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Beyond Course Evaluations: YayNay Sheets

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Beyond Course Evaluations: Yay/Nay Sheets

By Jessica L. Clark

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Last year, I taught legal research and writing as an adjunct professor for the first time, and I eagerly and nervously anticipated my first set of course evaluations. Although my evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, they were not without criticism. Had I known about these critiques earlier, I might have been able to make some adjustments during the semester, rather than waiting until the spring to react to them. Also, in hindsight, knowing about the positive comments throughout the semester might have made me more confident in the classroom, and inspired me to try some different teaching techniques.

This year, I am in a full-time teaching position, and student feedback is even more important to me as I consider a teaching career. With teaching as my full-time job, I have more time to devote to class preparation and development of exercises and assignments for my students, but I also have more time to think about whether I am doing a good job. A good job, to me, means giving my students what they need to learn legal research and writing, or, being an effective teacher. One way I can measure my teaching effectiveness is, of course, by the standard end-of-semester course evaluations, but I decided to try something new this year to get feedback from students earlier in the semester—the Yay/Nay sheet.¹

Opportunities for student feedback happen in every class; at the end of each class period, students

can evaluate what just happened during the class.² Law teachers should take advantage of these opportunities for collecting student feedback to improve both the students' learning experience and the teacher's teaching experience.³ One way

¹ I can't take credit for the idea to use Yay/Nay sheets. The idea came from another teacher—my mom, Mary Wherry.

² Yay/Nay sheets are not the only way to get student feedback at the end of a class period. Gerald F. Hess wrote about several methods for teachers to get student feedback throughout the semester, including "the minute paper" and "teacher-designed feedback forms." Gerald F. Hess, *Student Involvement in Improving Law Teaching and Learning*, 67 UMKC L. Rev. 343, 346 (1998). Minute papers are designed to have the teacher ask a specific question about the class and to have the students anonymously write answers. *Id.* The teacher-designed feedback forms focus on asking students for input about their learning styles. *Id.* Unlike these two techniques, Yay/Nay sheets are unlimited in terms of what students can write as feedback.

³ Terri LeClercq also wrote about methods for getting student input, including the note card method, to improve teaching by responding to students' needs. Terri LeClercq, *Principle 4: Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback*, 49 J. Legal Educ. 418, 419 (1999). With this technique, students "write down the major concept of the class" and questions. *Id.* Teachers can then use this information in planning the next class to address problems, misunderstandings, or questions from the class. *Id.*

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to collect this student feedback is to use Yay/Nay sheets at the end of each class period, as I did this year. In this article, after describing the Yay/Nay sheet, and how I use it in class, I give some examples of the student feedback I received from the sheets, including some discussion of how I used that feedback. Then, I conclude with some observations about the benefits of using Yay/Nay sheets.

The Yay/Nay Sheet

The Yay/Nay sheet is a simple and effective tool for collecting student feedback. It is a half sheet of regular sized paper, with two columns, one column headed “Yay” and the other “Nay.”⁴ It looks like this:



In the first class of the semester, I introduce the Yay/Nay sheets. I explain that a Yay is something the students liked about the class, or something they would like to see or do again. A Nay is something they did not like, or something they wish we would have done in class. I ask the students to write at least one Yay, and at least one Nay on the half sheet of paper that I distribute at the end of class. There are no limits on what the students can write, and these sheets are anonymous.

To use this technique effectively, I dedicate the last three to five minutes of each class period for the Yay/Nay sheets; this way the students have class time to fill them out, which likely improves both the content and number of student responses. On the first day of class, I also explain the purpose of these feedback forms: for the students to help me improve their experience in the course. I then reinforce this purpose by responding to the

student feedback throughout the semester, for example, by altering class content to cover a topic more in-depth or revisit a topic, by discussing something in class to clarify or provide additional examples, or even by changing my teaching methods.

During the fall semester, my students submitted more than 200 Yay/Nay sheets with a variety of comments ranging from praise about the class content to criticism of the class meeting time. Throughout the semester, based on this student feedback and my reactions to it, I improved my teaching, and, ultimately, improved my students’ learning experiences. To illustrate the types of feedback I received, and how I used the feedback to improve my teaching, I have provided several examples of Yays and Nays.

