Chapter 6

Looking after yourself

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

(Aristotle)

Success does not consist of never making mistakes, but in not making the same one a second time.

(George Bernard Shaw)

Sitting in, regularly, on colleagues’ sessions is one of the most productive ways to gain ideas to use in your own approaches. You’ll find things they do well which you would like to try, and (just as useful) you’ll notice things that they do less well which you will decide to avoid if at all possible.

(Phil Race – later in this chapter!)

Intended outcomes of this chapter

When you’ve dipped into the suggestions offered in this chapter, I hope you will feel able to take more control of some of the following aspects of your overall life in higher education:

* Managing your workload and stress levels;
* Getting the most out of appraisal;
* Making good use of your feedback from students.

While other chapters in this *Toolkit* have been directly or indirectly about looking after your students, most of this one is about ensuring that *you* survive! I am only too aware of the levels of stress that are experienced by many lecturers, due to all manner of causes, many of which are beyond their control, and I hope that the suggestions in this chapter will contain something for everyone, and help to reduce – or at least *manage –* some of the causes and effects of stress. The chapter continues with a discussion about appraisal – how to prepare for it, and how to approach getting the most from it. Finally, I’ve included a range of suggestions about how you may go about getting feedback from your students, and analyse it to your (and their) advantage.

Managing your workload

Heavier workloads have become a fact of life for most lecturers. Whenever I start a workshop with a post-it task asking lecturers to complete the starter-sentence: ‘Teaching would be much better if only I …’, up to half of the responses tend to be’...had more time’. However, this is not the best answer to the question. More time isn’t what turns a poor lecturer into a better one; it’s ‘doing better things’ that works, and not just ‘doing the same things better’. Nonetheless, lecturers feel under increasing pressure, and it seems highly unlikely that this situation will change. Managing your workload may increasingly seem like a balancing act between teaching, research and administration. I hope the following suggestions will help you to adjust your balance if necessary.

1. **Don’t waste energy on trying to turn the clock back!** What some people affectionately or wistfully refer to as ‘the good old days’ are very unlikely to return. One danger is that we spend so much time talking about how much better things once were, that we put even more pressure on the time and energy we have to face today and plan for tomorrow.
2. **Prioritise your own workload.** It is useful to go through all the tasks and roles that you undertake, asking yourself which are the *really* important ones, and which are the ones that would not have significant effects on your students if you were to prune them or abandon them.
3. **Don’t ask for permission to streamline your workload.** No-one is likely to respond ‘yes’. It’s better to ask for forgiveness if anyone notices things you haven’t done!
4. **Cut your assessment workload.** This does not mean reduce the quality of your assessment. It is widely recognised that over-assessment is bad for students, and in former times it was all too easy for such patterns of over-assessment to be established. Now may be the time to think again about how much assessment your students really need, and to improve the quality of this, but at the same time significantly reduce its volume. For example, set tightly word-constrained tasks (e.g. 200 words) instead of longer tasks such as essays. And set short exams rather than long ones – you can test students just as well in a well-designed short exam.
5. **Look for more efficient ways of giving feedback to your students.** Many colleagues find that emailed feedback communications end up saving a lot of time, particularly when you can develop your own bank of ‘frequently needed responses’ and paste them in as needed in individual emails, or better still on a course or module web page.
6. **Don’t play ‘email-tennis’.** Don’t reply individually to each email, and then to each reply to your reply and so on. Post your (well-considered) replies on a bulletin board, reply to the individual questioner along the lines ‘Good question. I’ve posted a reply on...’ giving the link, and direct all students to make good use of your responses.
7. **Make good use of learning resource materials.** Students nowadays learn a great deal more from online, and computer-based materials than once was the case. The quality of learning resource materials is improving all the time, and such materials are getting steadily better at giving students opportunities to learn-by-doing, and to learn from healthy trial and error. Materials are getting much better at providing students with feedback on their individual progress and performance. Making the most of such materials can free up valuable face-to-face time with students, so you can deal with their questions and problems in class time, rather than merely giving information to them.
8. **Make good use of your administrative and support staff.** It is easy for us to find ourselves doing tasks which they could have done just as well, and often they could have done them more efficiently than ourselves.
9. **Make better use of feedback from students.** Listen to their concerns, and focus on them, making your own work more useful to them at the same time. They know better than anyone else where their problems lie, so it is worth making sure that your valuable time is spent addressing the right problems.
10. **Keep your materials well organised.** It’s well worth the time spent to devote ten minutes after a particular class or lecture updating or improving the slides and activities you may have used on the basis of ‘what worked well’ and ‘what didn’t quite work’, so next time you come to the topic you’ll be starting from a better place.
11. **Don’t carry your entire workload in your mind.** We can only do one thing at a time, so when doing important work such as teaching and assessing students, don’t get side-tracked into worrying about the numerous other tasks jostling for your attention.

Managing your stress levels

The lecturer’s job can be extremely stressful as budget constraints and increasing class sizes cause staff to be put under increasing pressure to teach longer hours and in possibly unfamiliar ways, and to spend longer hours on assessment and record keeping as well as research. At the same time, students are becoming more diverse and have an ever widening range of requirements and expectations. A significant proportion of staff in higher education become physically ill as a result of stress. If you’re not working at your best because of stress, it becomes a vicious circle. There may indeed be very little you can do about many of the causes of stress, but you could be surprised at how much it is possible for us to adapt our responses to stressors. These tips cannot eliminate your stress, but may alert you to some strategies to help you deal with it.

