

Dealing with Hurtful Student Comments

Helpful advice from faculty who've "been there"

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Faculty work hard to provide students with a solid educational experience in their discipline. For any of a variety of reasons, e.g., immaturity, frustration, authority issues, etc., some students make comments in evaluating their professors that are primarily hurtful in tone. FaCET solicited advice from faculty on how they deal with hurtful student comments and cope with them emotionally and constructively. We hope the following comments will be of benefit to you.

Ted Hovet, Associate Professor, English

“In reading our student evaluations, we might be able to use the same skills we bring to our scholarly work—e.g. determining what is valuable and what is not; distinguishing ideas/data that we should retain and apply from what should be discarded as irrelevant or invalid. Obviously the stakes are different when it is personal (much like getting a bad review for a book or article), but it seems to me the profession always calls on us to hone our skills to discern what we should absorb and what we need to pass by. FaCET has a video of a workshop I conducted on this topic [*Using Written Student Comments from the Student Input to Teaching Evaluations (SITE)*] that might be useful and validating, as a lot of the participants talked about their own experiences with negative evaluations.”

Beverly Siegrist, Professor, Nursing

“[Dealing with hurtful student evaluations] is a topic that my students and I discuss in Nursing 520, *Teaching in Schools of Nursing*. In this class the students explore the roles of nurse educator as well as all forms of evaluation.”

“One of the quotes I have in my desk drawer is attributed to Kahlil Gibran: ‘Work is love made visible.’ I believe that WKU faculty generally work hard and love their work. It is understandable that poor student evaluations and comments will occasionally ‘hurt’ and make faculty evaluate their methods. Isn’t this a good thing?”

“I tell my students that I take all evaluations seriously and suggest that they do the same. It is a fact that at some point in a teaching career, a faculty member will receive a hurtful evaluation. It is helpful to remember that student evaluations of faculty (SEF) were first developed by students in the 1960s as a method of ‘having their say.’ Many research studies report that SEF are generally reliable and moderately valid; however, McKeachie (*Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*) recommends consideration of two major studies related to SEF. A study of 50,000 classes by Marsh & Durkin (1997) suggests the SEF should evaluate nine teaching dimensions: learning, enthusiasm, breadth, organization, group interaction, rapport, exams, assignments and workload. Another study, by Abriami, d’Apollonia and Rosenfield (1997), lists three essential components of SEF: viewing the teacher as instructor (our teaching ability and methods, i.e. clarity, preparation etc); viewing the teacher as a person (attitude, respect for students and other faculty, etc.); and, viewing the teacher as an evaluator (how do we evaluate students and give feedback?) Do the SITE evaluations at WKU consider these essentials? I don’t think so. So...it’s up to the faculty to make sure they have sufficient evaluation data to make decisions about their classroom teaching. It is very misleading to base an annual evaluation on only one or two dimensions of teaching.”

“This is what I tell my students, ‘If you have a hurtful evaluation or comments, read them and put them aside until emotions are under control.’ It’s hard because, after all, we put so much time into classroom preparation, developing best learning strategies for diverse learners, etc. It can feel like being told you have a FLK (funny looking kid). I relate a story to my students about when my first child was born. He was premature—skinny, red, and funny looking. When he was three months old I took him for his first professional photograph. That same week he had a checkup with the pediatrician,

who proclaimed after examining him, ‘he’s doing well; pretty soon he won’t be funny looking anymore.’ I, of course, broke into tears.” “Birthing a course results in similar emotions.”

“When I revisit the ‘hurtful evaluations’ I consider the following:

- Is this the first time to teach this particular course?
- Did I develop the course or was I assigned to teach the course? If assigned, did I have adequate time to prepare or lack the enthusiasm I needed to successfully teach the course?
- Is this the first time I have received a poor evaluation in this particular course or is it a trend indicating I need to pay attention and make changes?
- What was the timing of the evaluation? Was the evaluation acquired following an exam or return of a major assignment or faculty evaluation of the student? What was the environment (hot, cold etc.)?
- Were the comments consistent among the majority of the students of the result of one or two disgruntled students?
- What are the problems? The material, the teaching methods?
- Were the comments personal? Not everyone is going to connect with me as a person and teacher. Was I respectful of student ideas? Was I uncomfortable with my skill level in presenting the course content? Was I fair?
- What will be my action plan to either change the course and methods or improve my teaching? Perhaps no change is needed at this time. If it’s a new course, compare the evaluations after the next semester the course is presented and look for trends.
- Have the students been taught the importance of evaluation to evaluate faculty?”

