CAD Guidelines

Improving Learning and Teaching

Informal Feedback

2013 Edition

Centre for Academic Development

TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI
VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

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1. Why collect informal feedback?

From time to time, staff may wish to evaluate aspects of their teaching or identify areas of student understanding or misunderstanding well before the end of a course. The standard Victoria University student feedback system of teaching and end-of-course questionnaires are unable to successfully identify all these aspects because:

- they are usually carried out at or near the end of a course. Thus, problems are not identified until "too late" and changes cannot be made until the course is offered again;
- students know that the feedback they provide will not be of personal benefit; and
- information is sometimes general and might be limited in detail on specific aspects of teaching and learning.

Informal feedback is offered as an alternative method. It is entirely formative although information gained in this way could be usefully incorporated into a teaching portfolio for promotion purposes. The information collected through informal feedback is confidential between the lecturer and their students. Informal feedback should not replace formal feedback in circumstances where formal feedback is required (see *Student Feedback on Teaching and Courses Policy* http://www.victoria.ac.nz/documents/policy/academic/student-feedback-on-teaching-and-courses-policy.pdf).

Advantages

Informal feedback:

- is a quick and easy method to obtain information from students to assist your teaching/course delivery;
- offers an opportunity for students to provide timely, constructive information that will assist learning;
- allows information to be collected at any point during the course, though time should be left to implement any changes;
- helps students to become more reflective about their learning;
- can indicate the need for student development of study skills; and
- can foster a good rapport between staff and students, by showing that the lecturer cares about the opinions of their students.

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What can informal feedback be used for?

Information can be collected on any aspect of a course, teaching and learning: for example, to obtain student response to an innovation, assessment methods, student workload, suitability of textbooks or course materials, lecturing style, student understanding of lecture content, organisational or administrative difficulties. A number of the informal feedback methods can also be classified as Classroom Assessment Techniques (see Appendix II). Not only are these methods useful to solicit information from the students, but they can also be used to promote active learning in class.

2. How to start the informal feedback process

A key part of any informal feedback process is the initial planning. You should:

- Consider previous student feedback. Examine the evaluations data and identify any emerging trends (see http://www.cad.vuw.ac.nz/wiki/index.php/Student_Feedback).
- Clarify your purpose. What aspect of your course or teaching do you want to find out about?
- Limit your focus. Generally, two or three open-ended questions are most helpful, although rating scales can be used.
- Select an appropriate method for collecting information. This will largely depend on the course context and question(s) asked.
- Focus on what could be changed to improve the teaching/learning situation during the trimester.
- Remember to thank the students for their feedback and to assure them how it is part of continuous improvement.

Focus and questions to ask

The questions that would be useful to ask students for early feedback on could be divided into topics. Examples of questions are listed below with each topic. They may give you some ideas when developing your own. Inform students they can see the last cohort's formal feedback on the CAD website http://www.cad.vuw.ac.nz/feedback/feedback_display.php.

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Learning objectives

- What was this lecture about?
- What are the objectives of this lecture/course?
- Describe what you think this course is trying to achieve.
- Describe how the goals and objectives of this course fit with your expectations.
- How would you describe the main point of this lecture to one of your grandparents?
- Do you think the course is enhancing your ability to work with others, e.g. patients/ clients/ colleagues?
- Describe how you have benefited so far from enrolling in this course.

Course structure

- Did the practical sessions help you to understand the theory?
- Arrange the five topics of this course in the most logical order.
- List any topics that you think should have been included in this section of the course.
- "Tutorials/ workshops/ laboratory sessions would really help me to learn if they included…"
- In your opinion, what are the strengths of this course to date?
- How could this course be structured differently to improve…understanding/ participation/ practical application of knowledge etc.)?

Content delivery

- What might I/ the lecturer/ tutor do to make the material clearer?
- What are the strengths of your tutor/lecturer?
- What improvements to the teaching (in the lecture, lab session, tutorial, workshop) would you suggest?
- How could this course be made more interesting?

