Chapter 10

Feedback on Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

Tutors' and demonstrators' reasons for wanting feedback about their teaching practices are usually a mixture of the personal and the professional. Every part-time teacher is likely to be interested to know in a general way how he or she is doing and how things are going, and while some are keen on having details that will help them consolidate good practice or make improvements, others need to be able to document the quality of their teaching skills. Yet whatever the motivation, no one wants to invest more time and effort than is necessary to produce accurate and useful feedback information.

Indicating broadly how to obtain information that gives a reasonably sound and well-balanced picture is not hard. But the issue of what feedback will prove to be really useful is more problematic. This is partly because teaching practices vary widely within as well as across disciplines. There are choices to be made about which aspects of tutorials or practical classes and of the contributions made by part-time teachers (including marking where appropriate) will form the main focus of the feedback. It is also partly because of the different ways in which feedback can be sought. Some methods of feedback are designed to encourage written or verbal comments in a very open-ended way, while others such as questionnaires may restrict the range of answers to a small number of fixed choices.

Tutors and demonstrators therefore need to think through their own feedback requirements, in the light of, for example, their responsibilities, the aims, focus and content of their classes, and the relative merits of a broad overview or more close-grained information. How much time can realistically be invested is a further important consideration: the richer the feedback being sought, the more time-consuming it is likely to be to collect and analyse. Thus, deciding what to do is not altogether straightforward, and tutors and demonstrators will find it helpful to be aware of the possible options and what is entailed in putting them into practice. Accordingly, the two-fold aim of this chapter is

- to identify sources and methods particularly suited to getting feedback on teaching
- to give some practical pointers for collecting, analysing and making use of feedback data.

SOURCES OF FEEDBACK

Before considering what feedback to collect, it is worth establishing what kinds of feedback information may already be routinely available.

Existing Feedback

Most university courses are evaluated on an annual basis, often through the use of student questionnaires, and a good starting point is to find out what information about classes the course monitoring will produce, with a view to supplementing rather than duplicating it. Since the main purpose of this kind of feedback is to gain an overall impression of the effectiveness of a course, it will probably not throw much light on particular teachers or classes, but it will always provide a framework within which to nest perceptions of each teacher's practice.

Also helpful to tutors and demonstrators are the informal impressions that accumulate during the process of running sessions. There are the unobtrusive indications given by students' attendance patterns, how well prepared they are, their willingness to get involved in the class and to contribute to the tasks in hand. There are also the chance discussions with academic staff, such as the course leader, a lecturer, or supervisor, and with other part-time colleagues on the same or another

course. Interlaced with these, and to some extent feeding on them, are one's own feelings and reflections about what has been happening.

Sometimes it is quite safe to rely on these informal impressions, but on other occasions they can turn out to be partial or premature. The result might of course be to give too rosy a view, but more commonly the effects are in the opposite direction because tutors and demonstrators – especially new recruits – are prone to self-criticism and quicker to pick up on the negatives than the positives. One difficult student, whose disaffection may be quite unrelated to the class, can therefore easily attract more attention than many well satisfied fellow students. A particular comment may be misinformed or unrepresentative, and, as tutors and demonstrators will experience if they take more than one group, classes have a dynamic and life of their own, with both their high points and their sticky patches occurring at moments that are not necessarily predictable.

Feedback Generated by a Tutor or Demonstrator

Since existing channels of feedback are seldom sufficient in themselves to meet most teachers' needs, it makes good sense to obtain some additional systematic feedback.

The ideal in evaluation is to use multiple sources and methods for collecting feedback and to do so several times, rather than taking the equivalent of a single snapshot, from a single vantage point on a single occasion. This maximises opportunities for what is usually called 'triangulation': bringing together findings drawn from different perspectives is more likely to reveal the consistencies amongst diverse reactions or pointers for action. In everyday practice, however, this ideal is difficult to achieve. It is a matter of devising a strategy that will serve well enough, balancing some degree of triangulation against the need for economy of effort.