1. **Don’t expect to be stressed, just because everyone else seems to be stressed.** It sometimes feels as if stress is infectious, but it doesn’t have to be! There are usually some people who manage to keep calm when everyone else is panicking, and you can be such a person.
2. **Get better at recognising the physical signs of stress.** These include raised heart rate, increased sweating, over-anxiety, short temper, manic outbursts, elevated blood pressure, headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, aching neck and shoulders, skin rashes, and lowered resistance to infection. When people are aware that such symptoms may be caused by stress, it helps them to look to their approaches to work to see if the causes of such symptoms may arise from stress. But don’t become a hypochondriac; don’t look at the list of symptoms above and tell yourself ‘I’ve an aching neck, so I must be stressed!’
3. **Get better at recognising the behavioural effects of stress.** These include increased anxiety, depression, irritability, increased consumption of tobacco or alcohol, sleep disturbance, lack of concentration, and inability to deal calmly and efficiently with everyday tasks and situations.
4. **Get better at helping those around you who are stressed.** It often makes a big difference when one knows one has helped someone feel better about things that are troubling them, and helps one put one’s own problems into a healthier perspective.
5. **Increase awareness of how the human body reacts to stress.** Essentially this happens in three distinct stages. ‘The alarm reaction stage’ causes defences to be set up and increased release of adrenalin. ‘The resistance stage’ is when the body will resist the stressor, or adapt to the stress conditions. ‘The exhaustion stage’ results when attempts by the body to adapt have failed, and the body succumbs to the effects of stress.
6. **Don’t ignore stress.** There are no prizes for struggling to the point of collapse; indeed, this is the last thing you should be doing. As the symptoms of stress become apparent to you, try to identify the causes of your stress and do something about how you handle them.
7. **Get over the myths surrounding stress.** Research has shown that stress should not be regarded as being the same as nervous tension, and is not always a negative response, and that some people do indeed survive well and thrive on stress. In an education organisation, it is more important to manage stress than to try to eliminate it.
8. **Look to the environmental causes of stress.** These include working or living under extremes of temperature, excessive noise, unsuitable lighting, poor ventilation or air quality, poorly laid out work areas, and even the presence of vibration. In a your own institution, finding out what other people think of such environmental conditions is a good first step towards adjusting them.
9. **Look to the social causes of stress.** These can include insufficient social contact at work, sexual harassment, racial discrimination, ageism, inappropriate management approaches, unhealthy levels of competition, and conflict between colleagues. Any or all of these, when present, can be addressed and clarified by asking people about their own experiences of similar problems, and talking things through with them.
10. **Look to the organisational causes of stress.** These can include inappropriately heavy workloads, ineffective communication, excessive supervision or inadequate supervision, excess of unnecessary bureaucracy, lack of relevant training provision, undue concern about promotion or reward systems, and unsatisfactory role perceptions. Once identified, all of these causes can be remedied.
11. **Cultivate the right to feel stress, and to talk about it.** Stress is at its worst when it is bottled up and unresolved. It should be regarded as perfectly natural for people’s stress levels to vary in the normal course of their work. When stress is something that can be discussed, it is much more likely that the causes will be addressed. Talk about your problems. Actually voicing what is stressing you to a colleague, a line manager, the person you are closest too or even your cat can sometimes improve the situation. As with learning itself, talking through something helps you to sort your head out about it. Bottling it all up through some misplaced sense of fortitude can be dangerous.
12. **Don’t be afraid to go to the doctor.** The worst excesses of stress can be helped by short-term medication and medical intervention of some kind. People are often unwilling to resort to a visit to their GP for matters of stress when they wouldn’t hesitate to seek help for a physical ailment, or counsel a friend so to do. Don’t let such feelings get in the way of finding the kind of support you need.
13. **Take a break.** Often our panics over time management are caused not so much by how much we have to do as whether we feel we have sufficient time to do it in. Try to take a real break from time to time, so as to help you get your workload into proportion. A little holiday or a whole weekend without college work occasionally can make you better able to cope with the onslaught on your return.
14. **When you take a well-deserved break, don’t waste it by feeling guilty.** A sensible amount of time off is an essential part of any busy person’s time-management and task-management strategy. It also means that when you return to the workload, you tackle it more speedily and efficiently, so the time off has not been at all lost.
15. **Overcome powerlessness with action.** When you are stressed out, it is often because you feel totally powerless in the situation. It can be useful to look at the areas you do have some control over and try to do something about them, however minor. This may not change the overall picture very much, but will often make you feel better.
16. **Try counselling.** Many colleges have someone to whom staff can turn for trained counselling in times of great stress. Otherwise you could look elsewhere through your GP or in the phone book under therapeutic practice or alternative medicine to find someone who can guide and support you through the worst patches. This is often more productive than piling all your stress onto your nearest and dearest who usually have problems of their own – perhaps *you* !
17. **Try not to personalise a situation into hatred and blame.** It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing all your stress as being caused by an individual or group of people who have it in for you. Of course it may be the case but usually high stress situations are caused by cock-up rather than conspiracy!
18. **Avoid compounding the problem.** If things are pretty stressful at work, try to avoid making important life changes at the same time, such as moving to a different house or starting a family, if these can be deferred for a while.
19. **Try to adopt a long-term perspective.** It can be really hard to project into the future and to review current stress as part of a much larger pattern, but if you can do it, it helps. Much of what seems really important now will pale into insignificance in a few weeks’, months’ or years’ time. Easier said than done, but stress is nothing new; ‘Let nothing scare you. All is fleeting...Let nothing trouble you’ wrote St Teresa of Avila, 1515-82.

Managing your appraisal

Most universities and colleges in the UK have in place appraisal programmes that link directly into the overall mission of the institution, the local plans of the school or department, the needs of each individual, and (far from least) the experience of students themselves. For people who have never been appraised, the process may seem intrusive and threatening. Yet many people look forward to appraisal as an opportunity to get some feedback on how they are doing, and indeed to showcase to significant others some of the evidence of success they have built up. Sadly, however, many people coming into universities, especially from commerce, local government or industry, may have somewhat negative experiences of appraisal, which in some contexts is used very much as a management tool to control staff.

How is appraisal organised?

Often the person chosen to appraise you will be your nearest line manager. Ideally it will be someone who knows your work and the context you work in, and also be in a position to make decisions and act on the agreements you make within the performance review process. In some universities, it is possible for you to choose your own appraiser; in others you are allocated an appraiser and it is then not normally possible for you to reject the institution’s choice. As far as possible, many institutions try to respect specific requests for you to be appraised by someone of the same gender or ethnic group as yourself, but this is not always feasible or seen to be desirable. Often there is a pre-appraisal meeting lasting ten to fifteen minutes in which appraiser and appraisee have the chance to set the agenda for the actual appraisal, which then allows time for the appraisee to think about the desired focus of the meeting and to prepare some pre-appraisal documentation.

**Pause for thought: setting the scene for your appraisal**

1. Find out who is likely to be your appraiser when the time comes.

2. Make some enquiries about the specific processes that you are likely to find in your own appraisal; jot down the main points as an aide-memoire.

3. Find out if appraisers and appraisees are expected to undertake training before they undertake an appraisal, and if so, what is involved in this training.

