Soliciting Student Feedback (or How to TAP Your Own Class)

by Emily O. Gravett
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In response to the COVID crisis and the way JMU has been affected, we've decided to pause, for Fall 2020, the CFI's Teaching Analysis Poll (TAP) program (elsewhere called "Small Group Instructional Diagnoses" or "SGIDs," in case you want to look them up). The CFI's TAP consultants are all full-time teaching faculty who, like the rest of us, are dealing with online (and toggle) teaching, increased course loads, caregiving, homeschooling, and all of the other practical and emotional calamities that the pandemic has wrought so far. There simply isn't the bandwidth to offer online TAPs this semester.

That's a pity, since TAPs offer a range of benefits that are needed now, more than ever. They can convey instructor enthusiasm, increase student motivation and attendance, improve clarity of assignments and tests, strengthen bonding and communication with instructors, and more (see Hurney et al. 2014).

So, no TAPs this semester. <sadface> But we are here to help you reap some of the benefits of the TAP program, on your own. For those of you unfamiliar, here is how TAPs used to work back in the good old days when we could all meet in the same room at the same time:

> At a predetermined time, about halfway through the semester, a CFI-trained TAP consultant would visit an instructor's class, usually for the last 30-45 minutes. The instructor would leave the room and the consultant would then lead students in a confidential activity during which they would provide, in small groups, consensus-based feedback about the learning environment of the course. After gathering this feedback, the TAP consultant would type up a summary and use it in a consultation with the instructor, to prompt focused reflections about classroom interactions, student learning, and teaching strategies. Since the feedback is provided around the midpoint of the semester, instructors can use it to make meaningful changes and include students in the feedback loop.

Yet, even though these kinds of TAPs are not possible right now, we may still be wanting to check in with our students. Such check-ins can ameliorate the distance and disconnect students (and we!) may feel, as our courses shift online (or have been offered online to begin with), and they can help to counter feelings of loneliness and isolation. Lucy Bryan Malenke in the Writing Center is touching base with her students weekly, using the following Google form (which I'm sharing with her permission). She also sometimes adds specific questions to this form, about a particular activity or reading, for instance, to gauge student response.

You may also want to do a single, mid-semester check-in, more like a TAP. Here are the standard SGID questions that students discuss during that process:
1) What helps your learning in this course?
2) What hinders your learning in this course?
3) What suggestions do you have to improve your learning in this course?

So how could you re-create a TAP on your own? Here are some ideas:
- Create an ungraded "quiz" in Canvas, where you can check the box to "keep submissions anonymous," and ask students to respond to the TAP questions there, either asynchronously or synchronously.

- Ask students to asynchronously or synchronously respond to the questions on an anonymous poll using PollEverywhere, Slido, or something similar (e.g., Qualtrics, if you've gone through the training).
- Ask students to type their responses to the TAP questions into a shared Google Doc, either asynchronously or synchronously (with no Google log-in required, responses would be anonymous).
- If meeting synchronously on Zoom or WebEx, use the chat box to solicit the TAP feedback (this wouldn't be anonymous, so students may not be completely comfortable sharing as honestly).
- If meeting synchronously on Zoom, use the "breakout rooms" to ask students to respond to the TAP questions in small groups of 3-5 (using any of the above sharing mechanisms, e.g., Google Doc, Canvas, poll, etc.).
- Ask a colleague to join your synchronous session as a co-host for 30-45 minutes, you leave the session, and they do the above, leading students to respond to the TAP questions in a shared doc in small groups; this idea is closest to what actually occurs during a regular TAP.
- If your colleagues are all busy, ask one (or a small team) of your students to host 30-45 minutes of your class while you are absent, collecting the answers of their fellow students and developing recommendations together with them. Such an approach would give students more agency in their own learning in addition to providing you with feedback.

With most of the above ideas, you'll be the one trying to discern important themes among the results (though do pay attention to 'outliers'—these can be informative too!), as well as deciding what to act upon. Feel free, however, to request a CFI teaching consultation to discuss the results and to brainstorm possible responses. Talking to students about the feedback they've taken the time to give you is the most important step of all in the TAP process.

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https://www.jmu.edu/cfi/teaching/other/teaching-toolbox.shtml