The three main sources of feedback that part-time teachers can tap are themselves, their students and their academic colleagues. Each is equipped to comment better on some aspects than others. Tutors and demonstrators, for instance, can build up their own sense of areas of strength and weakness, since they are the insiders who know what they are aiming to achieve in their practicals and tutorials and how they are constrained by the resources and facilities available. Students, who will have been exposed to several teaching styles, have a vested interest in relaying their impressions and reactions, which may or may not coincide with the tutor's perceptions. And the watching brief that other teaching colleagues (and particularly mentors) keep on how part-time staff are faring will be informed by the depth of their own subject expertise and teaching experience.

FOCUSING THE FEEDBACK

In explicitly seeking feedback, university teachers can exercise a degree of control over which aspects of their teaching receive critical appraisal. As far as tutoring and demonstrating are concerned, the most valuable comments will generally be about those dimensions for which tutors or demonstrators have major responsibility and some discretion, together with those related to notions of what constitutes effective teaching.

Feedback on Tutorials

Generally speaking tutors have greater discretion than demonstrators over what is dealt with in tutorials and how it is tackled. A list of questions like those given below will therefore be helpful in reviewing possibilities and refining ideas about what feedback will be especially important.

- How well-integrated are the tutorials with other aspects of the course?
- How relevant are the topics addressed in tutorials?
- Is the mix of tutorial activities on offer sufficiently varied?
- Are students given adequate opportunities to participate?
- How appropriate is the amount of preparation required for tutorials?
- How well prepared is the tutor?
- How satisfactory is the tutor's knowledge of the subject-matter?
- How successful is the tutor in facilitating discussion?
- How well does the tutor succeed in stimulating students' interest in the tutorial topics?
- Is sufficient use made of handouts and other teaching aids?
- Are handouts and other teaching aids used effectively?
- How approachable is the tutor?
- Are students given regular feedback on their progress?

- How helpful is the feedback given to students on their written work?
- Overall, how satisfied are students with the tutorials?

If you are a tutor, which of these sorts of issues are likely to be particularly important for you? Are there any that are not applicable? What would you consider adding to the listing?

Feedback on Practicals

Giving careful thought to what kinds of feedback will be most helpful applies equally to practical and laboratory teaching. But since practical classes are usually carefully planned by more senior staff to ensure good integration with lectures, tutorials and course materials, the scope of questions is likely to be correspondingly narrower than for tutorials, e.g.:

- How realistic are the demands made in the practicals on students' grasp of subject-matter covered in the lectures?
- Are connections between practical work and theoretical background readily apparent?
- How satisfactory is the demonstrators' knowledge of the subject matter?
- What steps does the demonstrator take to ensure that practicals run smoothly (e.g. students adequately briefed, equipment and facilities in good working order, adequate time allocated for the activities set)?
- How approachable is the demonstrator?
- How successful is the demonstrator in responding to questions and queries promptly and effectively?
- How well does the demonstrator succeed in stimulating and sustaining students' interest in practical work?
- How effective is the demonstrator in marking practical or laboratory reports, and in giving students feedback on these?
- Overall, how satisfied are students with the conduct of practicals?

If you are a demonstrator, which of these sorts of issues are likely to be particularly important for you? Are there any that are not applicable? What would you consider adding to the listing?

Finally, advantageous though it is for tutors and demonstrators to clarify those issues on which they would most welcome feedback, students and academic colleagues ought to be given some opportunities to comment on the issues which they (rather than simply the tutor or demonstrator) see as most salient. A blend of well-targeted and more open-ended feedback is therefore highly desirable.

FEEDBACK METHODS

In the minds of many undergraduate students and their teachers, feedback is often very firmly linked to the use of questionnaires. In fact, there are many different methods that can be used, although each method is usually associated with a particular source of feedback, whether it be self, students or academic colleagues. *Figure 1* summarises the methods which are reviewed in this section of the chapter.

SOURCES AND METHODS OF FEEDBACK

Feedback from Self

- checklists and pro formas
- logs and diaries

Feedback from Academic Staff

- previewing and reviewing
- scrutiny of teaching materials

Feedback from Students

- structured group discussion
- simple forms of questionnaire

Figure 1

There are some deliberate omissions from this list. Neither direct observation (where a colleague is a sitter-in) nor indirect observation (using a video or audio recording) is considered appropriate to tutors' or demonstrators' needs, since both can be intrusive and disrupt the working atmosphere of a class that is running well.

