

Gathering Student Feedback

Gathering information from your students about their experience in your class is a valuable way to assess your teaching. By understanding how students are learning and experiencing your efforts, you put yourself in the position of being able to improve and make your teaching more effective.

There are many ways to collect feedback from your students. Which method is best depends on your objectives and the kind of information you need. Regardless of which method you choose, though, you'll want to: 1) make it possible for all students to contribute and, 2) think carefully about how you'll respond to the feedback students share.

Basic types of feedback

On a basic level, you can gather feedback from students through:

- **Formative feedback.** These low- or no-stakes feedback opportunities are deployed during the quarter. Instructors can use data from these assessments to identify where and how they might shift their pedagogical strategies before the end of the term to improve their effectiveness.
- **Summative feedback.** These feedback opportunities are typically deployed at the end of the course. Instructors can use data from these assessments (e.g., numerical and qualitative feedback from end-of-quarter evaluations) to identify where and how to shift their pedagogical strategies in future courses.

Formative feedback

Classroom assessment techniques (CATs)

These techniques allow instructors to monitor how well students are meeting learning objectives and processing course content. Some commonly employed CATs include:

- **Minute papers.** Ask students to write for 1-2 minutes on a question such as: "What was the most important concept you learned in class today/in this module?"
- **Directed paraphrasing.** Ask students to write (in their own words) a definition or translation of a major concept, idea, theory, principle, or procedure introduced in class.
- **Student generated test questions.** Ask students to write test or quiz questions based on material presented in the class.

Mid-quarter check-ins

Checking in with students around mid-quarter provides instructors with enough time to tweak their teaching to improve student learning prior to the end of the quarter. Some effective methods include:

- **Whole class interview** (such as through a Small Group Instructional Diagnostic [SGID])
- **Mid-quarter survey** (such as the one provided in Canvas starting this term in the Instructor Resources module)

It is important that students understand you take their feedback seriously. Consider designating class time to talk with the students about their feedback.

Whether you respond to the feedback in-person or via email/announcements, consider addressing all of the following:

- **Thank students for participating.** Let them know that you've read and considered their feedback.
- **Emphasize the positive.** Starting with what's working well can raise morale (yours as well as that of the students) and put students at ease about aspects of the course that they don't want you to change.
- **Avoid addressing every concern students raise.** It's more effective to single out two or three of the most commonly-mentioned points and focus on those.
- **Identify at least one thing you can change** in response to their suggestions. Thank the students for bringing it to your attention and explain how the change will work.
- **Explain what changes you will not be making and why.** Students might perceive that something is hindering their learning when, in fact, it might be an essential part of the learning process. Remember, some degree of cognitive discomfort or uncertainty is actually necessary for learning. Students might also suggest something that is beyond your control. Let them know that you've heard them but won't be making some of the changes they've suggested and why.
 - For example: "Five of you mentioned that the last exam was very challenging. However, many of you excelled at it, and if the exams were easy, you wouldn't learn as much!"
- **Empower students to address their own concerns.** If students are concerned about something that you can't address, try to suggest strategies they can use to mitigate these concerns.
 - For example: "If you're finding the content for our exams challenging, remember to use the study guides I posted in Canvas and consider reaching out to a classmate and studying together."
- **Use clear language when responding.** Consider introducing the points above with your students as follows:
 - "Thank you for your feedback."
 - "Here is what I will continue to do ..."
 - "Here is what I will change ..."
 - "Here is what I will not change, and the reasons why ..."

Summative feedback

Caltech provides end-of-term course evaluations (TQFRs, though the name is evolving). Students rate specific aspects of each course to inform possible changes in instruction and they also provide an overall rating of the course as a whole, enabling instructors to compare student perceptions of one course to another. The evaluations also include a set of open-ended questions that allow students to elaborate on their numeric ratings, providing instructors with more in-depth feedback.

Consider devoting time in class to introduce why these surveys are important, how they are used, and allowing students to write their responses.