

Random Thoughts . . .

HANG IN THERE! Dealing with Student Resistance to Learner-Centered Teaching

RICHARD M. FELDER

Dear Dr. Felder,

What can I do about low teaching evaluations from students I teach actively when what they clearly want is much more traditional (passive ride, smooth highway please)? I'm about ready to give up and return to just lecturing, as I am sure students will evaluate my courses higher if I do. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely, _____

* * *

Dear _____,

Before I respond to your question, let me assure you that I get it. Learner-centered teaching methods like active and cooperative and problem-based learning make students take more responsibility for their learning than traditional teacher-centered methods do, and the students are not necessarily thrilled about it. All college instructors who have tried the former methods have experienced student resistance—and if they were getting high evaluations when they taught traditionally, their ratings may have dropped when they made the switch. As you've discovered, it doesn't feel good when that happens, so it will be understandable if you decide to go back to teaching classes where you just lecture and the students just listen (or text or surf or daydream or sleep).

Please think about a couple of things before you make your decision, however. An important part of our job as teachers is equipping as many of our students as possible with high-level problem-solving and thinking skills, including critical and creative thinking. If there's broad agreement about anything in educational research, it's that well-implemented learner-centered instruction is much more effective than traditional lecture-based instruction at promoting those skills. (If you'd

like to check the research for yourself, the attached bibliography suggests some good starting points.) It's true that many students want us to simply tell them up front in our lectures everything they need to know for the exam rather than challenging them to figure any of it out for themselves. If we give them that, though, we are failing those who have an aptitude for high-level thinking and problem solving but might not develop those skills without the guidance, practice, and feedback learner-centered methods provide. That failure is a high price for us to pay to get better student ratings—and we might not even get them by staying traditional. Teachers whose evaluations are not all that high to begin with commonly see their ratings increase when they adopt a more learner-centered approach.

I don't know what your institution is like, but here's the way things go at the universities and colleges I've visited. Most instructors teach traditionally but there are quite a few who use active learning and other learner-centered methods, including some of the best teachers on the campus—the ones who routinely get excellent performance and high ratings from their students, teaching awards, and wedding invitations and birth announcements from their former students. At some point another faculty member may decide to try, say, active

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learning, perhaps after attending a workshop or reading a paper or constantly hearing about the superb student responses their gifted colleague always enjoys. He or she tries it and it doesn't go well—the evaluations are mediocre and some students grumble that their professor made them do all the work instead of teaching them.* Instructors in this situation can easily conclude that the nontraditional methods caused their poor ratings. What that conclusion doesn't explain, however, is how that talented colleague of theirs can use the same methods on the same students and get good performance and glowing reviews.

Whenever I've explored this issue with instructors distressed by it, I have invariably found that the teaching method they were trying was not the real problem. It was either that they were making one or more mistakes in implementing the method, or something else was troubling the students and the method was a convenient scapegoat. So, if you've used a learner-centered method, didn't like the outcomes, and would like to do some exploring, you might start with these questions:

- *In your student evaluations, were complaints limited to the method, or did they also relate to other things such as the length of your assignments and exams, the clarity of your lecturing, or your lack of availability and/or respect for students?* If they did, consider addressing those complaints before abandoning the method.
- *Did you explain to the students why you were using the method?* If you tell them you're doing it because research has shown that it leads to improved learning, greater acquisition of skills that potential employers consider valuable, and higher grades, most will set aside their objections long enough to find that you're telling the truth. (See Reference 2 in the bibliography.)
- *Did you use the new method long enough to overcome the learning curve associated with it?* It can take most of a semester to become comfortable with and adept at active learning, and if you're using a more complex technique such as cooperative or problem-based learning and you're not being mentored by an expert, it might take several years.
- *If you got unsatisfactory student ratings, did you check references on the method to see if you were doing something wrong?* For example, did you assign small-group activities in class that lasted for more than 2–3 minutes or call for volunteers to respond every time? (See Reference 4 to find out how both practices can kill the effectiveness of active learning.) The bibliography suggests references you might consult for each of the most common learner-centered methods.

- *In your midterm evaluations, did you specifically ask the students whether they thought active learning (or whatever you were doing) was (a) helping their learning, (b) hindering their learning, or (c) neither helping nor hindering?* If you do this, you may find that the students objecting vigorously to the method are only a small minority of the class. If that's so, announce the survey results in the next class session. Students who complain about learner-centered methods often imagine that they are speaking for most of their classmates. Once they find out that very few others feel the way they do, the grumbling tends to disappear immediately.

If your answers to any of those questions suggest that making some changes in your approach to the method and trying again might be worthwhile, consider doing it. If you conclude, however, that you've done all you can and going back to traditional teaching is your only viable course of action, then so be it. I hope you choose the first option, but it's totally your call.

Best regards, and good luck,
Richard Felder

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* *My favorite student evaluation came from someone who wrote "Felder really makes us think!" It was on his list of the three things he disliked most about the course.*

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