Similarly, formal interviews have been excluded, since conducting and transcribing them would be too time-consuming in relation to the knowledge gained, some of which at least could be accessed by more economical means.

TUTORING:
A SELF EVALUATION CHECKLIST[1]

Record by means of a tick in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
get the tutorial underway (establish links, aims, etc.)			
sequence and progress the tutorial task(s)			
ask questions and prompt students			
involve all members of the tutorial group			
handle students' questions and comments			
respond to students as individuals			
keep the focus on the main topic(s)			
help sustain students' interest			
ensure that key points were drawn out			
bring things to a close and indicate preparation task(s)			

Figure 2

DEMONSTRATING:
A SELF EVALUATION CHECKLIST[1]

Record by means of a tick in the appropriate column the comments which come closest to your opinion.

How well did I ...?	well	satisfactorily	not very well
make sure that students had the necessary materials, instructions, equipment, etc.			
get the practical underway promptly			
try to ensure that all the set tasks or experiments were completed in the time available			
keep track of progress across the whole class			
handle students' questions and queries			
provide help when students encountered difficulties			
respond to students as individuals			
help sustain students' interest			
bring things to a close and indicate preparation task(s)			

Figure 3

Feedback from Self

One way of encouraging self-reflection in a productively focused way is to use a checklist such as the examples given in *figures 2* and *3,* which call for a self-rating of performance on a number of key dimensions. If the tutorial or practical concerned is likely to be repeated at some future date, tutors and demonstrators can usefully supplement the completed checklist with snippets of additional background information about what they did or did not do, together with any ideas on what to try next time around.

The pro formas in *figures 4* and *5* are more general but also explicitly forward-looking in their focus, and can be a useful spur to noting down thoughts generated at the time. Since teaching is fitted in alongside other commitments, it is not surprising that ideas and insights which strike tutors and demonstrators in the course of carrying out their teaching tend to fade unless captured whilst still relatively fresh and clear. Tutors and demonstrators can carry out similar logging functions in lots of different ways, including:

- keeping a regular teaching diary;
- maintaining a loose-leaf collection of reflections, jotted down as and when this seems worthwhile;
- embellishing preparation notes with 'Post-its', recording thoughts and ideas immediately after the class concerned.

None of these options need take up a lot of your time. The important thing is to be able to lay hands on the information when required.

Feedback from Academic Staff

Previewing and reviewing probably call for little explanation: they are techniques for engaging in dialogue, either before or after a tutorial or practical session, with someone who has an informed understanding of the course and its students. Previewing revolves around the question "How well is this likely to work?". The academic colleague's role is to assist you in anticipating and forestalling any problems which might arise in connection with your plans and ideas for a forthcoming class. In reviewing – sometimes called debriefing – you share with your colleague your impression of how the class has gone, whatever its peaks and troughs, and together you explore why as well as what happened in the course of the session, and how you might most benefit from the experience.

Openness, sensitivity, and a supportive attitude on the part of the colleague are the main requirements for previewing and reviewing to work well, and either can be done at any time. The same applies to the scrutiny of tutorial materials or laboratory worksheets, and is another useful feedback activity, whether associated with previewing or reviewing, or undertaken separately.

Needless to say, the existence of a mentoring relationship enlarges the scope for more sustained feedback from and interaction with an experienced academic colleague, and might well benefit from an established pattern of meetings for the regular review of progress.

How do you think previewing and reviewing could help you to strengthen your expertise as a teacher? At what points over the coming term or year would previewing or reviewing be most helpful?

NEXT TIME I GIVE THIS TUTORIAL/PRACTICAL

Topic: Date:

When I gave this tutorial/practical, what seemed to go well was ...

And what didn't seem to go as well as I'd wish was ...

The next time I give this tutorial/practical

I should omit ...

I should change ...

I should add ...

Figure 4

REFLECTIONS ON YOUR TEACHING[2]

As soon as possible after taking a tutorial or practical class, write a short account of what took place. Concentrate on what actually happened, rather than attempting to evaluate it:

Now try to categorise your observations using the following headings:

Planned things I did – before and during the session – which helped students learn.

