

BE TA Training

Handout: Giving and receiving feedback

The way in which feedback is given and received during the teaching practice exercise contributes to the learning process. Feedback that is vague, judgmental, ill-timed, or unusable is not as valuable as feedback that is specific, descriptive, timely, and practical. Similarly, although being criticized is often not pleasant, being open to well intentioned, well-crafted feedback can only further professional development.

It is important to be practical, tactful, and upbeat when giving and receiving feedback—both in this teaching practice exercise and in your classes / laboratories.

Here are suggestions for how to give and receive feedback:

When giving feedback:

1. Be specific rather than general.

The more concrete the feedback is, the more useful it will be to the person receiving it. Thus, rather than saying, “Mike sometimes you weren’t clear in your explanations...,” tell Mike where he was vague and try to describe why you had trouble understanding him.

Similarly, it is nice but not very helpful to say, “Joan, I thought you did an excellent job.” Rather, list the specific things that Joan did well. For example, she might have motivated the problem effectively, used transitions advantageously, or communicated interest and enthusiasm. Tell her how these techniques contributed to the success of her presentation.

2. Be descriptive, not evaluative.

Focus on the effect the presentation had on you, rather than on how good or bad you perceive it to be. For example, saying, “It’s wrong to call on students when they don’t have their hands up,” is a generalization that may or may not be true in all cases. However, saying “I felt uncomfortable because you called on me when I didn’t have my hand up,” can help the person realize that students may have the same reaction.

Remember, too, that some of your responses will come from your own perceptions (for example, not everyone feels uncomfortable when called on). Thus it is good practice to begin most feedback with, “In my opinion...” or, “In my experience...”

3. Describe something the person can act upon.

Commenting on the vocal quality of someone whose voice is naturally high pitched is only likely to discourage him/her. However, if the person was speaking quickly because he/she was nervous, you might say, “Barbara, you might want to breath more deeply to relax yourself.”

4. Choose one or two things the person can concentrate on.

People can usually act on only a few pieces of feedback at any one time. If they are overwhelmed with too many suggestions, they are likely to become frustrated. When giving feedback, only call attention to the 'big ticket' items rather than 'nit-picky' details.

5. Avoid inferences about motives, intentions or feelings.

To say, "You don't seem very enthusiastic about this lesson" is to imply something about the person her/himself.

When receiving feedback:

1. Be open to what you are hearing.

Being told that you need to improve presentation is not always easy, but, as we have pointed out, it is an important part of the learning process. Although you might feel defensive in response to criticism, try not to take offense to the comments and use the feedback to your best advantage.

2. If possible, take notes.

If you can, take notes as you are hearing the other people's comments.

Then you will have a record to refer to later after you process your experience.

3. Ask for specific examples, if you need to.

If the critique you are receiving is vague or unfocused, ask the person to give you specific examples of the point he/she is trying to make.

4. You don't have to agree with every comment.

Sometimes feedback is a reflection of personal preference. Though it is important to hear the comments your peers and students provide, it is important that you are comfortable with your teaching style.