4. Talk to colleagues who have some experience of being appraised, and work out whether the process seems to happen uniformly in different parts of your institution, or whether there are significant differences from one department to another.

5. Ask a few colleagues what was the most useful thing they got out of their own appraisals, and note down your main conclusions.

What sorts of questions may you be asked?

Many institutions have a standard pro forma which can be used in preparing for appraisal. Questions could include:

* What areas of your work do you feel you can associate with a sense of achievement?
* What evidence can you supply to demonstrate your achievements (e.g. student evaluations, comments from peer observations, reports from external assessors)?
* What development activities proved particularly worthwhile, and how have you been able to build upon these in your own work?
* Which activities and goals that you had planned to undertake have fallen by the wayside?
* What are the particular reasons for these unfulfilled aims?
* What support have you received from your line manager and other colleagues during the period under review?

You are also likely to be asked to look forward to the next year and identify:

* your provisional goals for the next twelve months;
* your anticipated developmental needs over the coming period;
* any training or special support you are likely to require to enable you to fulfil your plans;
* what might interfere with your plans to achieve, and what strategies you can adopt to prevent this happening.

If no appraisal pro formas are supplied, it is still a good idea for the appraisee to prepare short notes under such headings to provide areas for discussion.

**Pause for thought: getting your act together for appraisal**

Rehearse answers to some of these questions:

* What areas of your work do you feel you can associate with a sense of achievement?
* What evidence can you supply to demonstrate your achievements (e.g. student evaluations, comments from peer observations, reports from external assessors)?
* Which activities and goals that you had planned to undertake have fallen by the wayside?
* What are the particular reasons for these unfulfilled aims?
* What support have you received from your line manager and other colleagues during the period under review?
* What additional support may have proved helpful?

Your appraisal interview

During your appraisal you should try to review as honestly as you can how well you feel you are doing and where you need to develop. You should not try to sweep your problems away under the carpet, nor should you be afraid to blow your own trumpet about the things of which you have a right to be proud. At the end of the interview, the appraiser should draw the process to a close by summarising briefly what has been said and then should guide you towards drawing up a set of realistic, specific and measurable goals for the next year, with timescales attached and recognition of the training, support and resources that are likely to be needed to help you to achieve them. If your appraiser does not do this for you, then you will need to make sure that you do it yourself anyway.

In many institutions it is normal for a report to be written on the appraisal meeting. Often, this is written by the appraisee and then signed with or without comments by the appraiser. After the appraisal interview, the appraisal report will then provide a useful reference document for the work of the year to come. There is also normally a system in place by which training needs identified during the process are fed into an institution-wide professional development programme.

Pause for thought: preparing your agenda for appraisal

Think through some of the following ‘starters’ as possible ingredients you might wish to use to steer your appraisal usefully.

* My personal goals for my teaching this year are:
* My other work-related goals are:
* The resources and support I will need to help me do this include:
* Training and staff development that could help me achieve my goals include:
* What could get in the way of achieving these goals is:
* I will know if I have achieved my goals when:
* The evidence I can use to demonstrate such achievements is likely to include:

General suggestions on preparing for your appraisal

Appraisal can be a strong positive power for the good when it is used developmentally to ensure that individuals and groups review their own achievements, build on achievements, set realistic goals for the future and think about how what they are doing fits into their whole institutional programme. The following tips aim to guide you away from allowing appraisal to become merely a tiresome formality, and towards it being an active and dynamic means of coordinating your work and getting the best from yourself and the institution

1. **Prepare thoughtfully for your review.** Try to ensure that you have a clear idea prior to the review, of the areas you aim to focus on. After all, it’s your appraisal and it’s up to you to get the most you can out of the occasion. If you skimp on the preparation, your appraiser may well take cues from you and also take the process less seriously than it deserves.
2. **Try to see both sides of the process.** If you’re preparing for review, think about how it feels to be in your appraiser’s position, so that you can help your appraiser to make the process positively developmental. See the appraiser as a guide and support for your process of self-review, rather than as an interrogator who is trying to catch you out.
3. **Collect evidence of achievement.** Bring to the review, or make a list of, concrete examples of outcomes that you have achieved, so that any successes or progress you claim can be backed up with examples. For example, you might bring along one or more of the following:

* student feedback data;
* printouts of your students’ achievements;
* examples of your effective organisational and administrative skills;
* copies of a few letters and memos from internal and external colleagues who have acknowledged your efforts.

You can also tell your reviewer about:

* examples of your dealing with problems;
* your contributions to strategic decisions;
* your promotion of the effective work and reputation of your department or institution.

You might like to collect these in a loose-leaf folder with material easily referenced so you can refer to specific elements within the appraisal without too much difficulty in finding them.

