

Alternative methods to SFQs of collecting formative feedback from students for professional development

Collecting feedback from students is a great way to gain a student perspective on what is working in the classroom and what needs improvement. Creating and distributing the tools ourselves protects us from unconscious bias from academic managers and gives us more precise information about aspects of our teaching that are of most concern to us.

As instructors, we can use the tools outlined below to solicit specific, actionable feedback from students to help us make decisions about many aspects of our teaching, such as

- the pacing of a course
- activities we use both inside and outside of the classroom
- delivery methods for information
- assessment tools
- selection of class materials and technology tools
- classroom management

Using these tools will help us to assess our materials and our practice, and may heighten student engagement by allowing them to participate in shaping their learning environment.

Keeping records of the tools we use and the feedback we receive, as well as a record of how we've used this feedback in our own professional development will also give us ways of reflecting on our practice and having meaningful discussions with our managers about our interactions with students.

Given the inequitable nature of the information gathered from SFQs, this last point about providing an alternative narrative that is focused on our classroom practice and not based on superficial and generic impressions from students is particularly important when discussing our performance with managers.

A List of Tools for Collecting Formative Feedback from Students

There are many ways to collect useful feedback. This list introduces a few common methods. I'd like to thank the team at Teaching + Learning for their help in providing some of the tools below.

Mid-term formative feedback: This is a tool that requires a bit of preparation, but is a great way to solicit feedback from students at a time when you can implement changes they'd like to see.

In the second half the semester, consider handing out a short list of questions for students to answer. Consider gathering feedback on activities, assessments, readings or course materials, as well as any classroom management issue that may have come up in the first half of the semester. A combination of questions on a Likert scale (where students rate statements from 1-5, for example), and short answer questions generally works well.

Blackboard also has a survey tool that could be very useful in this context. The survey tool allows you to ask different types of questions and is anonymous and ungraded.

For help in designing questions, feel free to consult the team at Teaching + Learning.

Start, stop, continue: This is a tool you can use at any point in a class or semester, but is often good to explore in the first half of the course so you can implement feedback.

To use this, simply ask students to take out a piece of paper and write the words start, stop, and continue in 3 different columns, or at 3 different points on the paper. Then, ask students to write down one thing they'd like you to start doing that you are not currently, one thing they'd like you to stop doing, and one thing they'd like to see you continue doing.

One-minute papers: This is a tool you can use at any point in a class or semester, and can in fact use multiple times with the same group of students.

Simply ask students to write for between 2-5 minutes on a question or short series of questions at the end of a class. These questions can be focused on the lesson (typical examples include "What was the most difficult or muddiest point of the lesson for you?") or on any aspect of the course to that point (such as "Which of the assignments we've completed so far was the most useful to you and why?").

The answers could be anonymous if delivered in a face to face class and can be collected for review immediately. For best results, communicate with students the following week about the general trends in their answers and, where possible, address any issues that come to light.

Suggestion box: This is another tool that can be used at any point in a semester, and might work best if it's open for most of the semester in a given class.

Make a suggestion box out of an old box of tissues, or a manila envelope. Encourage students to submit suggestions. You can also have a discussion thread on your Blackboard for suggestions. Be sure to refer to any substantive suggestions received to encourage students to continue participating throughout the term.