Student participation

- How have you taken part in the class activities in order to gain the most from the lectures/ workshops?
- State one thing that you have learned from another student during this lecture/ workshop.
- State one thing you have helped another student with

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during this lecture/ workshop.

- Do you feel free to participate and/ or ask questions in class at any time? If not, why not?
- What changes could be made so that students are more involved in lectures?

Assessment and feedback on students' work

- What did you like about the … (e.g. open book examination/ research project/ observed structured clinical examination process)?
- What improvements would you suggest to the … (e.g. open book examination/ research project/ observed structured clinical examination process)?
- What other forms of assessment would be appropriate to effectively assess this module?
- Name the most important thing you have learned from the assessment process in this module.
- What feedback on your assignment/ test did you find most valuable?
- Describe how you used feedback on your last assignment to improve this one.

Classroom climate and affective issues

- Do you feel comfortable asking questions in this class?
- What might reduce the level of talking in this class?
- What measures should be taken to ensure that everybody arrives in time for this lecture?
- How could we improve the atmosphere in the class?

Educational Technology/ Learning Materials and Resources/ Innovations

- Did you find the online (e.g. Blackboard) resources useful when studying for the test/completing the assignment?
- Is the course website supporting your learning so far? How?
- How often do you use the course website?
- How is the nature and/or availability of resources (e.g. library materials, computing facilities) affecting your learning in this course?
- How are you using the textbook? How often?
- Describe the main features of the perfect textbook/website for this course.

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- Do you find the PowerPoint presentations useful?
- How could the PowerPoint presentations be made more interactive?

Students' perceptions about level of difficulty, pace and workload

- Please comment on the level of difficulty – too hard? too easy? insufficient background knowledge?
- The pace in module x was – too slow, too fast, just right.
- Please comment on the number of assignments/ tests/ lab reports expected so far in this course.
- How did you find the level of work expected from you in completing the second assignment/lab report?

Administration and Organisation

- Please comment on the clarity of the administrative details/ time table/list of dates received at the beginning of the trimester.
- Were results of any tests/ assignments/ research projects available within a reasonable time frame?
- Are you experiencing any technical difficulties, including with software? Please give details.
- Are you experiencing any problems accessing computer labs? Please describe.

Timing

This would depend on the reason for wanting feedback from the students. If your main aim is that you want to promote learning through student participation, the timing and frequency of the feedback would depend on the situation, the course content and the students. For timing for gathering information on which to base changes to your teaching, you may find the following guidelines useful:

- Three to four weeks into the trimester – when it is the first time you teach a course, or when significant changes have been made to the course.
- Mid-trimester – when you have taught the course many times before.
- Not too soon after an assessment (examination or test) – unless information is specifically solicited about the assessment (because that is the information students will then focus on).

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What methods could be used throughout the trimester?

The 'secrets' to choosing the most useful methods and techniques are:

- Keep it simple;
- Keep it short;
- Use a variety of methods throughout the trimester;
- Match method to the situation;
- Experiment with the methods that appeal to you most until you find the most helpful ones for your situation;
- Plan and organise well – especially where technical assistance is needed; and
- Be creative and develop your own methods to suit the situation.

A range of methods are available. Not all these methods would suit all situations. Some of the methods include:

- A brief informal questionnaire handed out and completed in class.
- A blank index card to use during the last 5 to 10 minute of class - two questions should be answered on different sides of the card for quick processing.
- A show of hands, with lecturer recording approximate % in lecture.
- Using Clickers to elicit, analyse and present responses in real time.
- A show of coloured cards for instant feedback (with each of the colours representing one option). This involves giving each student a set of coloured cards at the start of the course. The method could be used to assess accuracy of recall instantly.
- Surveying a sample of students rather than the whole class. This is particularly useful in a large class or where fast feedback will be used on several occasions.
- Arrange for a focus group of students to be interviewed by a colleague/ Centre for Academic Development (CAD).
- Invite a colleague to conduct an oral evaluation session with the whole class. Students could be arranged in groups with a spokesperson from each group summarising the group's responses.
- Electronic feedback to gauge student opinions, via e- mail, or making use of the options on a course website (for example, discussion boards on Blackboard).