Yays

In some ways, the Yays are the best part of the Yay/Nay sheets because they are both professionally and personally satisfying, as well as fun to read. Reading the Yays reinforces my decision to take this full-time teaching job; I took this job because I think I can be a great teacher. Reading positive feedback makes me feel good because I like knowing that my students think I am doing a good job. The Yays do more than make me feel good; they also let me know what students liked about class content, an exercise or assignment, and my presence in the classroom. The positive feedback encourages me to continue developing my teaching techniques, and it keeps me excited about and engaged in teaching my classes. Generally, the Yays fall into two categories: comments about my presence in the classroom and comments about class content, including information and presentation.

First, the Yays about me, or my presence in the classroom, are especially entertaining and satisfying. Students notice things like my enthusiasm for teaching (“I don’t know how you have so much energy in the morning!”), and my attempts at using humor with a classroom full of law students (“Even though you didn’t get a room of law students to crack up, I enjoyed the light-

“I ask the students to write at least one Yay, and at least one Nay on the half sheet of paper that I distribute at the end of class.”

⁴ I print two Yay/Nay sheets per piece of paper, and cut the paper in half before distributing the sheets.

“Admittedly, the Nays are not as fun to read as the Yays. ... Like the Yays, the Nays fall into two general categories: constructive comments about the class content and complaints.”

hearted banter.”). Comments like these make me laugh, but I also appreciate that at least some of my personality comes through in the classroom.⁵ In another Yay about my presence in the classroom, a student wrote: “Overall classroom demeanor. I appreciate your professionalism.” Comments like this make me feel good about the relationship I am establishing with my students because I get the sense that my students like and respect me as a teacher. That is comforting, and, I think, a sign that I am doing a good job.

Second, students often wrote Yays about the class content, ranging from the actual information I gave them to my method of presenting the material. For example, students wrote as Yays: “helpful reminders on organization,” “I thought it was very helpful to suggest keeping a journal and a written record of sources reviewed and their purpose,” and, simply, “good information.” Students often wrote about specific things I talked about in class and how they could use that information. For example, “I liked the practical tips. You’re right—they sound simple, but something like scheduling time to brainstorm could really help me get ‘unstuck.’” These comments were useful to me because I knew that students understood the material I presented, and even thought of practical uses for the information.

Comments about the methods I used to present the class material were also common Yays. For example, one student wrote, “I found the PowerPoint helpful as a means of following the discussion.” Another student commented, “Slides and lecture were clear and useful.” These Yays let me know I gave my students the information they needed, and presented it effectively.

Nays

Admittedly, the Nays are not as fun to read as the Yays. Even so, the Nays can be just as satisfying on a professional level, because I can use the constructive

comments to identify things I can do to improve my teaching. Like the Yays, the Nays fall into two general categories: constructive comments about the class content and complaints.

First, students often wrote constructive Nays, where they identified something they did not like and also offered a suggestion for improvement. For example, after one of the first classes of the semester, several students wrote Nays about the handouts used during an in-class exercise not being available prior to class (e.g., “It would have been useful for the [handout] to have been assigned and read before the class.”). The students did not need the handouts prior to class for the exercise to work, but I could understand the desire to prepare for class by reading the handouts in advance. I reacted to this feedback by making the handouts available in advance for the following classes, and by sending an e-mail to the students letting them know when I posted the materials. In following classes, there were Yays about the handouts and other course materials being available online before class (“making PowerPoint available online”).

Second, there were Nays that were simply complaints that I would not change simply because the students did not like them, and in some cases, complaints I could not do anything about. For example, one student wrote a Nay about having to do an assignment that required work outside the classroom (“difficult to find time to do reading and assignments for class, helpful if everything is covered within class time”). My response to this was nothing—well, a laugh, and then nothing. Another student wrote as a Nay: “[handouts] not handed out in class.” For this Nay, I considered making and distributing hard copies of the materials I assigned as reading for the next class, but decided against it because I was committed to using electronic documents only, both to cut down on paper usage, and also because I think most law students are comfortable reading electronic documents.⁶

⁵ When I attended the AALS Workshop for New Law Teachers in June 2007, several panelists advised be yourself and let your personality come through in the classroom. I also read Kent Syverud, *Taking Students Seriously: A Guide for New Law Teachers*, 43 J. Legal Educ. 247, 247 (1993) (“be yourself as a teacher”).

⁶ See Kristen E. Murray, *My E-Semester: New Uses for Technology in the Legal Research and Writing Classroom*, 15 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing 194, 195–96 (2007) (describing students’ comfort with electronic documents).

