consultant can provide a welcome perspective for the teacher. For example, it is common for our introductory psychology students to complain about the difficulty of the exams, due to the tremendous amount of material covered in the beginning course. New instructors are comforted to hear that such responses are normative and do not necessarily reflect shortcomings on their part.

Identify Short-Term Goals and End the Session on a Positive Note

Every meeting should end with the instructor identifying a few specific areas to target for improvement. These areas will then provide the focus for the next meeting. We also recommend reiterating the instructor's strengths and expressing appreciation for his or her efforts to provide a high-quality experience for the students in the course.

Virtually all new instructors work extraordinarily hard and yet receive little acknowledgment. A simple expression of appreciation can go far in establishing a relationship that motivates instructors to offer their best.

Listen More Than You Speak

Carroll and Goldberg (1989) note that consultation works best for instructors who can identify discrepancies between expected and actual performances. Fortunately, it is rare to find a first-time teacher who has no idea about what can be improved. Indeed, the problem more frequently encountered is getting the instructor to realize that she or he already has several strengths. Much of the consultant's time will be devoted to drawing out the instructor's concerns and encouraging reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of a particular teaching technique or proposed course of action.

Suggesting that consultants practice restraint does not mean that they have little to offer. Although new teachers may know what needs modifying, they usually need help with how to enact that change. Providing concrete recommendations for how to increase student participation is but one example of using one's expertise to facilitate improvement. New instructors also appreciate hearing about similar obstacles that consultants have encountered and their attempts to overcome them. Such disclosure not only creates rapport, it also illustrates that beginning instructors face common adjustments and that challenges occur throughout one's career.

Conclusion

The initial teaching experience establishes strategies and attitudes that can follow the new instructor for years. When video is combined with consultation, beginning instructors get invaluable information about translating assumptions about teaching into practice (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002). Such feedback can set the tone for a teaching style that is effective and enriching to students and instructors alike.

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