Making Sense of Student Feedback

These tips can help you consider how to make best use of student feedback.¹

When considering student feedback:

• **Pick a good time to do so.**
  Carve out enough time to digest at least some of the information, have privacy, and can give yourself some mental ‘space’ to analyze the information.

• **Look for patterns in students’ comments.**
  Identify trends, note what you have done well and what needs improvement.

• **Take your experience into account.**
  If you are new to teaching, the university, or even the course, you may still be learning about various aspects of being a professor, such as course design, teaching skills, student interaction, and departmental expectations.

• **Take the context and characteristics of your course into account.**
  Research shows that student evaluations often are more positive in courses that are smaller rather than larger, and elective rather than required. Also, evaluations are usually more positive in courses in which students tend to do well.

When dealing with negative student feedback:

• Know that almost all faculty members receive negative feedback at some point in their careers, including those who are senior and highly successful.

• Allow yourself to acknowledge that it can feel hurtful or make you angry, but also provides opportunities for your continued development.

• Put outlier comments into perspective if they run counter to the feedback you get from a majority of students.

When deciding how to further your development as a teacher:

• Bear in mind the most frequently mentioned areas for teaching improvement in analysis of student evaluations within and across universities: 1) clearer, more specific in-class communication; and 2) clearer, more explicit organization of course content.

• Consider scheduling an appointment at the Sheridan Center for a consultation to help you interpret your evaluations.
  Research suggests that teachers who consult with someone about their evaluations are more likely to score higher on the next set of evaluations than others who do not discuss them with anyone. To schedule a consultation on student evaluations, contact the Center at 863-1219 or Sheridan_Center@brown.edu.

When planning steps to improve the feedback you receive in evaluations, consider the following options:

• Use one-minute evaluations at the end of selected class sessions, asking students to note the main idea they learned that class, or two ideas about a major construct considered, or a question about content, and so forth.

• Solicit mid-semester feedback on your course to check how the class is progressing while you can use the information to make changes.
  For ideas about how to do this, see the Sheridan Center Teaching Tip "Mid-Semester Feedback: Benefits, Techniques and Examples from Brown Faculty" (available online at http://brown.edu/sheridan_center/teaching/teaching_tips.html).

• Talk with the class about their interim feedback, and explicitly put into practice one of their suggestions.

• Before the final course evaluation, explain to the class the importance you place on their input.

¹ This "Teaching Tip" is taken, with minor modifications, from the "Student Evaluations" page of the website of Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching (http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/reflecting/student-evaluations/, accessed 2/29/2012). This page includes a list of resources on interpreting student evaluations and summaries of research on student evaluations, which you may find helpful.