

Enhancing Student Engagement, Sentiment, and Teaching Evaluations with Packback

One of the realities of teaching in higher education is that student evaluations are core to the tenure and promotion process, at least when it comes to assessment of teaching practice and course quality. It's often a review committee's only direct window into how your students perceive you, your quality as an instructor, and the efficacy of the courses you've created and executed. We know a few other things about them, too — good, bad, or ugly.

- ❖ They can provide a quick quantitative look at factors of good teaching, as well as give the opportunity to narratively qualify such ratings.
- ❖ It's difficult to get students to complete them and when they do, contextual, narrative feedback is often skipped. And much like Yelp, Google, or your favorite restaurant, students who have a poor experience are the ones more likely to complete the evaluation.
- ❖ They are easily biased by context, student grade, and uncontrollable factors like your gender identity/expression, race, and physical appearance.

On its face, this can make course evaluations a bit of a terrifying proposition. It's no secret it's often the strongest reactions that move students to respond to the course evaluation surveys. As such, it can give a skewed view of overall student interactions, perceptions, and outcomes directly related to your course construction and teaching.

That may be the very thing that can make them so exciting. Imagine if we could actually get all students to fill out these evaluations. Would we have to throw out all outliers, overly positive or negative? Perhaps. But imagine what a genuine and earnest student assessment of your course, its content, and your delivery could unlock for you and your growth. Imagine having a productive, open, and honest conversation with your chair and evaluation committee regarding where you are in your journey as an educator. What if the outcome is utilizing this feedback constructively; not for punitive measures, but as a method of self-reflection, mentoring, and developing stronger pedagogical practices?

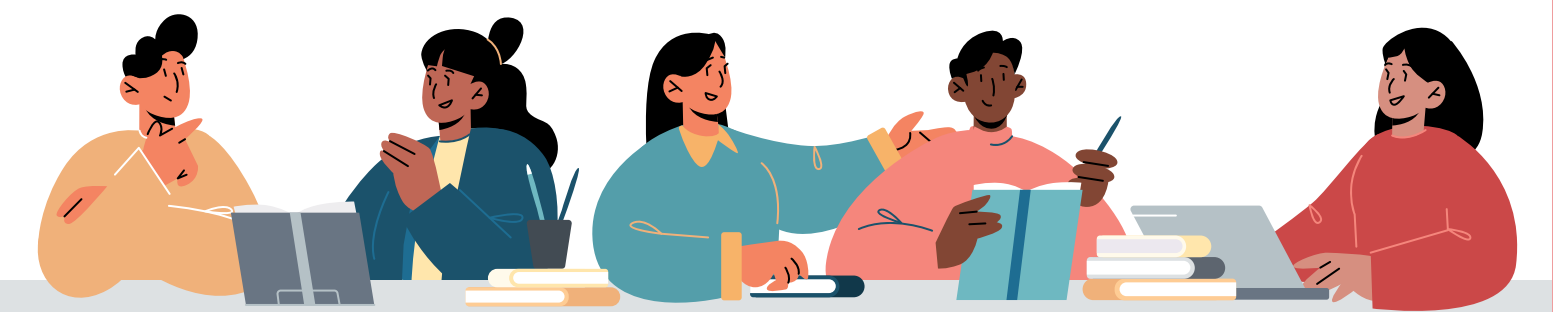


In my career as an educator, and particularly as a professor in higher education, I never received more responses on these surveys than when I was incorporating Packback into my courses. This improvement wasn't due to Packback being a magical wonder-tool, but rather because a core tenet of courses using Packback is fostering student ownership and investment in the course direction, as facilitated by professor collaboration. Students are supplying the content and ideas engaging in discussion with their own application and understanding of the course content prepared and delivered by the instructor. The professor, in turn, features quality student work and highlights it as the type of thinking needed by future practitioners in the field. The process is necessarily recursive.

Fostering an environment of continuous improvement requires such reflexive teaching practices where instructors critically examine their methods, materials, and the feedback provided by students. Incorporating AI-enabled platforms like Packback can be transformative in this process. Due to its immediate nature, you don't have to wait for finals week to engage in the review process, nor until next semester to implement adjustments. Packback facilitates engaging class discussions, allowing students to ask open-ended questions, provide peer feedback, and interact with course content more deeply. This increased engagement prompts students to think critically and take ownership of their learning and communicate with you continuously throughout the semester.

The following set of case studies will give you a glimpse into the transformative impact Packback can have on student evaluations, showcasing how increased engagement and continuous feedback contribute to a more accurate and constructive assessment of teaching practices.

Throughout each case study, we will highlight the unique ways each professor is using Packback to provide you with guidance and a library of suggestions and ideas to facilitate extraordinary student experiences and showcase the malleability of Packback in a variety of courses. Additionally, we'll carefully and specifically document the recommended faculty actions so you can foster that same welcoming environment and unlock those same wonderful Packback results.