“Finally, it is up to the individual faculty to make sure we get appropriate student feedback and acquire the necessary skills to teach effectively. The bottom line is that more than SITE evaluations must be used to evaluate our teaching. Peer review by departmental faculty and experts in the field is one method. Develop a mid-term mini evaluation and acknowledge the results in class. If changes are made due to the mid-point evaluation, inform the students. There are many resources to help faculty develop “best questions” (e.g. do we want to know about faculty behaviors, student perceptions, student’s own behaviors, etc.) Keep current in your field and attend conferences to improve your teaching. Take advantage of FaCET and the faculty support available either through workshops or individual consultation. Talk with “expert teachers” in your department and the university.”

“The College of Health and Human Services is in the process of implementing ‘Teaching Squares’ as one method to assist faculty in improving individual teaching skills. This is not peer review but rather peer modeling of classroom behaviors and skills. In this method a group of four faculty, from across disciplines, agree to visit each other’s classes in the role of student. Through individual reflection and sharing faculty identify methods to improve their teaching.”

“It helps me to remember that Socrates, considered one of the greatest teachers, got low marks on his teaching evaluations. Of course he was voted to be put to death – that’s really a hurtful evaluation!”

Linda Todd, Associate Professor, Bowling Green Community College

“I once heard someone say that they never read any of their SITES! I read all of mine; but if they arrive when I’m already stressed, I wait until I’m in the right frame of mind to read them. I find them interesting. I feel that SITES give students an outlet to share whatever they are feeling at the time about the class. I’m glad we no longer do SITES during the last week of the semester. “

“During my first year of my first college teaching position at the University of Mississippi, I remember a student’s comment in an evaluation. I knew by the content which student wrote the comment. It hurt at first but was a well-written and constructive comment. It helped make me a better teacher. “

“I always try to take any negative comment and see if I could have done something different with that student that could have changed the situation. Sometimes the comments come because a student does not wish to accept the high standards I try to set for them. Then, I just accept the comment as an opportunity for the student to vent! “

Nathan Phelps, Interim Director, University Experience

“When I introduce the Student Input to Teaching Evaluations (SITE), I ask the students to write comments that will help me be an effective teacher, etc. I have never had ‘hurtful comments’ and I have had a lot of helpful ones.”

Jerry Bennett, Visiting Assistant Professor, Management

“# 1 I always tell my students that if they have a problem, to come see me at any time. I make it a point to be in my office during office hours or make special appointments outside those hours.

#2 Treat the student as your customer; we are not here to do what we want, but to assure that the student learns the material.

#3 Nothing breeds success like success. Listen and when giving personal feedback encourage the student by telling him what he is doing right and areas where he needs to improve. Always try to be encouraging and maintain a positive manner.

#4 Get to know your students; call them by their first name when you see them, especially outside of class.

#5 Let them know that you care and you want them to be successful.”

Paul Bush, Assistant Professor, Bowling Green Community College

“To quote a character from Saturday Night Live, ‘I’m good enough; I’m smart enough; and, doggone it, people like me.’ We can see through this bravado to the character’s fragility as he mirrors our own concern when dealing with how others view us, but ultimately he’s right, and we can’t take the student ratings personally (at least not past the first few minutes of disappointment). Instead, let’s use the students’ comments for what they were designed—to encourage us to change if change in our teaching method is truly needed: are we setting up clear, concise objectives; are we constructing our assignments to reach them; and are the evaluations (quizzes, exams, essays) designed to see if our students achieve the objectives we said they would? If, on the other hand, the comments were of a bitter personal attack, I suggest trying to find my favorite bumper sticker and pasting it above your computer: ‘Mean people suck.’”

Les Pesterfield, Professor, Chemistry

“When I read my student comments...

1. I try to take every comment with a grain of salt. I do NOT believe the comment ‘Pesterfield is god!’ any more than the comment ‘What an @\$! Never take him!’ These types of comments are nothing more than a student’s reflection on whether they liked me or not. I learned long ago that no matter what I do in the classroom someone will not be happy.”