1. **Regard the review as an opportunity.** Make it an occasion where you can raise all the important issues you haven’t had time to discuss earlier. Have a mental shopping list of training you would like agreement that you can undertake, or aspects of your job description that you would like to develop further. You may be able to negotiate time or resources for professional training of various kinds. You might wish to gain approval for your participation in local or national activities relevant to your work. Remember that professional development need not involve high expenditure. Opportunities may exist for you to undertake personal development through work-shadowing, self-instruction and the use of online and print-based staff development resource materials without large outlays of cash.
2. **Talk to colleagues who’ve been through it all before.** Each appraisal scheme is different, and it’s helpful to tune in to the way your own scheme works in practice. Ask colleagues what was most helpful to them regarding preparation, and what they got out of the whole process. Also ask them for any things they would have tackled differently armed with hindsight.
3. **Review your own performance objectively.** Don’t over-claim success, or downgrade your own achievements. Try to analyse what has gone well, and why, as well as what has been less successful, and why. In your preparation, ask colleagues who are not involved in your appraisal to help you realistically evaluate how you are doing. Ask them to help you remember the good parts that might have slipped your memory as well as to give you dispassionate accounts of the perhaps traumatic occurrences that you regard as having gone badly.
4. **Don’t be artificially modest.** Without being boastful, you can use appraisal as an opportunity to celebrate the things of which you are proud. Often people are not fully aware of what individuals have done, and how much of a cooperative activity has in fact been the responsibility of one person. It is amazing how often an appraiser will say, ‘I never realised that you are involved in so many areas’.
5. **Be realistic about your part in areas that have not been successes.** There’s no need to shoulder all the blame for anything that went wrong, but the performance review is a chance to analyse how much responsibility you bear for the projects that have not succeeded, or for any deadlines that have been missed. This is the time for you to learn from the mistakes of the past and look forward to the next era. Avoid seeing your review as raking over old ground or digging up past errors and mistakes. Use it as a chance to reflect and to learn from what went wrong or did not work. Do not use this part of your review to criticise other colleagues or dwell on things over which you (or your manager) have little control (particularly a lack of resources).
6. **Write your own private reflective log after your appraisal.** Even if you have already produced a more formal report for your appraiser to sign off as part of the appraisal process, it can be helpful to have a more personal record of your own to refer back to. This can include how you felt when discussing your successes or failures, and notes to yourself about how you will go about following up your commitments arising from the review, and things to bear in mind to make the next occurrence of appraisal smoother.
7. **Remember that it is *your* review.** Don’t allow it to become a one-way process, with your reviewer doing most of the talking. Use it as a proactive opportunity to address your own working life. See your review as the most appropriate occasion to renegotiate (if necessary) your job description and make it more interesting or rewarding. If you regard the staff review process as a tokenistic activity in which your manager is simply going through the motions, then that is what it is likely to become.
8. **Use a part of your review to discuss institution-wide issues that concern you.** These might include equal opportunity matters, health and safety issues, particular problems often faced by students, or your concerns about teaching, learning and assessment. The review process often provides a rare chance for you to have the undivided attention of your line manager.
9. **Try to think of appraisal as a process and not an event.** Don’t regard the date of your appraisal interview as the be-all and end-all of appraisal. It may be quite a crucial date, but it is only a milestone on a continuing journey.
10. **Finish the review with an agreement as to what will happen next.** Normally this will involve a confidential written record of the review, together with an agreed action plan that includes deadlines and responsibilities for both you and your line manager. Make sure that you know who is doing what before the end of the meeting. Make notes in your diary so you can follow up agreed actions in due course. Contact your reviewer if you don’t feel an agreed activity has actually been set in train or had any outcome.
11. **Review the review process.** If you feel that you have been short-changed by your reviewer because you felt rushed, not listened to, or not taken seriously, say so and do not countersign the formal record of the review or action plan. If you are happy with the way things have been done, make this clear too so that your reviewer, in turn, can use your satisfaction as evidence in his or her own review.

Managing your feedback from students

The consumer’s view is being sought more and more, and with students increasingly paying for their tuition, the student voice needs to be taken into account more than ever. Evidence of student feedback is one of the things that anyone reviewing the quality of your teaching is certain to ask to see, especially when student satisfaction as measured in national surveys, such as the National Student Survey in the UK, is a significant ingredient in the formation of league tables about various aspects of the overall standing of an institution.

The most serious danger is that from the students’ point of view, giving feedback can become a chore. Then the act of giving feedback may not be taken seriously. The value of obtaining feedback is undermined whenever there is a feeling that the purpose is merely ‘to be seen to be obtaining feedback’. The purpose of feedback should not merely be to make things better next time round. Giving feedback can itself be turned into part of the learning experience – particularly when feedback is the result of group discussions. In this section, I would like to point to four questions we should be asking ourselves at each stage of feedback processes:

* Are students developing a feeling of ownership of the feedback they give? (Or is it just clicks on an online survey, or ticks and jottings on someone else’s questionnaire!)
* Are we getting the feedback we *need* from students? (Or are we only getting the answers to *our* questions, rather than the things that students need to be telling us?)
* Is giving feedback a learning experience in itself? (In other words, are students led into some deep and useful thinking about their studies, in the process of providing us with feedback?)
* How are we planning to give students the results of their feedback? (If they see that we’re not actually taking any notice of their feedback, they’re not likely to cooperate with our future attempts to procure feedback from them.)

Feedback on your lectures

There are many ways of getting feedback about the effectiveness of your lecture programme. Some are very simple, and require no special effort on your part.

Body language

You can find out a great deal about how your classes are going by keeping an eye on the ways your students are behaving. You can usually tell the difference between ‘eyes glazing over’ (or asleep!) and ‘eyes which are interested and alert’. However, you can’t *always* tell. Some students develop the art of appearing to be interested and alert when they’re actually neither! There are of course body language traits that can alert you to unproductive processes – shuffling, chattering, fidgeting, and so on.

Coursework

Often, it’s only when you assess the coursework associated with a particular topic that you fully discover how the students’ learning *really* went. This can give you the opportunity to use further large-group teaching occasions to address what you’ve found out about the general state of the group’s learning achievements. (It will be too late, of course, to do anything about discoveries about your students’ learning which will become all too apparent when you mark their exam scripts – but such feedback remains useful for next time round regarding teaching the same topics.)

Informal comments from particular students

Often, you’ll have opportunities to talk informally to some of the students – for example those who happen to come up and ask you questions, or those you meet in other contexts such as labs, studios or fieldwork. However, the feedback you get from these students may not be representative of the feelings of the whole group – the students who ask you questions may be the keenest ones, or the boldest. Any students experiencing real problems with the content of your sessions may not wish to give you any clue that they’re not yet ‘with you’ in their grasp of what is being learned.

Peer feedback

Until relatively recently, there used to be too much privacy attached to our performances with large groups in lecture rooms. Now, most institutions of higher education have some sort of policy on peer observation, sometimes quite informal, but still very useful. Sitting in, regularly, on colleagues’ sessions is one of the most productive ways to gain ideas to use in your own approaches to working with large groups. You’ll find things they do well which you would like to try, and (just as useful) you’ll notice things that they do less well which you will decide to avoid if at all possible. It is really useful if you can identify one or two colleagues where you can develop peer feedback into something really useful, where you mutually and regularly give each other honest and constructive comments about how the sessions are going. Many institutions now use peer-observation of teaching to help lecturers not only to develop their approaches, but also to prepare themselves for any external scrutiny of the quality of their teaching.

If you are heading towards any kind of inspection of the sort where someone from another institution may observe you at work with large groups, it can be very useful to rehearse the situation by getting one or two other lecturers – maybe from other disciplines – to observe you quite formally as preparation. This helps you to become accustomed to the presence of outsiders, and also to become more aware of the things that you do that are most effective and interesting.

