



# “They Are the Experts”

A National Teacher of the Year  
Talks about Student Surveys

SARAH BROWN WESSLING

**Sarah Brown Wessling has surveyed her students informally on their classroom experiences since her days as a student teacher.** Having created and refined her own survey for many years, the English teacher at Johnston High School in Johnston, Iowa, incorporated items from the [Tripod survey](#), developed by Harvard researcher Ron Ferguson, after reading them in the MET project’s research report on the instrument (see [Learning about Teaching: Initial Findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project](#)). She also provides space on the written forms for students to write comments to clarify their responses.

In this question-and-answer, the 2010 National Teacher of the Year explains why she surveys students and what she’s learned from the exercise.

## Why do you see students as such an important source of information on your classroom?

**WESSLING:** They are the experts about what goes on in the class. Even if I intended it to come out one way, if that’s not how they perceive it, that’s not reality. Certainly students also bear responsibility for that reality, but their perception is our reality. So my intentions are not as important as their expertise.

When I give surveys to students, I tell them that I rely on them every semester, every year, to give me feedback in order to grow as a teacher. There are some things that I can’t do better if they don’t tell me.

## How have your surveys changed over time, and why did you adopt the Tripod items?

**WESSLING:** Early on I asked more questions about managerial kinds of things. Were my directions clear? Then as I modified it over time, I asked more questions about the kinds of work that I ask students to do. Was it beneficial? Was it not beneficial? It’s still largely questions about what worked in the class and what didn’t work.

When I came upon the [Tripod] items in the MET report I really liked the “7 Cs.” I thought it did a much better job synthesizing all the things that I had been asking about. It takes a lot of the complex facets of teaching, and it kind of boils them down into manageable categories, and categories that make sense to students.

## What have you learned about your teaching from the feedback students give?

**WESSLING:** I’ve seen some important affirmations. I have a lot of students affirm that the courses I teach are very challenging. The “Care” part comes through very clearly from students—I see that as really affirming that they know I see them as individuals.

When I get the surveys back I look for patterns and trends, but what really drives my reflection is the comments they offer. It’s the comments that in the end—nine times out of 10—will change my instruction, or solidify my instruction.

A lot of students clarified with comments that said “she doesn’t always tell me exactly what to do.” But what I know is that

by not telling them exactly what to do I'm asking them not to regurgitate. I'm asking them not to summarize but to hypothesize. I'm asking them to inquire, to assert. So when they say "this course is challenging but I want to be told exactly what to do," that tells me what I need to do is to talk to them more about why I'm not giving them more explicit instructions.

### Can you think of a time when you changed your instruction in response to survey results?

**WESSLING:** I learned that the class was a bit large for the degree of discussion that we had. Through the survey there were some students who said it always seems like it's the same kids who are talking. I thought, okay, this is really important. They're telling me that they have things to say, that they want to say things, and I need to think about managing the discussion and giving them more opportunities to confer with others.

So I made some shifts that second semester where I put them in a lot of smaller groups to start with, and then brought them back to the larger groups. That ensured

that everyone got to talk, that everyone got to work out their ideas. And then everyone would be prepared to talk in a large discussion.

### You decided on your own to survey your students. Why do you think student surveys aren't more widespread?

**WESSLING:** It's a really tough step to ask your students what they think. It hasn't always been easy for me, especially early in my career. I knew they weren't going to come back the way I wanted them to. But personally, I always say I'm more afraid of mediocrity than I am of my mistakes. So being able to just get over the vulnerable feeling makes a huge difference.

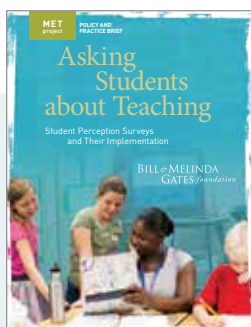
Part of why I choose to do this is that it is formative. Whenever learners move into that space of fear, they shut down. If my students become afraid of anything in the classroom—of me, or my grading, or my fairness—they can't learn. It's the same with adults. We need to make sure that we use these kinds of things in order to create cultures of learning.

My experience with student surveys has been in a context without stakes. When anything is part of formal evaluation I think it has to be coupled with real professional growth opportunities and in a climate that's supportive, not punitive.

### What do you think student surveys add to the mix of information on what goes on in a classroom?

**WESSLING:** All good researchers triangulate their data. They have multiple points of data that they look at, and they're looking for consistency and patterns and incongruities. I think looking at all these facets—the student surveys, the student work, the common assessments that we do as a department, the standardized tests that we do—all these things together help us understand the narrative of our classrooms.

Taking out one of those I think skews that narrative. Or focusing on any one of them too much also skews that narrative.



Download the MET project's policy and practice brief on student perception surveys, [Asking Students about Teaching](#), and learn more about the MET project at [www.metproject.org](http://www.metproject.org).



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**About the MET project:** The MET project is a research partnership of academics, teachers, and education organizations committed to investigating better ways to identify and develop effective teaching. Funding is provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.