There were also Nays about the class meeting time, 8 a.m. Often, students wrote simply “8:00 a.m.” as a Nay, and “too early.” One student even apologized on behalf of the class: “Sorry we’re all so sleepy.” The class time was not something I could change, for a number of reasons, but I understood why the time was a Nay (it was a Nay for me, too!). My way of dealing with this Nay was to make the class meeting time less burdensome by providing the students with engaging material and effective presentation in every class. Still, when the only comment in the Nay column was about the class meeting time, I considered that a positive because there was nothing negative about what actually happened in the class.

Yay and Nay

There were also comments that appeared in the Nay column for some students and in the Yay column for others. In one class, I spent about five minutes discussing footnotes and attribution, providing a basic introduction to the different types and purposes of footnotes. The Yay/Nay sheets from that class included comments about this part of the class in both columns: as a Yay (“discussion of footnoting principles/citation was good review, even if just to hear it again”); and as a Nay (“footnotes discussion seemed unnecessary”). These comments that fall into both columns are not surprising, and they serve a useful purpose in reminding me that my students have different experiences and different needs. With that in mind, I think about teaching both to the students who want more on a particular topic or concept, as well as to the students who might be bored because they are already comfortable with that topic or concept. Sometimes, the result is that I post additional reading or teaching notes after class; that way students that want more can get more. I also try to come up with exercises that we can use in class to put the information in practice, instead of merely lecturing about it.

Benefits of Using Yay/Nay Sheets

There are several benefits to using Yay/Nay sheets to collect student feedback throughout the

semester, for both the teacher and the students.⁷ First, my students and I benefit from the relationship that develops from using the Yay/Nay sheets. Students do not regularly have the opportunity to give their professors feedback until the end of the semester, when it is too late for the professor to do anything in response for that class of students. Setting up open communication from the very beginning of a course can make a teacher more approachable to the students, and the teacher may feel more comfortable in the classroom, especially after doing something in class that was initiated because of student feedback. There is also a sense of respect that comes from using Yay/Nay sheets; I let my students know I respect their opinions enough to ask for them, and even respond to them, which fosters a mutually respectful relationship. This relationship also helps foster a good classroom dynamic because students likely feel more comfortable talking in class or volunteering their ideas when they are regularly asked to give their positive and negative opinions about things in class.

Students appreciate the opportunity to give feedback with the Yay/Nay sheets. In fact, several students wrote Yays about the Yay/Nay sheets. For example, one student wrote “I like that you are seeking feedback,” and another student wrote “I love Yay/Nay sheets. Yay indeed!” The Yay/Nay sheets give the students the sense that they can influence the course, and in fact they do. When I respond to the feedback they give me, they know that I actually care about their opinions (I do), and that I am willing to make changes to accommodate their ideas (I am). Also, giving feedback and experiencing my positive responses to this feedback give my students a sense of ownership about the course, which also contributes to the good relationship we have.

Second, the student feedback gives me a good sense of whether my lesson plans were effective in terms

⁷ See LeClercq, *supra* note 3, at 427 (discussing the benefits of asking for student feedback during the semester).

“Setting up open communication from the very beginning of a course can make a teacher more approachable to the students, and the teacher may feel more comfortable in the classroom. ...”

“The feedback about class content and teaching techniques is useful to me because I find out whether my lesson plan worked in the classroom.”

of content and execution. When I see positive comments about a class exercise or discussion, I am confident that my execution of the exercise or discussion was effective, and that the students appreciated that use of class time. For example, following a class discussion critiquing legal writing excerpts for which I assigned reading with discussion questions before class, almost every student included a Yay about the exercise (e.g., “I liked the assignment [with questions] before class. I think it made the class more productive.”).

Hearing from students about how a particular class compared to other classes is also useful because that information helps me think about the lesson plans for future classes. For example, one student wrote a Yay after the same class critiquing legal writing: “Best class yet. Use of the examples was very helpful. This should be done in every class.” This comment was of course enjoyable to read, but also useful to me as the teacher because I started thinking about ways to incorporate more legal writing examples into the course. Even though I could not re-create the specific class exercise for every class, I could add more examples and critiquing through peer review or in-class rewriting assignments.

The feedback about class content and teaching techniques is useful to me because I find out whether my lesson plan worked in the classroom. I can then continue to use that technique or that type of exercise in future classes with confidence that my students will benefit from it. I also like knowing that the students think I gave them something useful. As the teacher, I know that I have important lessons to teach my students, but reading Yays that use the same words I used in class that day, or show how a student can use what I taught, means that, to at least some students in my class, the lessons are getting through. Also, asking students for their reactions to the specific class immediately following the class has the benefit of more accurately capturing what happened in class that day. Unlike with course evaluations where students might overemphasize a minor incident or complaint, because that is what they remembered at

the end of the semester, using the Yay/Nay sheets at the end of class results in students focusing on that class period only. With the class focus, the students often give me specific feedback about class content and teaching techniques, instead of the more general comments I would receive in end of semester evaluations.

