



Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic

Suggestions Regarding Implementing a Variety of Feedback Approaches that
Support the Professional Development of TAs University-wide



**University
of Victoria**

1. Introduction

How can Teaching Assistants (TAs) learn effective teaching skills? One method is practice, practice and more practice. However, practice on its own does not necessarily improve one's teaching (McKeachie 2006). Practice needs to be complemented by carefully designed feedback that offers TAs, whether beginning or experienced, guidance as they develop as teachers. In addition, in order to offer the best undergraduate education possible at the University of Victoria, it is essential that TAs are supported to become better teachers. Approximately 30% of first- and second-year courses at UVic include TA-led tutorials, labs or discussion sessions, which emphasizes the support that TAs require.

The goal of this document is to provide suggestions as to how best to offer formative feedback to TAs. Formative feedback supports teachers as they develop their teaching skills, as opposed to summative evaluation, which tends to rate or rank teaching performance after the teaching is completed. For this reason, formative feedback is preferred over summative evaluation.

As a beginning teacher, a TA gains valuable information about his/her role as an instructor when he/she has the opportunity to receive different types of feedback. The primary purpose of feedback is to improve teaching. Consistent, structured and constructive feedback about the performance of his/her duties and responsibilities will improve teaching performance, which in turn builds confidence and creates a positive cycle. Additionally, undergraduate students deserve an opportunity to provide feedback to let the TA and department know how his/her learning is being supported or how the teaching could be improved. The opportunity to provide feedback lets students know that their input is valued and tends to result in increased communication between the TA and students. Lastly, course supervisors and the department will gain a greater understanding of how to advise future TAs regarding how to conduct lab, tutorial, or discussion sessions.

TAs should keep in mind that these formative feedback tools are only a

small part of a continuous teaching improvement process. It is recommended that TAs practice on-going self-reflection about their teaching and take advantage of the broad range of resources available to them on campus, such as the workshops and programs available through the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC)

<http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/taproduct/index.php> TAs can also take advantage of the Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC) in their department, who can assist TAs to develop feedback forms specific to their needs. Furthermore, once TAs approach the job market, their ability to reflect on their teaching will be extremely beneficial in a variety of professional employment contexts.

In what follows, you will find some general information about requesting feedback, methods for obtaining feedback from students, and lastly types of feedback that a TA may request from colleagues on campus.

We hope this information is useful for TAs and course supervisors. The TA Training and Professional Development program at the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC) continues to strive to help graduate students professionally develop in tandem with their graduate degrees. These suggestions were compiled to initiate a broad campus conversation about how best to provide formative feedback to TAs regarding their TA roles and responsibilities and do not replace or are in any way the same as the Course Experience Survey (CES). If you have ideas and/or suggestions, please feel free to contact Cynthia Korpan, TA Training Program Manager, at tatrain@uvic.ca, or 250-472-4798.

2. Requesting feedback: some general considerations

Here are some important suggestions to follow when implementing any type of feedback:

- Request feedback early so that concerns, either from the TA or students, can be addressed.
- Always ensure that feedback is anonymous. Students must feel secure that their feedback will not affect their grades.

- Remember to limit feedback questions to areas in the course that the TA or course supervisor has control over.
- Do not solicit or encourage comments on the personal aspects of a TA.
- The feedback form should be distributed at the beginning of the tutorial, lab or discussion session. If the feedback form is given out at the end of class, students tend to rush through the form.
- Clearly state the purpose of the feedback form (for example, to enhance student learning).
- Consider providing a disclaimer at the top of the feedback form.

A suggestion:

“Thank you for taking the time to provide feedback. The department welcomes all suggestions, but please ensure that your suggestions are about how the TA can improve the (insert - lab/tutorial/discussion) session and structure. Even though the TA and department will consider all suggestions, it may not be possible to implement changes to structure this term. However, your suggestions will help us improve the (insert - lab/tutorial/discussion) for the future.”

3. Methods for obtaining student feedback

FAST EARLY FEEDBACK¹:

This type of feedback is delivered within the first few tutorials, labs or discussion sessions. It addresses areas such as the TA’s voice projection, writing clarity and pace, which are all easily adjusted. Therefore, early feedback is particularly beneficial for International Teaching Assistants. See *Appendix 1* for a sample Fast Early Feedback Form.