John Knox
Weather and Geology Professor
University of Georgia

Quantitative Results:

80%

of students reported they discovered new, applied concepts through John's usage of Packback

76%

of students reported engaging more with the course material as a result of using Packback

88%

of students approved of John's teaching practices due to his implementation of Packback

91%

of students were happy with Packback's quality and performance

Finding the Higher Education Holy Grail: Intrinsically Motivated, Engaged, and Curious Students in Large Lecture Courses

Introduction

John Knox, a dedicated professor at the University of Georgia, has been teaching large courses — upwards of 300 students — each fall, including Introduction to Weather & Climate and Physical Geography. With a passion for fostering deeper understanding and engagement among his students, John has continually sought innovative methods to enhance the learning experience in his classes. Over the years, he has experimented with various teaching techniques, wanting to find a way to truly empower his students to be intrinsically motivated and curious. His desire was to see students ask or answer questions without being prompted, connect the course material back to their everyday lives, and even go out of their way to research new topics, driven by their own fearless curiosity.

The Problem:

Like many teachers in today's post-COVID classroom, John had trouble finding ways for students to meaningfully interact with the course material, and more importantly, each other. One avenue he explored in his Introduction to Weather & Climate course was to implement a weekly written assignment where students were required to fill out a weather diary. However, as it happens with many weekly assignments, student participation waned with each week. The assignments that were submitted had become perfunctory — entries that were once colorful, personable, and fun to read became dull and tedious to review. Of course, that dynamic was captured on John's end of course evaluations.

In an attempt to address this, John shifted to an approach where instead of writing a weekly weather journal, he asked students to come to class prepared with discussion





topics and questions based on that week's weather patterns. While this method showed promise initially, the widespread use of smartphones made it too easy for students to simply google answers, bypassing the critical thinking and discussion he intended to promote.

John needed a solution that would leverage technology in a way that students found engaging and interactive. He sought a platform that would not only encourage deeper thinking but also facilitate collaboration and discussion *without* increasing his grading workload.

The Solution:



John first heard about Packback in 2018 and immediately saw its potential. What stood out to him was Packback's ability to foster student engagement through thought-provoking questions and peer interactions. The platform's design allowed students to explore topics of interest, participate in discussions, and receive real-time feedback, all without the need for extensive grading from John. Suddenly, John's initial goal of intrinsically motivating students to engage in his course beyond the surface level became a possibility.

Each week, John would engage students on Packback Questions and provide prompts related to the course material, encouraging students to post one question and respond to at least two others. This open-ended approach allowed students to interact with the course material in ways that were most relevant and interesting to them. Students' ability to scroll through the community and respond to comment on or "spark" other students' posts added an almost "social media-like" aspect that students felt comfortable with.

To integrate Packback into his class, John dedicated time each Thursday to highlight top questions submitted by students and facilitate in-class discussions around them, providing an aspect of non-lecture based interaction, which his students responded to positively.

The Results:



The impact of Packback on John's classes was profound. He was initially amazed by the high level of student engagement and the quality of discussions generated through the platform. This positive response motivated him to continue using Packback and refine his approach to grading.

Students consistently expressed their enjoyment of using Packback in their evaluations. They appreciated the platform's ability to facilitate deeper exploration of topics and valued the collaborative aspect of the discussions. **Many students reported feeling intellectually challenged and found the assignments to be a valuable part of their learning experience, rather than mere busy work.**

The benefits extended beyond improved engagement and learning. John noticed a significant improvement in his teaching evaluations, as students highlighted their positive experiences with Packback. They praised the platform for its effectiveness in enhancing their understanding of the material and recommended it to their peers.



Hear from The Students Directly

“Packback made me think outside of the typical memorization and recall that most basic classes require and it made me open my mind to abstract or specific real-world implications of the information I’ve learned.” —*Anonymous Intro to Weather and Climate Student*

“Packback forced me to think more critically compared to past classes where I just needed to know what would be on the test.” —*Anonymous Intro to Weather and Climate Student*

“In my geography class, when we discussed lightning I became interested in lightning safety, and so I did some research on questions posed on Packback about public pool lightning policies. My classmates’ answers helped me understand the topic more deeply, and prompted some additional research questions that I am still investigating.” —*Anonymous Physical Geography Student*

For any undecided professors, John highly recommends the use of Packback. He emphasizes its ability to stimulate meaningful discussion without requiring excessive effort from the instructor, and its affordability and positive reception among students, making it an invaluable tool for enhancing both student engagement and teaching evaluations.