Third, the student feedback is a powerful motivator. I love how I feel after a great class—excited and motivated to continue improving my teaching and my classes. Reading the Yays that show the students also thought it was a great class is truly satisfying, and I can reread the Yays when I need a confidence boost! The Yays also force me to maintain a standard; once students have praised my teaching style, my attitude, or the class exercises or assignments, I do not want to let them down. The Nays inspire me to think about how I can improve my teaching and reach out to more students in the classroom.

During each class, I usually have a sense of how things are going. There are times when I think an exercise worked well, and times when I think my lecture points on a particular topic did not give the students the information I intended to give them, or perhaps just not as clearly as I planned. While I am standing in front of the classroom, I am aware of the classroom dynamic and think I have a good sense of when students are responding to the material. But, without Yay/Nay sheets, I am not sure if the students share my evaluation of the class. Reading the Yay/Nay sheets often reinforces my thoughts about the class, makes me confident about my teaching abilities, and helps me identify ways to improve.

Finally, and related to all of these benefits, using Yay/Nay sheets makes me a better teacher, and that is the ultimate benefit to the students. Before using Yay/Nay sheets, I waited until the end of the semester to get a sense of what the students thought of me as a teacher and of the course. I did not go into class each day thinking about what I would do that would wind up in the Yay column or the Nay column. Since I started using Yay/Nay sheets, I still do not go into class wondering what will end up in those columns. But I do go into each class confident that I have an

interesting, engaging, worthwhile class planned, and that I will reach my students to give them something they need.

I look forward to teaching my classes because I have a sense that I have established a good relationship with my students, even if I don't know them very well, based on their feedback throughout the semester. I am motivated to keep the Yay columns filled, and the Nay columns empty, but I also look forward to the Nays that I can do something about, which will lead to improvements that benefit the entire class. Using Yay/Nay sheets has increased my confidence in my teaching abilities, and that contributes to my overall job satisfaction, which no doubt, translates into the classroom. In the words of one of my students: "Yay indeed!"

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“I am motivated to keep the Yay columns filled, and the Nay columns empty, but I also look forward to the Nays that I can do something about. ... ”

Another Perspective

“When I think of teaching first-year law students to conduct effective legal research, I think of teaching a young child to ride a bike—a two-wheeler without training wheels. Few parents would expect their children to jump up onto a bicycle and ride off without a hitch. Rather they expect a few (if not many) tumbles and some tears and scraped knees.

In an attempt to make the process as pain-free as possible (both for their children and for themselves), most parents begin the riding lesson by holding onto the back of the seat to steady the bicycle while their children ‘ride.’ Feeling secure, the children are able to establish a kinesthetic understanding of bicycle riding that they would be unable to gain if all their effort was concentrated on attaining a balance that is far beyond their reach. With the hands of caring parents steadying them, they are able to work the pedals and steer a straight course down the sidewalk. They may even pick up enough speed to leave their parents a bit worn as they struggle to keep up—one hand firmly grasping the seat and holding it steady. But while the children certainly can propel the bike forward under their own power, they really have not yet learned to ‘ride’ the bike (despite their insistence that they have).

In order for each child to take the next step and truly learn to ride the bicycle, the parent must let go of the seat. This may result in the occasional crash at first, but Lance Armstrong would never have become a three-time champion of the Tour de France if years earlier his parents had not finally let go.

Conscientious parents, however, don't just let their children continually fall down, hoping that eventually something will ‘click’ and the child will ride off down the sidewalk. They coach and assist, provide the insights of experience, offer feedback (both as to specific technique and general approach), and act as a cheerleader throughout the process and when success is finally achieved.

There are many parallels between teaching a young child to ride a bicycle and teaching a law student how to conduct effective and efficient legal research. These parallels are rooted in learning theory. Learning, like riding a bicycle, is active. It takes effort and concentration, and it can be hard work.”

—Kristin B. Gerdy, *Teacher, Coach, Cheerleader, and Judge: Promoting Learning Through Learner-Centered Assessment*, 94 Law Libr. J. 59, 60 (2002).