How TAs can respond to Fast Early Feedback – items in this category can be easily addressed. For example, a TA can easily increase his/her voice level or make arrangements to wear a microphone if necessary;

¹ Adapted from <http://www.engr.wisc.edu/services/elc/tahand.pdf>

or he/she can write larger and clearer on the blackboard. This type of feedback allows the TA to adjust his/her behaviour immediately in the next tutorial, lab or discussion session so that students will notice that their feedback was taken into consideration.

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES (CATS)²:

Feedback of this type takes place at the end of a lab, tutorial or discussion session. It is anonymous, quick and easy to administer. TAs get an immediate sense of whether students have grasped the concepts taught or need further instruction.

What are two quick and easy CATS that TAs can use?

- a) One minute paper – at the end of class, the TA asks students to write on an index card or piece of paper what major concepts, procedures or definitions they learned that class. By scanning the cards, the TA quickly determines if students were able to articulate the main points of the lesson.
- b) Muddiest Point – TAs can ask students to write down the one concept that was *not* clear. This quickly identifies the problematic concept(s).
- c) *Responding techniques for CATS* – TAs address the concept(s), procedures and/or definitions in a subsequent class, provide further instruction, direct students to additional resources, and/or include the concept(s) at an upcoming exam review session to ensure that the material is understood by all students.

MID-TERM:

It is a great idea to get substantial feedback from students before the end of term. This way, TAs receive early feedback and can implement changes if necessary. Here are some suggestions:

- a) Carefully plan the right time to request feedback. For example, asking right after a test will likely only solicit comments related to the test.
- b) Think of midterm feedback as a collaborative project with the students, focused on working together to make the course better.

² Classroom Assessment Techniques come from Angelo & Cross (1993).

See *Appendix 2* for an example of a feedback form suitable for administering at mid-term.

How TAs can respond to mid-term feedback – it is courteous for a TA to acknowledge any issues that were identified. TAs should summarize the main points gathered from the feedback forms and share with students what was stated as positive and what could be improved. The TA should emphasize to the class any suggestions that cannot be addressed right away but will be useful for future offerings of the course. This also provides the opportunity to tell students why certain suggestions cannot be changed - for example, that the number of tests must remain the same or to verify why that text was chosen.

SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL FEEDBACK (SGIF)³

This feedback process involves inviting the TA Training Program Manager as facilitator to obtain feedback from students in the tutorial, lab or discussion session. It is best if this feedback technique is conducted about three weeks into the course. SGIF allows students to discuss collectively any suggestions they may have for the TA. By way of group discussion, students are given the opportunity to articulate constructive and productive feedback to the TA. Students often identify gaps or repetition in the curriculum between courses in a department. SGIF is also extremely effective when a TA is trying a new teaching method in a course and wants immediate feedback. By having the facilitator guide students' discussion, he/she is able to help tease out answers to the specific questions in which the TA is interested, as opposed to students misinterpreting questions and/or not providing enough details about why they like or dislike a particular teaching method or assignment. The process proceeds as follows:

- a) The TA and facilitator have an initial meeting to review the tutorial, lab or discussion session goals and other specific goals for the feedback session. The facilitator will suggest asking students what instructional strategies have helped them learn, and what could be implemented in the tutorial, lab or discussion session to help them learn better. Sometimes, TAs want to

³ SGIF is sometimes referred to as small-group instructional diagnosis (SGID) and was originated by Dr. Joseph Clark at the University of Washington.

receive answers to specific questions about certain teaching techniques or assessments used. New questions may need to be designed to accommodate these additional goals.

- b) The facilitator conducts a 25 to 30 minute feedback session in the tutorial, lab or discussion session with students. The TA is not present during the feedback session.
- c) The facilitator prepares a report that summarizes student feedback in the aggregate and arranges to meet with the TA to discuss the report.
- d) The TA uses the report to inform decisions regarding implementation of student suggestions immediately or at a future date, as well as plan how he/she will address the generated feedback with his/her students.

END OF COURSE:

Typically, student feedback is requested at the end of the course via a formal scripted form. The script may ask a variety of questions, or be as simple as asking students the following three questions:

- a) What worked?
- b) What didn't work?
- c) If you were teaching this lab/tutorial/discussion session, what would you do differently?

This format can be very effective in getting a general indication. However, without some prompting, students may not be able to recall exactly what worked. If interested in receiving feedback about particular details of the course, use direct questions. For example:

- a) "Did you find that the reflective writing pieces at the end of lab/tutorial/discussion helped you comprehend class material?"
or
"Were the demonstrations clear and helpful in providing sufficient suggestions to complete the assignment?"