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- Make use of the class representative to meet periodically with you outside of class to discuss difficulties or dissatisfaction with the course.
- Form a student management team with the charge to identify problem areas and suggest improvements on a regular basis.
- Use a suggestion box.
- Encourage students to leave messages on your office voice-mail or by e-mail.
- Contact CAD for assistance with developing a special, one-off formative survey form which can be processed by CAD.

Enlist student support for the feedback process. Most students will be prepared to participate if they know that their lecturer is committed to giving them feedback on the results as soon as possible and will endeavour to implement changes where possible.

3. Analysing the responses

It is not necessary to engage in complex analysis of the results. A show of hands can be immediately summarised on the board. Using Clickers allows immediate simple analysis. Written responses can be analysed using a simple frequency table. Read through the comments until you feel able to identify common themes, record these and tabulate the frequency of each.

4. Now what?

Say Thank You. Feedback is the students' gift to you. Use it wisely.

Interpretation and the development of an action plan are key phases of using informal feedback.

Consider carefully what the students say. Always concentrate on the positive comments first. It is good to know that something about the course is appreciated/ that the students did learn something after all, before reading any suggestions for improvement.

Carefully consider the meaning of the results. What insights have you gained? What are the implications for teaching/course delivery?

…

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Categorise negative comments and suggestions into three groups, for example, those that

- could be changed this trimester;
- must wait until next time the course is offered;
- should not be considered because of pedagogical or other reasons.

It is only human to feel disheartened by negative comments. This type of categorisation could help to keep the focus firmly on the course under consideration and remove the personal "sting".

Discussing ideas with colleagues or CAD staff may be useful at this stage.

It is important to be realistic and bear in mind available time and resources to avoid disappointing yourself or your students.

5. Completing the loop

This is another crucial stage of any feedback process. Continuing student goodwill and participation will be enhanced if they feel part of on-going evaluation and improvement by receiving prompt feedback. Also, remember to acknowledge feedback received out of class, for example, via email, voicemail or a suggestion box.

- Start your next lecture by thanking the students for their feedback and ideas.
- Provide appropriate feedback to the class, clearly identifying the responses you intend to make. Ideally this should be in the next class or as soon as practicable after that. If students were asked to suggest changes indicate which changes you will make in the short/long term and which you are unable to change at this stage.
- Indicate where further clarification is needed.
- Informal feedback is also a useful way of informing the learning process and getting students actively involved in reflecting on their own learning. The appendices provide a range of specific techniques that could be useful for this purpose.

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Appendix I

Activities to include in the first and last ten minutes of a lecture

Suggestions from a workshop handout based on C.C. Bonwell and J.A. Eison's *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (ASHE-ERIC *Higher Education Report No.1*,1991).

The First Ten Minutes	The Last Ten Minutes
In an individual writing activity have students summarise the main ideas from the previous class session and speculate (or pose questions) about the upcoming class session.	Have students working in pairs or groups develop an outline of the day's presentation.
Ask students to identify one question from the assigned readings that they would like to have answered in class (could have done prior to class). Students then share their question with three peers and pick one question from the group to pose to the instructor. Finally, each group asks the instructor a question.	Divide the class into groups of three to five, depending on size of class. Ask each group to propose three goals which they would like the class to accomplish at the next meeting.
Put students in groups of three and have them develop a set of "consensus answers" to a series of eight to ten questions about the topic for the day. After providing correct answers followed by discussions, reward the group with the most correct answers.	Have students form groups and write two good multiple choice questions to the class. Discuss these questions. [Or consider using them for exam review sessions or in the exam.]
The students could work in small groups to brainstorm and possibly organise past experiences that may relate to the class objectives for the day.	Have students review each other's notes to enhance learning. Have students summarise the main topics of discussion in one or two paragraphs and then relate them to yesterday's discussion.
	Have students evaluate each other's work – in this frame, something very small (e.g. notecards for research papers), making sure they have grading instructions. To ensure low risk: create short, structures specific roles. Make sure students know each other's names.