Anything unplanned I did during the class which seemed to be helpful.

Anything – planned or unplanned – which may have hindered students' learning.

Figure 5

Feedback from Students

Since group discussion is the characteristic tutorial method, the case for tutors deploying the same approach to obtaining feedback from their tutees is a compelling one. But it is a useful approach for demonstrators too, since they also have the advantage of working regularly with a group of students they have come to know well.

As a feedback technique, group discussion has distinctive strengths: it gives opportunities for exploring issues in depth, weighing the significance of points raised and clarifying students' suggestions. If it is to work well, however, it needs a clear framework or structure which will both help to ensure that key issues are addressed and encourage everyone to make contributions of their own.

One possible starting point is to ask your students to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of their tutorials or practical classes, or to suggest what changes they think would be helpful. Another is to provide a working agenda (of the kind illustrated earlier), while at the same time encouraging the group to substitute or add other items as they see fit. It also helps if you appoint one of the students in the group to assist in recording the main discussion points, which can be checked over before a summary note of the findings is produced. Whilst group discussion does take up valuable time in eliciting views, this is counterbalanced by the effort saved in the painstaking analysis which other methods of feedback would necessitate, since students' views are recorded and collated as an integral part of the process. Should you feel that students are likely to be too inhibited by the lack of anonymity to voice their opinions – perhaps for fear of causing embarrassment or of being disadvantaged in some way – one feasible solution might be to involve a trusted third party in running the feedback session.

A refreshingly different way of getting pointers as to how classes are progressing is to give out 'Post-it' slips for students to label with three simple headings, as illustrated in *figure 6*. You then ask the students to write below each heading what they would like you to stop, start and continue doing in tutorials or practicals during the next part of the course. The 'Post-it' notes can be displayed immediately on a board, wall, or the back of a door, and after they have been collected up you can group similar comments together to identify the main themes.

Questionnaires are of course a third option, but a light touch is essential, for two reasons. First, questionnaires may look straightforward, but in reality designing and processing a good questionnaire calls for considerable effort and expertise. Second, feedback questionnaires are in such widespread use that some students are

