Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #5:
Provide regular opportunities to address content that students may find unclear

Today’s tip addresses the disconnect between what we teach and what students learn. What may have seemed very comprehensible to us may have seemed less so for some of our students. Providing an opportunity for students to recognize (and let us know about) what wasn’t clear can help in many ways:

- it encourages students to take a more active role in monitoring how things are going,
- it encourages us to reflect more systematically and more “constructively critically” on our own teaching and to think about ways we might get our points across more successfully,
- it allows students to come to feel more comfortable letting us know when they are having trouble following what we are trying to help them understand, and, as a result,
- it can help students engage more fully with you, with their classes, and with their education in general.

Muddiest point activity:

- Allow a few minutes at the end of class for students to review what you have just covered, and then write a brief note about anything that is unclear. This can be done on index cards, sheets of paper, or uploaded to your course website.
- Review students’ feedback before the next class period, so that you can identify and address points of confusion.

This technique can provide you with very useful and TIMELY information about where students may be getting lost, or about where you may have been less clear than you thought you were.

Comparing notes activity:

Once a month or so, or perhaps as part of your planned review for an up-coming exam, allow 15-20 minutes for students to go over their notes in pairs or small groups. Have them:
- identify and clarify places where they have gaps or where they are unclear.
- discuss points they have found particularly interesting or surprising.
- summarize briefly, in writing, what they discussed.

This technique is beneficial in many ways: It provides an opportunity to students to identify and repair holes in their understanding of class material, it engages them actively with the each other and with the material, and it gives you a window onto how they are doing and what they are making of the course content.