Feedback from seeing yourself teach

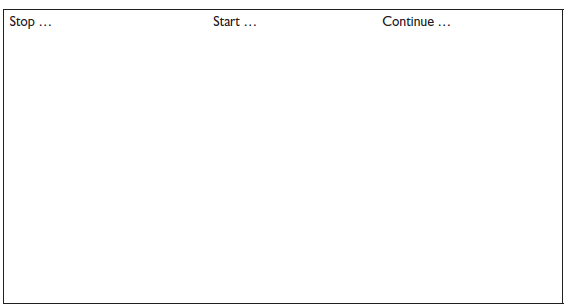
Making your own video is easier than you may think! You can choose the room, time, class, and position that you place the camera or mobile phone, and when you switch it on and off, and no one but you needs to see the video (though it is even more useful if you get a colleague or friend to watch it with you). It can be even better to get a colleague, or a student, to operate a camera, and follow you around and zoom in to show details of your expression or of the visual aids you may use. You can derive a substantial amount of feedback about your own performance just by watching yourself. You can even get a surprising amount of useful feedback just from making a sound recording of you in action.

Stop, start, continue

A quick and versatile method of gaining feedback – especially from large groups of students – is to give them post-it notes, and ask them to write the three headings ‘stop’, ‘start’, and ‘continue’ on them as shown in Figure 6.1.

You can then ask the class a question along any one of the following lines:

* under each heading, jot down what you’d like *me* to do in future sessions on this course … or …
* tell me what *you’d* like to stop doing, start doing, and continue doing as we go further in this course … or …
* simply write down anything you’d like to tell me under each of the three headings.



*Figure 6.1* Student feedback

A variety of feedback mechanisms

Feedback can be gathered from students in many different ways, including from:

* interviews with individual students;
* feedback activities with groups of students;
* solicited feedback from large groups of students (for example using the ‘stop, start, continue’ agenda on post-it notes in large-group lectures, as mentioned above);
* questionnaires online or on paper;
* using clickers in large-group sessions, to get quick responses about how a particular module is going, with students retaining the comfort of anonymity in their responses;
* student representation on programme boards;
* informally (for example through tutorials, seminars, one-to-one chats with students in lab work, studios, field work);
* students’ exam performance (but then it’s too late for some!);
* students’ coursework performance (and particularly from *their* reactions to our own feedback to them);
* information which may be forthcoming from external observers who may be able to discuss with students their experience of courses, e.g. moderators and examiners.

This chapter continues with some illustrations of the advantages and disadvantages of a number of approaches to eliciting feedback from students.

Some limitations of questionnaires

Because it’s easy to administer, the questionnaire has become the dominant method of seeking feedback. Unfortunately, it’s also easy to fall into the temptation to produce statistics based on questionnaire responses. If 84 per cent of students think Dr Smith’s lectures are brilliant, we’re inclined to ignore the 16 per cent who don’t – but they may have very good reasons for disliking the lectures. The problem is not so much with gathering feedback by questionnaire, but with the ways feedback is processed and collated. Some of the factors which limit the value of questionnaire feedback are listed below.

1. **The ‘ticky-box’ syndrome on paper-based questionnaires, and ‘clicking-on’ with online ones.** People become conditioned to make instant responses to questions. Getting through the questionnaire quickly becomes a virtue, and quite often the questions are not read properly. Responses are made on a surface level of thinking rather than as a result of reflection and critical thinking. (This is not a problem on those occasions where instant reaction is what is wanted, but the feedback we gather is not usually analysed on that basis.)
2. **Performing dogs syndrome.** Many people filling in questionnaires tend to want to please! They can usually tell which responses will please the people giving them the questionnaire, and the people whose work is involved in the issues covered by the questionnaire. If they like the people, they are likely to comment favourably on things, rather than use them to show their real views.
3. **The grudgers.** If one way or another you’ve upset some students, or bored them, or ignored them, when it comes to giving feedback they may tend to tick more of the ‘negative’ choices.
4. **Lost learning opportunities.** Questionnaires are often used after an event rather than during it. This tends to minimise any real learning outcomes of the process of completing questionnaires. The sense of ownership is reduced, when students don’t see how their responses will be of any direct benefit to themselves, and may only help their successors.
5. **The ‘WYSIWYG’ syndrome** (what you see is what you get). Questionnaires produce feedback on the particular issues covered – but often *not* on other important issues. There is a tendency to design questionnaires which will give positive feedback, and to avoid asking those questions where there is every possibility of critical replies.
6. **‘Blue, rosy and purple’ questionnaires.** A major limitation of most questionnaires is that responses are coloured by how people *feel* at the moment of filling them in. If the same questionnaire were used a few days later, some responses may be completely different. Yet the results are often statistically analysed as though they reflected permanent, considered reactions to questions and issues, rather than fleeting, transient reactions.
7. **‘Conditioned response’ questionnaires.** When the same questionnaire format is used repeatedly, students can become very bored, and may revert to answering many of the questions in the same way as they have often done previously. Feedback then is not specific to the particular occasion when the questionnaire is being used, and at best represents overall feelings rather than specific responses.
8. **‘Death by questionnaire’.** Especially when there is an ‘official’ survey (as with the NSS in the UK), many institutions try to sample in advance the tone of the feedback which will be produced, resulting in too many questionnaires issued too often. This is worse when the questionnaires are badly designed in the first place, and when nothing ever seems to happen as a result of the feedback that is given.

Some advantages of questionnaire feedback

Despite all the reservations presented above, there are some significant advantages associated with gathering student feedback through questionnaires. The best ways of using questionnaires therefore depend on using the advantages deliberately, while at the same time minimising the effect of the drawbacks.

* Feedback questionnaires can be anonymous: this allows students the chance at least of giving negative feedback without the embarrassment of giving it publicly.
* Feedback questionnaires can be quick, especially online: many things can be covered in a few minutes.
* Feedback from questionnaires is amenable to statistical analysis: this is an advantage – but as we’ve mentioned, a dangerous one!
* Feedback from questionnaires can be fed into institutional review and quality procedures. Most institutions have some such processes in operation, and an obvious ingredient is of course feedback from students.
* Questionnaires can be used on a ‘deeper’ level: it’s possible, for example, to get students to go through a questionnaire *twice.* The first time they can be briefed to respond as they feel, the second time they can be asked to respond as they would *like* to feel. This can help to get over the problem of different students preferring different things – the gap between ‘how it is’ and ‘how you’d like it to be’ is often more important – and more revealing – than students’ reactions just to ‘how it is’.