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Appendix II

Selected Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) for getting feedback on student learning and response to teaching [1]

Name:	Description:	What to do with the data:	Time required:
Minute paper[2]	During the last few minutes of the class period, ask students to answer on a half-sheet of paper: "What is the most important point you learned today?"; and, "What point remains least clear to you?". The purpose is to elicit data about students' comprehension of a particular class session.	Review responses and note any useful comments. During the next class periods emphasize the issues illuminated by your students' comments.	Prep: Low In class: Low Analysis: Low
Chain Notes	Students pass around an envelope on which the teacher has written one question about the class. When the envelope reaches a student he/she spends a moment to respond to the question and then places the response in the envelope.	Go through the student responses and determine the best criteria for categorizing the data with the goal of detecting response patterns. Discussing the patterns of responses with students can lead to better teaching and learning.	Prep: Low In class: Low Analysis: Low
Memory matrix	Students fill in cells of a two-dimensional diagram for which instructor has provided labels. For example, in a music course, labels might consist of periods (Baroque, Classical) by countries (Germany, France, Britain); students enter composers in cells to demonstrate their ability to remember and classify key concepts.	Tally the numbers of correct and incorrect responses in each cell. Analyze differences both between and among the cells. Look for patterns among the incorrect responses and decide what might be the cause(s).	Prep: Med In class: Med Analysis: Med
Directed paraphrasing	Ask students to write a layman's "translation" of something they have just learned -- geared to a specified individual or audience -- to assess their ability to comprehend and transfer concepts.	Categorize student responses according to characteristics you feel are important. Analyze the responses both within and across categories, noting ways you could address student needs	Prep: Low In class: Med Analysis: Med

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Name:	Description:	What to do with the data:	Time required:
One-sentence summary	Students summarize knowledge of a topic by constructing a single sentence that answers the questions "Who does what to whom, when, where, how, and why?" The purpose is to require students to select only the defining features of an idea.	Note whether students have identified the essential concepts of the class topic and their interrelationships. Share your observations with your students.	Analysis: Med
Exam Evaluations	Select a type of test that you are likely to give more than once or that has a significant impact on student performance. Create a few questions that evaluate the quality of the test. Add these questions to the exam or administer a separate, follow-up evaluation.	Try to distinguish student comments that address the fairness of your grading from those that address the fairness of the test as an assessment instrument. Respond to the general ideas represented by student comments.	Prep: Low In class: Low Analysis: Med
Application cards	After teaching about an important theory, principle, or procedure, ask students to write down at least one real-world application for what they have just learned to determine how well they can transfer their learning.	Quickly read once through the applications and categorize them according to their quality. Pick out a broad range of examples and present them to the class.	Prep: Low In class: Low Analysis: Med
Student-generated test questions	Allow students to write test questions and model answers for specified topics, in a format consistent with course exams. This will give students the opportunity to evaluate the course topics, reflect on what they understand, and what are good test items.	Make a rough tally of the questions your students propose and the topics that they cover. Evaluate the questions and use the goods ones as prompts for discussion. You may also want to revise the questions and use them on the upcoming exam.	Prep: Med In class: High Analysis: High (may be homework)

(1) Details on these and others available from Angelo & Cross, Classroom Assessment techniques, 1993.

(2) See also: http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/teaching-guides/assessment/cats/

Published Resources:

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, P.K. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Davis, B.G. (1993). *Tools for Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Appendix III

More Feedback Techniques for Active Learning

1. RSQC2 Technique

RECALL	List the most interesting, significant or useful points of the previous session.
SUMMARISE	Summarise important points in one meaningful sentence.
QUESTION	Raise any questions you have about that session.
COMMENT	Write down a word or phrase describing how you felt about that session while you were in it.
CONNECT	Connect what you learned in that session to what came before or comes next.