ON-LINE FEEDBACK:

An easy to set up questionnaire tool exists on the internet called TooFast: <https://www.toofast.ca/index.php>. The on-line tool was developed by Mount Royal University, Carleton University and Campus Alberta for instructors. Simply have TAs sign up for an account and

they will be able to design a feedback form that they can send out electronically, post a link on Moodle or post a link on a course webpage. The tool has a large bank of questions that TAs can choose from or they can input their own. Students simply need to click on the link and answer the questions. The advantage with this tool is that it provides, in addition to the written responses, a visual representation of the feedback submitted.

4. Solicited Feedback from Peers or Colleagues

A TA may request feedback from peers or other colleagues. This is an excellent way for a TA to receive a variety of different points of view about his/her teaching and potentially obtain future references. Each observer is asked to provide a written feedback letter that identifies what the TA did well and what could be improved. Additionally, a TA may request that the observer videotape his/her teaching so that the TA can view it later. If a TA does request a video of his/her teaching, advise him/her to watch the tape in several ways: with no sound on so that he/she can concentrate only on hand and body movements; fast forward so that he/she can take note of repeated movements that could be tempered; and in normal mode with friends and family so that the TA receives further feedback about the clarity of his/her teaching style.

PEER OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

One of the most effective forms of receiving feedback about teaching is through peer observation. It can be organized in a formal or informal manner. Formally, if your department supports a Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC), the TAC is available to set up a peer observation system to suit TAs in the department. Informally, two TAs can agree to observe each other and provide feedback. This is an excellent and safe way to receive feedback from colleagues; it also demonstrates excellent collegial practice. We recommend that the suggestions provided in *Appendix 3* on how to conduct a teaching observation are followed.

COURSE SUPERVISOR OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

In a mentor-type relationship, the TA can utilize the feedback received from a course supervisor to enhance his/her current and

future TA work. We recommend that the suggestions provided in *Appendix 3* on how to conduct a teaching observation are followed. The department may consider making course supervisor observations mandatory for new TAs, a practice that is occurring more frequently at UVic and elsewhere. If implemented, we recommend that the course supervisor observe the new TA within the first three weeks of the semester.

TA TRAINING PROGRAM MANAGER OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

Providing teaching observation feedback to TAs is something that the campus- wide TA Training Program Manager does on a regular basis. By request, the Program Manager makes arrangements to visit the TA's tutorial, lab or discussion session at an agreed upon time and observes the session for about one hour. The TA will then be invited to meet with the Program Manager to discuss the observations. The TA will leave with a letter detailing what the TA Training Program Manager observed and can be used for the TA's teaching dossier.

5. Personal Self-Reflection

TUTORIAL, LAB OR DISCUSSION SESSION JOURNAL

This form of documentation allows a TA to keep a running account of each tutorial, lab or discussion session that he/she facilitates. The journal, whether physical or electronic, includes lesson plans and notes recorded after each session. TAs are encouraged to take time during the session, if available, or immediately after the session, to record the following:

- a) What worked?
- b) Where did students need clarification?
- c) What types of questions did students ask?
- d) What could be done differently?
- e) Did you feel confident teaching this topic, and why or why not?
- f) What additional resources do I need?

The journal may or may not be shared with others. Ideally, the journal

can be used as a catalyst for discussions with the course supervisor each week or bi-monthly, so that the course supervisor can provide feedback about TA concerns, offer suggestions on lesson plans, and keep on top of the questions and issues arising in the session. The journal is a useful tool when reviewing the term and for planning the next term with an organized and documented account of actual events that took place in the learning environment. And an appealing outcome is that it will save time in the future!

Fast Early Feedback Course Section _____

TA _____

Date _____

Do I speak audibly and clearly	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Do I speak too softly?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Do I speak too fast?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Do I use filler words (um, ah) too often?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Can you read my writing?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Do I write too small?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Is my writing messy?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Did you understand all the instructions and class procedures that I announced?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Did I make the material interesting?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Did I remember to encourage questions?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Did I answer questions effectively?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Am I teaching at an appropriate pace?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	
Was I respectful of your needs?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3-----2-----1	

Adapted from Teaching Assistant Evaluation and Improvement Handbook: Dept. of Engineering, University of Wisconsin
<http://www.engr.wisc.edu/services/elc/tahand.pdf> Accessed, Dec 9, 2011.