Some ideas on structured questions

Structured (or ‘closed’) questions are of several types including the following:

Ticking boxes or putting marks on scales

This is often done using ‘agreement measures’ and can be done with contrasting dimensions at opposite sides of a form, see Table 6.1.

One of the things which can go wrong with such scales is when the factors at each end turn out *not* to be opposites. Furthermore, if an odd number of columns is used (as in the example shown), the middle column represents ‘safe middle ground’, and can cause students to put their responses there when they can’t decide whether something is interesting or boring, and so on. It can be argued that it is better to force them to make a decision by having an even number of columns. Then, those students who *really* think that something is midway between the extremes have to make a conscious decision, for example to put their tick or cross on the central line.

‘Usefulness’ measures

Various features of the teaching methods or processes can be mentioned at the left-hand side of a pro forma, with boxes for ‘very useful’, ‘quite useful’ and ‘not useful’ to tick. The dimensions can include such things as: online resources, slides, worked examples done in class, for example, see Table 6.2.

*Table 6.1* Example of an ‘agreement measures’ questionnaire

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |  |
| Boring |  |  |  |  |  | Interesting |
| Too fast |  |  |  |  |  | Too slow |
| Audible |  |  |  |  |  | Inaudible |
| Slides easy to read |  |  |  |  |  | Slides hard to read |
| Aims made clear |  |  |  |  |  | Aims hard to work out |
| I learned a lot |  |  |  |  |  | I didn’t learn anything |
| My questions answered |  |  |  |  |  | My questions unanswered |
| Enjoyable |  |  |  |  |  | Not enjoyable |
| Well worth turning up for |  |  |  |  |  | Not worth turning up for |

*Table 6.2* Example of a usefulness measures questionnaire

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Feature | Very useful | Quite useful | Not useful |
| Online resources |  |  |  |
| Module web pages |  |  |  |
| Practice quizzes |  |  |  |
| Large-group sessions |  |  |  |
| Small-group sessions |  |  |  |
| Independent learning |  |  |  |
| Slides in lectures |  |  |  |
| In-class exercises |  |  |  |
| Peer assessment tasks |  |  |  |

*Table 6.3* Example of an agreement measures questionnaire

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Strongly agree* | *Quite agree* | *Disagree* | *Strongly disagree* |
| I find your lectures stimulate me to further work |  |  |  |  |
| I remain switched-off for most of my time in your lectures |  |  |  |  |
| I am clear about the intended learning outcomes of each part of this module |  |  |  |  |
| I don’t really know what is expected of me in this subject |  |  |  |  |
| I find it easy to ask questions in your lectures |  |  |  |  |
| I find parts of this subject very hard to understand |  |  |  |  |

Statements with ‘agreement’ measures

A series of statements can be checked against boxes such as ‘strongly agree’, ‘more-or-less agree’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’, for example. The statements can usefully be both positive and negative, to ensure that respondents don’t fall into the pattern of agreeing (or disagreeing) with everything they see. Part of such a questionnaire could be as shown in Table 6.3.

Number-gradings

This is another form of structuring students’ responses, by asking them to enter numbers to indicate their feelings with regard to a statement or an issue, e.g. 5 = most useful, 4 = very useful, 3 = quite useful, 2 = of limited use, 1 = of little use, 0 = of no use.

‘More’, ‘Just right’, ‘Less’ boxes

These could be used (for example) for students to record their feelings about the things they do in tutorials, for example see Table 6.4.

Table 6.4 Example of more, just right, and less

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Processes used in tutorials* | *More of this please* | *Just right, thanks!* | *Less of this please* |
| Practising problem solving |  |  |  |
| Seeing worked examples done |  |  |  |
| Working through case-study materials |  |  |  |
| Asking questions of the lecturer |  |  |  |
| Being asked questions by the lecturer |  |  |  |
| Having marked homework discussed individually |  |  |  |
| Having marked practical work returned and discussed |  |  |  |
| Seeing examples of assessment criteria |  |  |  |
| Using assessment criteria directly to mark own or others’ work |  |  |  |
| Practising addressing previous exam questions, then marking them |  |  |  |

Prioritising

This sort of structure helps overcome the ‘ticky-box’ syndrome, as it causes students to think more deeply about issues. For example, they can be asked to enter ‘1’ against the best feature of Dr Smith’s classes, ‘2’ against the next best, and so on. My recommendation regarding getting students to prioritise teaching attributes remains ‘keep it as simple as possible’. Questions and choices need to be clear and unambiguous. This method can also be used to find out which topics in a subject area students find the most difficult, for example see Table 6.5.

Some ideas for open questions

Open questions allow each student to respond freely to set areas. While such questions can overcome some of the limitations I have mentioned regarding structured questions, if the questionnaires are paper-based, the fact that students are entering their responses in their own handwriting can be a deterrent against them expressing negative or critical views, where they may feel that they could be traced and maybe even penalised as a result. Online questionnaires can be used anonymously – but then students may not think the results will be treated as seriously as if their names were on the questionnaire. See Table 6.6.

*Table 6.5* Example of a prioritising questionnaire

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Physical chemistry: rank the topics below from ‘1’ (the one you find most straightforward) to ‘8’ (the one you find most difficult)* | *Your ratings* |
| Electrochemistry |  |
| Chemical kinetics |  |
| Thermodynamics |  |
| Phase equilibria |  |
| Colloid chemistry |  |
| Spectroscopy |  |
| Photochemistry |  |
| Mass transfer |  |

|  |
| --- |
| *Table 6.6* Example open questions |
| Two things I like best about your classes: |
| 1  2 |
| Two things I like least about your classes:  1 |
| 1  2 |
| This module would be better for me if you could: |
| The three topics I found most difficult to make sense of in this module are:  1 |
| 1  2  3 |

Computer-analysed feedback

Many software packages exist which allow student feedback to be gathered, and statistically analysed. Students can be asked a series of multiple-choice (pick *one* of these...) or multiple-response (pick *one or more* of these...) questions, and their choices of entry can be recorded by the computer, enabling statistical analysis to be done on the responses from large groups of students. The feedback can be made anonymous, or students’ names can be used. It is probably best to use such feedback approaches where a record is kept of which students have given their feedback, but the individual responses are analysed on an anonymous basis. Students are more likely to give feedback using such software, particularly if the process of gathering the feedback can be made more interesting for the students giving it, for example by providing on-screen responses back to students on the basis of some of the choices they make, for example ‘sorry you didn’t like this’, ‘glad this worked for you’, ‘thanks, we’ll bear this in mind in future’ and so on.