Brittany "Bri" Kerschner
English Professor
Century College

Quantitative Results:

89%

of students reported feeling more confident in their discussion and learning abilities

80%

of students reported feeling more comfortable with self-guided learning

95%

of students preferred Packback over other tools

Utilizing Regular Writing Practice in Packback to Increase Student Confidence, Ownership, and Outcomes

Introduction

Bri Kerschner, an English professor at Century College in Minnesota, has always been at the forefront of technology and was never shy about trying new tools to improve student learning outcomes. In 2017, after a series of frustrating experiences with other classroom tools and technology, coupled with her students' poor performance and engagement, Bri decided to give Packback a try. She implemented Packback across four of her courses, seeking a solution that *both* she and her students would appreciate.

The Problem



Before adopting Packback, Bri faced significant challenges with her existing discussion board tool in her native LMS. Setting up discussions was cumbersome, and the tool failed to facilitate meaningful conversations among students. Many of Bri's students, particularly those considered at risk of failing or withdrawal, did the bare minimum to earn points. It was quite common for Bri to scroll the discussion board and read "good job", "I agree", or "this makes sense".

Bri's primary goal was to improve her students' writing and critical thinking skills, but with 200-300 students each semester, providing individualized feedback was nearly impossible without suffering immense burnout. The discussion boards felt like busy work to the students, and this sentiment was reflected in their evaluations.



The Solution

Upon hearing about Packback, Bri decided to implement it in her courses right away. Despite initial skepticism, she was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to set up and how quickly her students adapted to the platform.

In her courses, students were required to post each week. Bri found that this approach to regular, low-stakes writing practice significantly improved their writing skills without requiring an enormous lift on grading. The more they wrote, the better they became. Recently, in her Comp 2 class, she integrated Writing Lab, which instantly became a student favorite. Multiple students shared with Bri that they could feel Writing Lab making them a better writer.

From the outset, Bri noticed a remarkable change in student behavior. The quality of discussion posts improved dramatically, with students contributing thoughtful and in-depth responses. About two-thirds of the way through the semester, students began expressing a desire to discuss Packback posts during class. This level of engagement was unprecedented and continued in subsequent semesters. Students were analyzing material more deeply, bringing real-life examples into their discussions, and demonstrating a newfound enthusiasm for the subject matter.

The Results



The impact of Packback on Bri's classes was transformative. Her students reported feeling more engaged and confident in their writing abilities. In post-course evaluations, a majority of students indicated that they had become better and more confident writers, finally feeling like they were equipped to put their thoughts to paper (or in this case, keyboard). The evaluations also revealed that students appreciated the freedom to explore topics that genuinely interested them, leading to richer and more challenging discussions than Bri could have ever imagined, and had ever experienced in the LMS.

Students said that they felt intellectually challenged in a positive way, and that they felt prepared to tackle writing assignments in any future class, thanks to the skills they developed using Packback.

Bri found that Packback not only alleviated her previous frustrations but also provided a tool that genuinely made a difference in her students' learning experiences and course evaluations. The platform facilitated a supportive and engaging environment where students could thrive, achieving the course objectives and preparing for future academic challenges.



Hear from The Students Directly

"In past English courses, I never had the chance to think and discuss my thoughts with other classmates. Packback though challenged me to become more engaged in the content I am looking into where I can efficiently understand not only my own thoughts, but others as well." —*Anonymous Composition 2 Student*

"Packback has challenged me to come up with more meaningful questions which in turn causes me to engage more in course materials." — *Anonymous Composition 1 Student*

"Packback helps me discover my unique voice as a student by allowing me to voice my own opinions and thoughts in discussions. I like how there are no right or wrong answers!" — *Anonymous Composition 1 Student*



For professors undecided about trying Packback, Bri offers a compelling recommendation: "Try it out, what's the worst that can happen? You have the opportunity to provide your students with a tool that will help them both inside and outside the classroom. Almost every instructor I know who has tried it is hooked. Packback is a tool that makes a difference — it helps students achieve the objectives of the course and prepares them for the future."



Greg McLamb

History Professor
Western Carolina University

Quantitative Results:

The average grade for writing assignments increased from a

C+ to an A-

63%

of students said that Packback improved their critical thinking skills

50%

of students felt more confident in their writing skills

Boosting Student Engagement and Improving Evaluations with Packback at Western Carolina University

Introduction

Greg McLamb, a history professor at Western Carolina University, teaches large undergraduate courses like U.S. History since 1865 and U.S. History before 1865. With an average enrollment of 60 students in each course, Greg faced the challenge of making historical content engaging for his students. After years of trial and error, Greg decided something needed to be done to enhance student engagement and improve the overall quality of his courses, and in the summer of 2023, he turned to Packback.

The Problem

Before integrating Packback, student engagement was waning, and it was starting to be reflected in his student evaluations, making it harder for him to maintain his status as an adjunct professor. In his online courses, student evaluations often mentioned that there was a lot of work with “little payoff”. Students felt they were not receiving timely feedback on their discussion posts, which led to a lack of meaningful interaction between student and educator. The format of requiring one post and two responses on Greg’s native LMS did not foster genuine discussion, it just made students feel like they were doing busy work.

