Using Formative Feedback to Improve the Classroom Experience

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**Taiwo Ande,
Assistant Provost for
Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness**

INSTITUTION:
University of Mary Washington

NO. STUDENTS:
~4,000

LOCATION:
Fredericksburg, VA

CHALLENGE: The University had no official formative evaluation tool for instructors

bluepulse [2]
progress. together.

eXplorance

BENEFITS

- Reduces the number of surprises on end-of-semester course evaluations

- Use a social media-like app to improve the classroom experience

- Gives a voice to quieter students

- Increases student engagement

The University of Mary Washington (UMW) has always put the student experience front and center, and it shows. The Virginia-based university has above-average retention rates and high graduation rates, among other impressive statistics. UMW is considered one of the top colleges in Virginia.

Recently, the university implemented a new technology to add to those retention and classroom engagement initiatives: a student feedback system called Bluepulse, from eXplorance. Bluepulse is a formative evaluation tool that students can access anytime from their mobile devices. The app lets students send instant feedback to their instructors, similar to a tweet.

CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY

With Bluepulse, instructors can ask for student feedback in the form of quick poll questions or confidential open-ended responses. It's similar to an end-of-term report, but different in that it's much shorter, runs from the beginning of semester to the end, only the instructor sees student comments, and all responses are anonymous.

The social media-like design is very familiar to students. "Because Bluepulse feels like something students are used to, like social media, it makes it easier to get students to participate," said Taiwo Ande, Assistant Provost for Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness. "The fact that we could integrate Bluepulse into the learning management system was also a plus."

FEWER SURPRISES IN COURSE EVALUATIONS

UMW has been using the system for over a year, and is enjoying several benefits. Chief among them are the more substantive results from end-of-semester course evaluations.

"One of the biggest benefits of Bluepulse is having student feedback from the first to the last day of class," said Ande. "Bluepulse has definitely reduced the number of surprises we see at the end of semester on course evaluations. In courses where Bluepulse was used, end-of-semester course evaluations are now more substantive, as instructors are making changes to correct the smaller concerns earlier on. Students are now talking about the more important issues," he added.

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Students send feedback not just during class but also while studying, if they wish. For example, if a student is in the library reviewing a topic that's proving difficult, they can send that message over Bluepulse right then. "Instructors know when to slow down, when to speed up, which topics to review again. It's a win-win for both student and instructor," he said. "And it gives the quieter students an opportunity to lend their voices, without necessarily having to speak out in class."

Another benefit of the new technology is the increased level of engagement. "Having students feel like they have more influence over class direction is very, very meaningful." He said. "It makes them feel more engaged."

SELECTING THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

UMW initially deployed the tool for 17 course sections. They are currently planning deployment for at least 16 more sections. "Those who used it last year demonstrated the tool to their peers at the last faculty development meeting," he said. "We have a lot of people showing interest."

The Office of Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness carefully selected and trained the faculty members for deployment, as Bluepulse is not necessarily appropriate in all classroom environments.

"We started with faculty members who expressed interest," said Ande. "Faculty have to be ready to commit. If you ask students to provide feedback, but then don't make clear how you're using it to inform teaching, then the dialogue breaks down and the tool becomes meaningless."

PROVIDING RESEARCH DATA FOR FACULTY

All this recorded information gives instructors access to previously inaccessible research data, which they've been encouraged to use for their own scholarship. "One faculty member is including their experience with Bluepulse in a paper they're presenting in their field," he said. "This is real data that they can use for their own professional development in addition to their pedagogical improvement."

The Office has found there are several other situations where the tool proves useful. New instructors, for example, benefit from the immediate feedback. It can be used for new classes, curriculum development, and to explore the best teaching approaches. It can also be used to compare methods of teaching. One instructor used it to monitor progress for a course he was teaching, one online and one in-class.

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Dr. Ande himself used the tool for a course he taught. "Getting a handle on students' comfort levels with the subject matter before the class started was very helpful. I polled the students on how comfortable they were with statistics. This gave me a good understanding of the mix of the class, and I shared that information with them, so students could feel comforted knowing they weren't the only ones feeling apprehensive."

To assist faculty in managing the tool, the Office provided some important support resources, including creating question banks that instructors could pull from and adapt as needed, and collaborating with the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation on leveraging Bluepulse for pedagogical excellence.

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Dr. Ande doesn't recommend the tool be used in classes that contain fewer than ten students, where verbal feedback would be more appropriate. They also don't recommend any instructor use it for more than one class. "Used appropriately, it can be very powerful. But we don't want it to overwhelm our instructors."

USING MODERN TOOLS TO MAINTAIN OLD PRINCIPLES

Bluepulse has taken a very modern tool, such as social media, to reach students in a way they couldn't before. And all in order to improve the student classroom experience. "Bluepulse is an innovative tool," he concluded. "We can now influence the student experience right from the start, instead of waiting for the end of term. It's a true formative evaluation tool for our instructors that is making a difference in our classrooms."