Computer-gathered feedback is not restricted to multiple-choice questions. Open-ended questions can also be included, and the software can sort and print out lists of the responses of a whole class of students to any particular question. Open-ended feedback of this sort, when gathered by computer, may be more reliable than when given in handwriting, as students may feel less under threat regarding their views being noticed and used against them!

Suggestions on ways of using questionnaires

I’ve been quite critical about some of the most common methods used to seek and analyse student feedback, and have referred to many of the things which can go wrong with such methods. Next, however, I offer a range of suggestions for developing some of these methods further, taking into account the risks, and aiming to optimise the potential benefits, both to ourselves and to our students.

1. **Consider making the use of questionnaires private to individual members of staff.** For feedback about lectures (or tutorials, or lab work) I think it best that each lecturer designs and uses his/her individual questionnaire, and obtains feedback for his/her own use privately. This doesn’t mean, however, that the forms are to be filled in ‘privately’ by students – it may well be better to use them as an agenda for group feedback.
2. **Make questionnaires ‘short and often, not long and once’.** Any feedback form should be short enough not to bore or alienate students. A good guide may be that it should be possible for a group to complete the form in a few minutes or so. This means separate forms for lectures, tutorials, and so on.
3. **Use questionnaires for formative rather than summative feedback whenever possible.** Seek feedback during a programme, so that something can still be done about matters emerging. Feedback after completion of a programme is still useful, but is not seen by students as so valuable as when they have the chance to suggest changes they themselves will benefit from directly.
4. **Employ questionnaires for a wide range of matters to do with presentation, style and approachability.** These aspects of, for example, lecturing, can be gathered in the private mode suggested above. Individual questionnaire components can be selected/ composed by each staff member to search for comment about issues that may be of particular concern to the lecturer concerned.
5. **Consider ‘more public’ questionnaires for general issues, and for summative feedback.** These can be used to measure feedback relating to non-personal variables, such as:

* relative workload of different topics or modules;
* perceived relevance of topics as seen by students;
* relevance of practical work to theory, as seen by students;
* balance of lectures, tutorials and other teaching/learning contexts.

This ‘more public’ sort of questionnaire is more likely to have value when used towards the end of a course or module, and to gather summative feedback, which can be used in reviewing the course or module prior to the next time it will be delivered.

1. **Structured questionnaires can have the advantage of anonymity.** Even if using a mixed questionnaire containing open-ended questions as well, you may decide to issue the structured and open-ended parts separately because of this factor.
2. **Try to avoid surface thinking.** Students -and anyone else involved – get bored if they have long questionnaires to complete, and the decisions or comments they make become ‘surface’ rather than considered ones. Even though students may be able to respond to a structured questionnaire of several pages in relatively few minutes, the fact that a questionnaire *looks* long can induce surface response behaviour.
3. **Consider the visual appearance of your questionnaires.** Go for a varied layout, with plenty of white space, so that it does not look like a solid list of questions. Use a mixture of response formats, such as deletions or selections from lists of options, yes/no choices, tick-boxes, graduated scales, and so on – make it *look* interesting to complete.
4. **For every part of the questionnaire, have definite purposes, including positive ones.** Don’t ask anything that could prove to be superfluous or of passing interest only. Ask about positive experiences as well as searching for weaknesses.
5. **Plan your evaluation report before you design your feedback questionnaire.** It helps a great deal if you know exactly how you plan to collate and use the responses you will get from your questionnaires. Working out the things you hope to include in your report often alerts you to additional questions you may need to include, and (particularly) to superfluous questions which would not actually generate any information of practical use to you.
6. **Make each question simple and unambiguous.** If students’ interpretations of the questions vary, the results of a survey are not valid enough to warrant statistical analysis of any sort. In particular, it’s worth ensuring that in structured questions, students are only required to make decisions involving a single factor.
7. **Ask yourself ‘what does this question really mean?’** Sometimes, your reply to yourself will contain wording which will work better in your questionnaire than the original idea you started with.
8. **Avoid safe middle ground in scales.** For example, the scale ‘strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree’ may give better results if the ‘undecided’ option is omitted, forcing respondents to make a decision one way or the other (or to *write* ‘can’t tell’ on the questionnaire, which then has the validity of a conscious decision).
9. **Be aware that some respondents will make choices on the basis of those they think they are expected to make.** Many respondents set out to ‘please’ the person gathering the feedback, possibly thinking of possible recriminations if critical selections may be traced back to their authors.
10. **Keep prioritising questions short and simple.** For example if students are asked to rank seven factors in order of value (or importance), it may be easy enough to analyse the best and worst choices, but difficult to make a meaningful analysis of ‘middle ground’.
11. **Pilot your draft questionnaire.** There is no better way to improve a structured questionnaire than to find out what students actually do with it! Use short print runs for any paper-based questionnaires, and trial online ones with small groups first, and edit as you find out more about what gives useful feedback and what doesn’t.
12. **Remember that students’ responses can be influenced by their mood at the moment of answering the question.** Ideally, you may wish to balance out this source of variation in one way or another, for example by issuing a similar questionnaire at another time, and comparing responses, or by including some alternative questions in other parts of your questionnaire which ‘test’ the same agenda so you can be alerted to inconsistency in responses due to swings of mood.
13. **Don’t leave big spaces in paper-based questionnaires for students to fill in their replies.** You can compensate for this restriction later with ‘any other comments?’ space. If students’ responses are necessarily short, you are more likely to get easily interpreted answers to your questions, which helps make statistical analysis more fruitful. Similarly in online questionnaires, it’s best not to have fixed box-sizes on-screen, but to allow the box to expand where students feel like being more expansive than expected in their replies.
14. **Decide whether you want the questionnaire to be anonymous, optional or respondent-known.** With responses involving handwriting, there is always the possibility of tracing respondents, and students may respond differently with this possibility in mind. With computer-based open-ended questionnaires, this dimension is simplified, but not entirely overcome if log-in data could be used to trace respondents.
15. **Resist pressures to over-use standard questionnaires.** This applies equally to structured or open-ended versions or mixed-mode questionnaires. Students quickly get bored with identical questionnaires, and are likely to fall into a standard mode of response, where there is considerable ‘echo effect’ carried forward from previous decisions and responses. The most useful feedback data is normally generated by specially produced questionnaires relating to a specific course or subject, or a particular aspect of the teaching and learning in that subject.
16. **Try to get a good response rate.** When questionnaires are filled in during contact time, you are more likely to get everyone’s views. If questionnaires are taken away by students to be sent back later, there is a tendency to get lower response rates, and the students who actually go to the trouble of responding may not be representative of the whole group. With online questionnaires, some institutions offer random ‘prizes’ for a few of those completing them.
17. **Give students some free-ranging questions.** For example, it’s worth considering asking them, ‘What other questions should be included in future editions of this questionnaire?’ and inviting them to supply their own answers to the questions they think of. Such data is unsuitable for any statistical purposes, but is valuable in qualitative analysis of feedback from students.
18. **Work out how you are going to analyse the data from open-ended questions.** Sometimes a transcript collecting all responses to a question is necessary before the gist of the feedback can be discerned accurately. In other circumstances, counting the number of times something is mentioned in students’ responses can be a valuable process.
19. **Don’t accumulate piles of uninterpreted questionnaire data!** It’s best to make a deliberate effort to produce a summary report (even if only for your own private use) for each set of data. A pile (or online file) of feedback responses quickly becomes out of date as new developments are implemented in courses. Also, it is worth showing students that you take the data seriously enough to analyse it straightaway.