In his face-to-face classes, students were not bringing outside readings into classroom discussions, viewing the readings as unnecessary and irrelevant. This negative sentiment resulted in shallow classroom discussions and a general lack of enthusiasm for the material. Greg’s courses were becoming stale, and he needed a solution that would reinvigorate both his teaching methods and





student engagement. In fact, Greg was at the point where he was ready to blow up his whole class structure and start from scratch, but wanted to give it one more try with Packback.

The Solution



Packback provided the perfect opportunity for Greg to revamp his course structure without having to completely start over. He began by implementing discussions with Packback Questions and, impressed by the immediate positive impact, soon incorporated Deep Dives into his classes to facilitate his long-form writing assignments.

Greg's goal was to improve the length, quality, and quantity of discussion posts and enhance student engagement with the course material. **As an initial experiment, he ran both Canvas and Packback discussions simultaneously and quickly noticed a significant improvement in the quality of posts from students using Packback. He cited Packback's AI-driven feedback and gamified elements as qualities that motivated students to produce more thoughtful and detailed responses.**

Initially, students were a little hesitant to adopt a new system, but once they experienced the guidance and real-time feedback provided by Packback, their enthusiasm grew. They began referencing each others' discussion posts more both in Packback and in-class, leading to deeper and more relevant conversations. Students finally felt like they were doing work that was meaningful and applicable to the course. As students continued to cite the joy, excitement, and purpose that Packback provided them with, Greg began to expand his own use of Packback. He saw the discussion topics students were talking about in Packback Questions and decided to transpose them into guiding topics for longform essays and essay questions on exams.

The Results



Greg was blown away by the impact Packback had on his courses. He noticed immediate improvement in student sentiment, engagement, discussion, and performance.

Greg's students began referencing each other more in their discussion posts, leading to more interconnected and engaged conversations. In-class discussions became more dynamic and relevant, with students eager to discuss topics introduced on Packback. Students mentioned that the Curiosity Score function of Packback added a sense of fun and "gamification" to the course and encouraged them to dive deeper into the material.

As engagement rose, students reported feeling more confident in their writing and discussion skills due to the immediate feedback and structured guidance provided by Packback. Many students expressed that Packback made them more interested in readings and class discussions, transforming their attitude from obligatory participation to genuine enthusiasm. Students loved the immediate feedback because it helped them gain a better understanding of their assignments and made them feel confident that they were taking their responses in the right direction.



As a result of student behavior shifting, student evaluations showed a marked improvement, with more positive feedback and specific mentions of Packback's impact. Students highlighted that Packback made them feel more confident in their understanding of the material and more prepared for class discussions. Students reported that Packback made them better, more confident writers, researchers, and critical thinkers.

Through Packback, Greg was able to successfully revitalize his history courses, enhance student engagement, improve writing skills, and create a more dynamic and interactive learning environment among students which was reflected in their evaluations of his course.



Hear from The Students Directly

"Packback gave me the confidence to believe in myself and my writing abilities. I learned that I actually do better than I give myself credit for" — *Anonymous US History Until 1865 Student*

"It helped me gain a better understanding of how to write. I was able to see and understand other classmates writing styles and incorporate some of their techniques into my own writing" — *Anonymous US History Until 1865 Student*

For professors considering Packback, Greg offers strong encouragement: "Try it for at least one semester; what do you have to lose? Packback has doubled the length of my student posts, maybe even tripled them. It has increased their cognition of what they're actually reading. **This product is the only one that I've ever worked with that actually does what it says it's going to do.** There is a lot of promise when it comes to educational software, and Packback delivers on that promise."





Conclusion

The stories shared by Professors John Knox, Bri Kerschner, and Greg McLamb clearly demonstrate the transformative power of Packback in elevating teaching evaluations by improving the student experience. Each professor we spoke with faced unique challenges in their classrooms, from low student participation and superficial discussions to a deep lack of intrinsically motivated students.

Through thoughtful implementation, Packback provided a robust solution that not only addressed the challenges each professor faced, but also fostered an environment of active participation, collaboration, and rigorous writing practice at scale. By encouraging students to ask thought-provoking questions and engage in meaningful discussions, coupled with real time in-depth feedback, Packback helped create a more dynamic and interactive learning experience.

Overall, these stories highlight how Packback can be a valuable tool for educators seeking to enhance student engagement, improve course evaluations, and support student success. The positive outcomes observed by John, Bri, and Greg serve as compelling evidence of Packback's ability to thrive under a variety of subject matters, course sizes, and modalities. For any professor considering adopting new educational technology, Packback stands out as a promising and effective solution that delivers on its promise to improve the learning experience for both students and educators.