Objective: To help the student understand what has been learned (or not), helps the lecturer gauge how well the students have understood

How: index cards

When: at the end of the lecture

How often: as often as necessary

Use for: class preparation, to check whether students understand

Reference:

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, P.K. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques (2nd ed.)*.San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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2. The Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire

Example of a Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire
(Brookfield in Sutherland, 2000, p.69)

1Please take about five minutes to respond to the questions below about this week's class(es). Don't put your name on the form – your responses are anonymous. At the start of next week's class, I will share the responses with the group. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help me to make the class more responsive to your concerns.

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

Objectives: to help the student understand what has been learned (or not), helps the lecturer gauge how well the students have understood

How: printed questionnaire

When: at the end of the week's lectures/end of a section

How often: every week/end of every section/end of some sections/weeks

Use for: to help the students review what happened in class and think about their reactions, information for the lecturer to become more responsive to the students' needs

Reference:

Sutherland, K. (2000). *Small group Teaching – A handbook for VUW teachers.* Wellington: University Teaching Development Centre, Victoria University of Wellington.

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3. Reading response sheet

Name: _____	Date: _____
Words for review	
Things I found confusing	
Things I found interesting	
Things I'd like to discuss in class	

Objective: to improve class preparation

How: email, or printed form

When: by 9pm. the night before class (email), in class (printed form)

How often: as often as necessary

Use for: class preparation, to check whether students are reading the learning material

Reference:

Oden, Amy G. Professor of Church History, Oklahoma City University, on discussion list POD Network, pod@catfish.valdosta.edu , 27 August 2000, Methodologies to encourage student preparation.

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4. Checklists

List lecture topics and ask students to tick which topics needed more or less time (or use the checklist for another kind of question, for example, to comment on the level of difficulty).

Topics	Needs more time	Could have been covered in less time
Topic 1		
Topic 2		
Topic 3		

Objective: to identify problems quickly

How: email, or printed checklist

When: towards the end of a unit or set of topics

Use for: to address the problem in future teaching of the same topics

Reference:

Harvey, J. (Ed.) (1988). Evaluation Cookbook. *Learning Technology Dissemination Initiative, Institute for Computer Based Learning*. Edinburgh: Herriot-Watt University.

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5. Open Letter Variations

a) Write an open letter to students asking them to comment on particular aspects of the paper/teaching/their learning. The letter should not be more than one half of an A4. Leave space at the bottom for the students to answer. Make sure that they understand they do not have to put their names on the letter. Email or blogs could be used whilst bearing in mind ways of ensuring anonymity of responses.

b) Ask the students to write a letter to the next class doing the paper. Promise the students not to keep negative comments from the next group. Collect, and hand out at the beginning of the next trimester/year. Give the new students an indication of the changes you have made to the paper after reading these letters.

Objectives: to identify problem areas in teaching and learning, to give new students the message that their opinions matter

How: on half of an A4 page or email

When: towards the end of a unit/trimester

Use for: to change what you can immediately, to address the problems in future teaching of the same paper, to build rapport with the new group of students

Reference:

Rando, W.C. and Lenze, L.F. (1994). *Learning from students: Early term student feedback in Higher Education*. Pennsylvania: National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment.

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6. Rounds

Give each student the opportunity to speak in turn on a given topic, for example, a test or and assignment. If a student does not want to say something, pass to the next one. It's okay to repeat what somebody else has said. Keep a record of what the students say. Note what the main themes emerging from the discussion are.

Objective: to identify problems quickly

How: discussion in small groups

When: any time during the trimester

Use for: to use in tutorial groups to get feedback on a 'unit' issue

Reference:

Gibbs, G., Habeshaw, S. and Habeshaw, T. (1989). *53 Interesting ways to Appraise Your Teaching*. Bristol:Technical and Educational Services Ltd.

For more information, please contact the Centre for Academic Development at CAD-contact@vuw.ac.nz.

Or your faculty key contact – see the CAD Faculty Contacts.

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