Appendix 2

Using Student Feedback to Improve Your Teaching: Designing a Feedback Form for Use in Your Course

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There are many reasons for designing your own feedback form for use in class:

- a. If you are a new instructor, you may wish to check your progress after about week 3 of the course. In this way, adjustments can be made before the formal course evaluations are done at the end of term.
- b. Perhaps you have tried a new innovation and specifically want to know if it was useful.
- c. You are a graduate student and do not have access to a regular feedback process, but nevertheless you need student feedback on your teaching for your portfolio or to apply for a job.

Tips for getting effective feedback using a questionnaire:

- a. Explain carefully to students why you are asking for their feedback and how their comments will be used (for example, to improve the course in subsequent weeks/ terms).
- b. Ask them to be specific and to use examples from the course to illustrate their points.
- c. Assure students it is anonymous.
- d. Give them time in class to fill out the questionnaire to indicate how important it is to you.
- e. Ask students questions only about items they are able to judge.
- f. Ask only about issues you are prepared to (or can) change.

Sample Feedback Questionnaire

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Feedback Questionnaire for _____ <course name/number> Date: _____

Dear Student:

I would appreciate it if you would take a few minutes to answer the questions below regarding how this course is going so far from your perspective. Please be as specific as possible and use examples. I need to know what I am doing well, so I can keep doing it and also what could use some improvement. Your comments will be treated in confidence and will be used to improve the course in the future. Thank you!

Which aspects of my teaching have you found to be the most useful to you so far this term? Please give examples.

Has anything hindered your learning in this course? If yes, please explain and suggest what might be done differently.

Has my use of _____ <name new innovation/specific teaching method> specifically helped your learning in this course? Please explain.

Do you have any other suggestions?

<http://www.ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/support/index.php>

Points to Consider		Comments
.....Material.....	Puts outlines on blackboard or overhead screen, so always accessible	
	States learning outcomes, goals	
	Uses headings and subheadings to organize material	
	Situates material relative to the course	
	Gives several examples of each concept, some being concrete everyday examples	
	Defines new or unfamiliar terms	
	Confirms students' understanding	
	Offers help to students	
.....Student Interactions.....	Handles student problems and concerns effectively	
	Builds student rapport	
	Provides opportunities for student questions	
	Incorporates student ideas into lesson	
	Asks students and the whole class questions	
	Responds effectively to student questions	
	Demonstrates respect around issues of diversity	
	Uses teaching aids effectively (blackboard, whiteboard or overhead)	
	Uses a variety of activities in class	
	Demonstrates equipment/techniques effectively	
	Uses graphs, diagrams, images to facilitate explanation	
	Demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject	
	Employs moderate pace	
	Maintains eye contact	
Uses voice (speed, tone, volume, clarity) effectively		
.....Delivery.....	Demonstrates mastery of the subject material	
	Maintains appropriate movement throughout the room	

Other Observations:

PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

Peer-evaluation has been used in academia for many years when it comes to tenure decisions, grant applications, etc. Now, many institutions use peer observation as a means of evaluating and improving the teaching of educators. As a result of the observation process, it is hoped that you will gain new ideas and perspectives about teaching from your colleagues.

Instructions for use

PRIOR TO THE OBSERVATION

Have a short meeting to discuss any points of emphasis that the teacher would like examined. (Is there a specific aspect of your teaching that you want examined?) The observer should be clear on the TA's goals and should review any relevant material ahead of time (e.g. class outline, homework/assignment that students were asked to do).

DURING THE OBSERVATION

As the observer, show up on time for the session.

The TA/instructor should teach as normal – don't change because you are being observed! The TA should introduce the observer to the class and explain the purpose of his or her visit. The observer should comment on all of the categories on the form (if applicable). Any additional observations can be put in the extra space provided or on a separate piece of paper.

AFTER THE OBSERVATION

The observer should review the notes on the form and make any additions that are necessary. If the form is "messy," rewrite on another form. The peer observer and TA should meet to discuss the results of the observation. Keep a copy for your teaching dossier!

Useful feedback is...

Descriptive rather than judgmental

Specific rather than general

Focused on behaviour rather than the person

Focused on helping rather than hurting

Focused on behaviour that the teacher can do something about,
not inferences
Provided with opportunities for further discussion
Provided with clear suggestions for improvement
Based on observations
An opportunity to learn!

Adapted from University of Minnesota, Center for Teaching & Learning Services website) <http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/>

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