

BENEFITING FROM COURSE FEEDBACK – EXPERIENCES FROM PHYSICS COURSES

I. Kontro

Department of Physics, P.O.B. 64, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland
email: inkeri.kontro@helsinki.fi

The role of student feedback in developing university teaching is contested. Proponents argue that student experiences are an important factor in determining the quality of teaching [1], while opponents claim student feedback tells little of the quality, is easily swayed by external factors, and leads to little change in teaching [2].

At the Department of Physics, University of Helsinki, we have collected comprehensive course feedback from introductory courses and intermediate courses since 2007 and 2014, respectively. The return rate is usually 80-90%, as the feedback is collected as a part of the compulsory calculation exercises. Exercise points are awarded for participation. To minimize influence of grades on feedback, the questionnaire is sent out before the exam.

This feedback has proven highly important in developing courses. The feedback shows that student experience is not dependent on course difficulty – in fact, challenging courses get better feedback, as long as the students find the teaching of high quality and appropriate for their level. Student feedback is particularly useful for evaluating how students perceive the difficulty level of the course and whether their prior knowledge was sufficient. From feedback, we have spotted difficult transitions between courses and exercises which are too difficult to be useful – but also courses which are too easy and where more material could be covered.

The feedback is also analysed together with other factors such as pass rates, exam results and gains in standardized tests (*e.g.* Mechanics Baseline Test [3]) to provide a comprehensive picture of learning. Teachers benefit from a feedback system which offers a detailed analysis on what is normal feedback and what kind of responses warrant a change. In our system, one person analyses the feedback, delivers and interprets the feedback to teachers and assistants, and delivers a response to the feedback to students.

In conclusion, feedback should not be the only way to evaluate teaching, but a comprehensive feedback system aids in developing teaching, which has benefits both for students, teachers, and the institution as a whole.

[1] L. Harvey, *Quality in Higher Education* 9 (2003) 3.

[2] P. Moilanen, T. Nikkola and P. Rähkä, *Aikuiskasvatus* 1 (2008) 15.

[3] D. Hestenes and M. Wells, *The Physics Teacher* 30 (1992) 159.