Feedback from interviews with students

Interviews with students can be a valuable source of feedback. However, interviewing students is costly in terms of time and effort; the following suggestions may help you to make it a cost-effective process.

1. **Prepare your agenda carefully.** To enable you to analyse and collate the feedback you get from students, it is important that they are all asked the same questions in the same way. It is all too tempting to develop the agenda on the basis of the replies of the first few students, so it is usually worth piloting your question list on a few students (not necessarily from the group to be targeted) before starting on a set of ‘real’ interviews.
2. **Link interviews with other means of getting feedback from students.** If you are already using (or planning to use) structured or open-ended questionnaires, you may find it worthwhile to work out what *else* you will be particularly looking for in feedback from interviews.
3. **Consider the merits of using interviews to follow-up questionnaire feedback.** When you have already analysed questionnaire responses by students, you may be able to pinpoint a few issues where you want to ask students more detailed or more personal questions about their experiences with a subject or a course.
4. **Consider the alternative possibility of using preliminary interviews to establish the agenda for feedback questionnaires.** This would probably not take the form of interviews with the whole group, but with a representative selection of students.
5. **You may not be able to interview the whole group.** Decide how you are going to select the students you choose to interview. There are many possibilities, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. For example, you could select randomly by name or student number, or you could make a representative selection including high-performers, middle-range-performers and low-achievers in related assessments, or you could ask for volunteers (not, however, the most representative of the possibilities).
6. **Remember that some students may be quite anxious.** Any kind of interview may feel to students as if there is an assessment dimension present, and this may cause them to be restrained especially when it comes to expressing dissatisfaction.
7. **Ask questions which lead students to answer rather than to refrain from comment.** For example, asking students ‘was there anything you found unsatisfactory?’ may be less fruitful than asking ‘what was the thing you liked least about the way this module was taught?’
8. **Don’t lead your witnesses!** It is one thing to ensure that students feel free to answer questions, but another to lead them towards the answers you want, or the answers they may think you want. ‘Do you like the way I used lots of graphics on my slides?’ is an obvious example of a leading question!

Feedback from groups of students

Students may be more forthcoming in a group, and you could consider posing the questions (maybe as a handout), leaving the group to come to decisions about how the students wished to answer them, then return to hear their answers. Students have the safety of being able to report minority views or controversial views, without the student who actually speaks such responses having to ‘own’ the view reported. Group interviews can actually save a considerable amount of time compared with solo interviews, and allow students to compare and contrast their own perspectives. Students in groups can also be helped to prioritise or sequence in order of importance their responses, making their feedback even more valuable. Group interviews can also be used to get students to clarify or explain issues or responses which at first may be unclear.

This can be more useful than feedback from individuals, for the following reasons:

* Feedback from groups captures discussion, reflection and debate. This is more useful than only having the reactions of individual students.
* A group can present negative feedback with less embarrassment than an individual. Individuals can be more forthcoming in making inputs in a group, when their feedback is then rendered more or less anonymous within the group.
* Group feedback is likely to range more widely. Where a questionnaire is used as an agenda for group feedback, the group is more likely to be willing to go beyond the agenda.

It’s essential to make good notes when interviewing groups of students! After four or five interviews, you may have a good idea of the general nature of responses to your questions, but you could have lost a lot of the specific detail. More recent interview happenings tend to ‘drown’ earlier ones in one’s memory.

Conclusions

The aspects of ‘looking after yourself’ discussed in this chapter are not, of course, the end of the story. A further important topic is reflecting on your teaching – in some ways this is the most personal and powerful way of looking after yourself, and there’s a lot about this in the final chapter in this *Toolkit.*

However, there are many other people who can help you to look after yourself. You may be lucky enough to have a great mentor – or you may be able to find one for yourself. It’s really useful to have someone to turn to on those days where challenges seem just too challenging – and indeed on those occasions when you’re so pleased with something you’ve done you’re just burning to tell someone who will also be pleased. More widely, don’t be so busy that you lose touch with friends. Sometimes talking about things entirely unrelated to your job can be very restoring. In fact – just keep *talking.* Like learning in general, putting things into spoken words helps us to get our heads around things. Even when things are difficult, ‘telling the tale’ to different people often both gets it out of your system, and reduces the significance of a problem. When talking, however, don’t forget to *listen* to replies and advice. You may not want to take particular advice, but it’s good to have people offering it, as you can then select. If you cut people off while giving advice, they won’t keep giving it.

And keep *writing* as well. Make notes to yourself, keep a reflective log or diary, if this helps you pin down problems and challenges. Sometimes it’s just a relief to have ‘put it on the wall’ (not publicly) in your own words somewhere. Make some of your writing much more public – there’s nothing so good for helping us consolidate our thinking about teaching than to turn some of the better bits of our work into publications, to share what we’ve learned more widely. There’s more about this in the next chapter too. At the end of the day, though, the very best person to look after yourself can only be you.