“When I finish a semester I ask myself the following five questions:

- a. Was I on time for class?
- b. Was I prepared for class?
- c. Was I enthusiastic about what I was teaching?
- d. When I made a decision about classroom/student issues, was I being compassionate and fair?
- e. Was I trying to do the best for my students?

If I can answer yes to these five questions, I do not worry about the personality comments from students.”

2. “I keep in mind that the activation energy (sorry for the chemistry reference) for giving a BAD comment is much lower than the activation energy to give a GOOD comment. Students and individuals in general like to vent when something does not go their way. I find that hateful comments come from students who are frustrated and feel

helpless to perform up to my expectations for them in a class. I know these students are venting and are often looking for a scapegoat upon which to pin their poor performance. I simply choose NOT to accept responsibility for their poor performance. Education is a two-way street. I attempt to hold up my end of the agreement to the best of my ability.”

3. “I know that students have not been trained to evaluate me, either in my teaching style or in the depth/breadth of my content knowledge.”

“Lastly, I am not perfect. Sometimes a comment will just get to me.”

Wren Mills, Part-time Faculty, English

“While we’ll always get a few of those pain-in-the-butt comments that just aren’t substantiated at all, students do want to be heard, and I think just letting them know that we take it seriously is a big key.”

“I tell my students, the week before the SITEs are done, that what they put on those evaluations means a lot to me and to please take some time over the next week to think about what comments to make. I tell them I want to hear what I do wrong as much as what I do right. We have a very frank talk about some past comments I’ve gotten and how it affected the way I ran the class the next term. This seems to have stopped the ‘I don’t like your pants’ comments (that’s a real one, by the way) and my favorite: ‘You had us read too much’ for an English 200 Literature class.”

“I also have students submit, on the last day of class, a review of the course as their last journal entry. I give them lots of things to consider: how they liked certain lessons and assignments, what they thought of the way I ran the classroom, and what they’d wished we had done that we didn’t. I even encourage them to suggest alternate reading selections to replace ones they did not like. They can answer which ones they want and even submit the review anonymously if they like. I’ve required it for the last two terms, but even when it was optional, I found most of them did it. I get the feedback IMMEDIATELY and have time to correct myself before the next term rather than getting the results of SITEs a few weeks in. If a class is struggling at mid-term, I do a mini-evaluation and see what I need to do to fix things, and the couple of times I’ve had to do that, it’s made a HUGE difference in the class.”

Nancy Roberts, Associate Professor, English

“I’ve often wondered if we can’t do something on the other end, perhaps include a discussion of student ratings in Freshman Orientation programs/classes, to guide the students to an understanding of what sort of comments are likely to result in improvement. I suppose some students need to spew out frustration, personal attacks, irrelevant peeves, and we need to learn how to deflect those blows, but they can have the effect of making instructors more defensive, anxious, not as trusting of the students—hard as we try not to let this happen—and no one benefits. I can get ‘Passionate, inspiring, best-ever teacher’ on the same sheet as something like ‘You are an old, deaf woman.’ Human nature, I fear, tends to put more emotional weight on the hurtful words, perhaps for the very fact that someone interacted with in good faith turns out to be so vindictive. Laughter helps. So does the chance for us to blow off steam! More collegial sharing would help enormously.”

Susann Davis, Instructor, Modern Languages

“When I received my first teaching evaluations someone suggested that I simply ignore the worst two and the best two. There will almost always be somebody who adores everything and someone who hates everything. Of course, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.”

Paul Bush, Assistant Professor, English, BGCC

“One last thought for dealing with hurtful student comments: Do you already know that you are very sensitive to other people’s hurtful comments? If so, then you should never open the SITE evaluation packets when you are alone. Instead, have a SITE opening party with people who support you!”

References

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3. McKeachie, W. J. (1997b). *Student ratings: The validity of use*. "American Psychologist," 52: 1219-1225.

E-Mail facet@wku.edu -- Phone (270) 745-6508 -- Fax (270) 745-6145.

Write to the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching, 1 Big Red Way, Bowling Green, KY 42101-3576

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