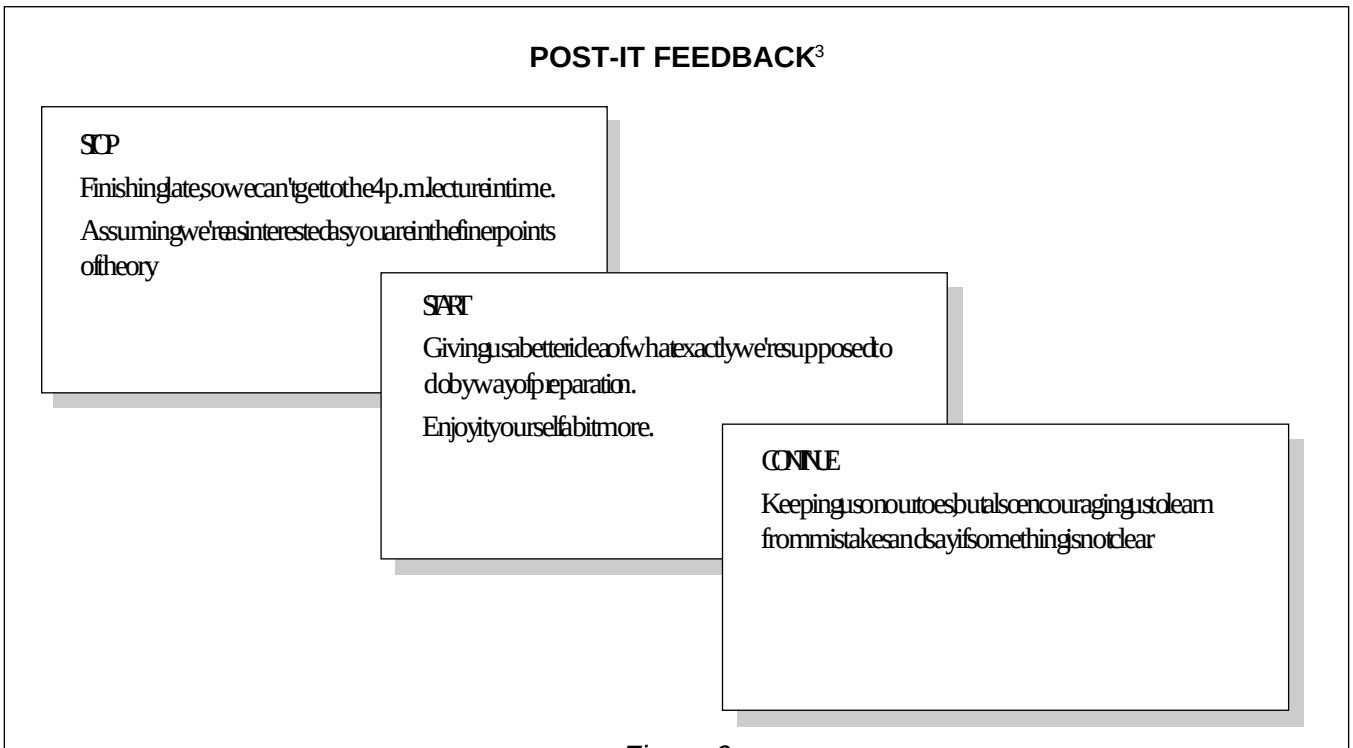

Figure 6

experiencing 'questionnaire-fatigue', and there is a growing reluctance to fill them in with careful thought or attention to detail.

One way of achieving a light touch is to use the one-minute questionnaire. This entails asking students to jot down their answers to one or two questions, which are handed in as they leave. The focus could be related to the substance of the tutorial or practical class:

- 'What is the most significant thing that you learned today?'
- 'What question is uppermost in your mind at the end of this tutorial / practical?'

or it might touch on what the group was like:

- 'How do you feel the class went today?'
- 'What would have made it better for you?'

While students would feel put on the spot if asked directly, their written responses are more likely to give insights into their experiences and what they are taking from them. A similar approach can also be used to get feedback at the end of a course or part-course, asking students to indicate, for example:

- 'Things you found most valuable, and why.'
- 'Things you found least valuable, and why.'
- 'Your ideas for improvements.'

If you feel that more than a light touch is merited

A TUTORIAL QUESTIONNAIRE[4]

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate your response to each of the following statements about the tutorials you attended as part of the course. Thank you very much.

	✓✓	✓	?	✗	✗✗
The tutorials					
• covered key areas and ideas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were well linked to lectures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were well planned and structured	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• encouraged students to prepare properly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were lively and stimulating	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The tutor					
• helped students to participate and contribute	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• was interested in students and their progress	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• acted as an effective group leader	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
As a student					
• I looked forward to the tutorials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• I enjoyed being in the tutorials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• I learned a lot from the tutorials	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please add below any comments about what would have made the tutorials better for you

✓✓ = strongly agree, ✓ = agree, **?** = unsure, ✗ = disagree, ✗✗ = strongly disagree

Figure 7

and will work with your students, you could consider adapting an off-the-shelf questionnaire of the kind shown in *figures 7* and *8*. Ready-made questionnaires rarely offer an exact match with a teacher's particular requirements, but can of course be modified to suit specific contexts. Your institution's staff development or training unit may well have a collection of feedback questionnaires for you to consult and see the varied range of what has already been developed.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Implicit in this discussion of feedback methods has been the notion that, apart from eliciting information from all three sources, most teachers will also welcome and benefit from feedback of two broad kinds: formative feedback (gathered as the classes are in progress and giving the opportunity to make adjustments or take a fresh approach) and summative feedback (collected as the tutorials or practicals come to an end and giving an overall view of their strengths and weaknesses). So the question of when to obtain feedback – en route or at the finish – cannot easily be viewed in simple either / or terms. At base, it is a matter of striking an appropriate balance between how much feedback would be helpful to you as a part-time teacher and what can be realistically handled in practice. Students and academic staff will certainly be encouraged to give feedback if they feel that it is informing practice, and indeed feedback loses its rationale unless this is the case. On the other hand, no one wants to feel overburdened with supplying or processing

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON PRACTICALS[4]

Please put a tick in the appropriate box to indicate your response to each of the following statements about the practicals you attended as part of the course. Thank you very much.

The practicals	✓✓	✓	?	✗	✗✗
• covered key areas and ideas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were well linked to lectures	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• helped relate theory to practice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were well planned and structured	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• were lively and stimulating	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The demonstrator					
• made clear what was expected of students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• helped students with any difficulties they encountered	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• was interested in students and their progress	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
As a student					
• I looked forward to the practicals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• I enjoyed being in the practicals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
• I learned a lot from the practicals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please add below any comments about what would have made the practicals better for you

✓✓ = strongly agree, ✓ = agree, **?** = unsure, ✗ = disagree, ✗✗ = strongly disagree

Figure 8

feedback, and in no sense should feedback be so intrusive that it gets in the way of the main business of teaching and learning.

Most of the methods described in this chapter, and their use with the relatively small numbers characteristic of tutorial groups or practical classes, mean that data analysis is not the substantial undertaking it can be with extensive questionnaires and very large classes. If some of the feedback is in the form of students' responses to questionnaire items, applying sophisticated statistical procedures is unlikely to be warranted. It is generally sufficient to construct a simple table giving the total number of responses for each item and their percentage equivalents, which rarely requires more than the assistance of a hand-held calculator. The open-ended comments generated by the other methods discussed also need to be analysed systematically. This entails organising comments into relevant categories (e.g. those relating to various aspects of the class content, the tutor's or demonstrator's management of the session, and the learning outcomes) and then, where necessary, identifying key themes which may cut across comment categories. The task is often as easily done manually (e.g. by xeroxing, cutting up and physically sorting the responses into sensible groupings), as on a computer. Whatever form the data takes, your main aim should be to produce an accurate summary of the findings, which can then be considered alongside whatever else has emerged, in arriving at a reasonably rounded and even-handed picture of the classes and the teaching.

The same principle applies in making sense of any item of data. No single piece of evidence should be taken too seriously by itself: more important are the *overall* indications of strengths and weaknesses, together with any pointers for making improvements. Nor should the feedback necessarily be taken too personally; for tutorials and practical classes cannot be isolated from the rest of a course, and the ability to bring about lively, productive sessions is affected by a web of internal and external factors outwith the control of individual tutors or demonstrators, including curriculum content, course structure, assessment practices, and resources. What will assist the further development of both the part-time teacher and the course is for tutors and demonstrators to discuss with other academic staff, and particularly other experienced members of the course team, what the feedback data might mean and what its practical implications are.

For all tutors and demonstrators, feedback can contribute to what they learn from their teaching experiences. But the other benefits it has will vary, depending on the aspirations of individuals and what the future holds for them. Those who continue to teach in the following year will be much better informed about what action to take in adjusting their teaching approach and building their expertise. Those who are moving on to employment, and not only those on an academic career path, will find it useful to be able to document their skills and achievements as teachers, whilst at the same time displaying the professionalism associated with treating feedback as part and parcel of effective teaching.

REFERENCES

1. Adapted from a self-evaluation checklist for use after a teaching session which has been much reproduced from Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S. and Habeshaw, T. (1988). *53 Interesting Ways to Appraise Your Teaching* . Bristol: Technical and Educational Services.

2. This is based very much on a checklist which appears in Gibbs, G. (1993). Observing Teaching. SCED Paper 79. Birmingham: Standing Conference on Educational Development.

3. This technique was devised by Phil Race and is very effective in use. See Race, P. and Brown, S. (1993). Getting feedback from your learners. *500 Tips For Tutors.* London: Kogan Page, pp. 66-68.

4. This questionnaire has in fact been specially constructed, drawing on practical experience and ideas from guides to evaluation, such as Ramsden, P. and Dodds, A. (1989). *Improving Teaching and Courses: A Guide to Evaluation*. 2nd edn. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. But it has its origins in a questionnaire for the evaluation of small group teaching produced by the Advisory Centre for University Education at the University of Adelaide. See Roe, E. and McDonald R. (1983). *Informed Professional Judgment: A Guide to Evaluation in Post-Secondary Education*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 180-182.