

CLASS REPRESENTATIVES: A Formative Feedback Strategy for Teaching Development

Formative feedback is an intentional, voluntary, developmental strategy for instructors to receive feedback about their teaching with the goal of better understanding and improving student learning



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My Teaching

I am a teaching professor in the Biological Sciences department. Since joining the University of Calgary in 1998, I have taught introductory biology courses as well as upper-level courses in plant and fungal biology. While these upper-level courses are moderate in size (60-96 students) and are taken primarily by majors in the various Biological Sciences programs, the introductory biology classes are a mixture of majors and non-majors and are very large, with each course consisting of two or three sections of 400 students each. I teach the upper-level courses using a team-based learning format, and the introductory courses involves both lectures and active learning approaches (e.g. think-pair-share activities).

My Teaching Curiosity

My very first teaching experience at the University of Calgary was a 400-student section of introductory biology. I had taught smaller classes as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alberta, but very quickly found that teaching such a large class was a completely different experience! In particular, I struggled with feeling very disconnected from the class, and with how to “read” the class — it was hard to know whether the students understood what we were discussing in class, whether the pace

was too fast or too slow, whether they needed more examples to really understand the concepts (this was before the advent of clickers, which now allow instructors to poll a class very easily). In the smaller classes that I had previously taught, I had students provide written feedback mid-way through the semester. But it seemed quite daunting to read through so many forms, and I also did not want to wait until mid-semester to find out how things were going.

Asking for Feedback from a Colleague

Luckily, part way through my first year, I talked with a colleague from the University of Alberta, who had taught large first-year classes for many years. He told me that he had started a “class ombudsmen” approach, in which he met regularly with a few students from his class to discuss issues and concerns.



Reflecting and Acting on the Feedback

I changed some aspects of my colleague’s approach to better fit with my personality, and introduced what I called ‘class representatives’ (class reps) into my first-year class in 1999, and what a difference it made! While everything didn’t go completely smoothly the first time through, I would say that having class reps has been one of the most effective changes to my teaching practice.

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Student Feedback and Outcomes

Meeting with the class reps each week not only gives me answers to those questions about pace and level of understanding, but



has also had a huge impact on the climate of my classrooms.

Even though only a few students in any class are class reps, many other students comment in their end-of-term surveys that just knowing that I met weekly with class reps made them feel that they had a voice in the classroom and that I cared about their experience.

Teaching Development

Scheduling regular meetings with the class reps also improved my teaching experience by helping to counteract that 'disconnected' feeling; getting to know even a few students helped me feel more connected to the class as a whole.

Formative Feedback Benefits

I have discovered that giving students a voice and an opportunity to be partners in a course changes the dynamic of a class: the class becomes something that we are developing and working on together. The frequent interaction with motivated students is very energizing and allows me to rethink strategies and make incremental improvements as the course progresses.

References



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Heather Addy with 'Class Reps'.

Photo by Riley Brandt, University of Calgary

Words of Wisdom

- Take the time and make the effort to create an informal, welcoming environment for the class representatives
- Bring food (cookies or Timbits work well)
- Spend time in the first meeting doing icebreakers so that the students get to know each other and you
- Remember to listen without being defensive
- You don't have to implement all of the changes students suggest but you do need to listen and reflect
- Take their comments as an opportunity to see your course through a new lens
- Read the following section on how to set up a class reps program

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How to set up a Class Representative (Class Reps) Program in your Classroom

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How to recruit class representatives

I post an announcement in class for the first week of classes, and also an announcement as a News item on D2L, indicating:

- duties and time commitment involved (i.e., meet with me once per week for ~30-40 min to discuss all aspects of the course; class reps bring forward their own concerns as well as those of other students)
- what interested students should do (i.e. e-mail me with their class schedule, or with a list of what days/times during the week they are available).

How to decide and schedule meeting times

The day/time for the meeting is determined by what works best for the majority of students as well as for me, and also when a suitable meeting room is available (my office is too small for these meetings). There will always be some people that cannot make the meeting time; in the email I send out to the group about the first meeting, I explain how I set the meeting time and thank those people who can't attend for their interest in being a class rep.

How to select the number of class representatives

Four or 5 for my smaller classes (of 60-100) and about 8-12 for the large first-year classes of ~400. Initially I worried about having too many class reps and would limit the number of students but soon found that there is always some attrition over the term. It is much better to have a larger group rather than a very small group: some of the most valuable discussions are those among the students themselves and if you have too few students (e.g. only 2 or 3), these discussions just don't happen—the students feel more intimidated about speaking up if there is not safety in numbers. Also bear in mind that not all students can attend every meeting, due to other commitments or conflicts. I invite all of the students who are available at the meeting time, and have not had any trouble with having too large of a group.

What to do at the first meeting

Like a first class, the first class rep meeting is crucial to setting the tone for the term.

- I start with introductions: each of us introduces her/himself, where we're from, major, year and some sort of "ice-breaker" e.g. the highlight of your summer. We repeat brief versions of these introductions (just name & major) over the next few meetings, since there are often new people joining, and it takes a while to learn names (at least for me!).
 - Next, I provide some background as to why I use class reps: e.g. unlike end-of-term surveys and USRIs, feedback from class reps helps me make changes while the course is running. I share my philosophy that it is not "my" course but "our" course and thus it is crucial to hear students' perspective on the course.
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- I explain their role, which is to provide student perspective on how the course is going, and that all aspects of the course are on the table (lectures; labs; assignments; exams e.g., after the midterm I will ask them whether the midterm accurately reflected the learning objectives, whether there was sufficient time, etc.).
- I emphasize that I really want their honest, constructive feedback and spend a bit of time telling them how to give constructive feedback (e.g. use of “I” statements). It is important to also let them know what their role does **not** include: e.g., they are not responsible for sharing their notes with students who miss class (this request comes up a lot in some terms since at least some class reps have their email addresses posted on D2L).
- I ask for permission to post their first names and email addresses on D2L, so that students can email them with issues to be brought up at the meeting. This is not a requirement: if some students do not want their email listed, that is fine but I have rarely had students indicate that it is not OK. I also ask if they are willing to stand up in class and be introduced as a group, so that the other students will know who the class reps are; I repeat this step a few times over the term. The class reps tell me that most of the input they get is from people they sit with in labs or class—including conversations around them that they overhear at the beginning or end of class—but sometimes people do seek them out.
- I ask if they have any questions about their role or any aspect of being a class rep. After answering the questions, I leave for ~5 minutes, explaining that sometimes students hesitate to provide constructive criticism if they feel that they are the only one with that concern. Giving them time to talk among themselves first means that when we do get into their concerns, the issues come from the group rather than from an individual student. Leaving the students alone also helps them gel as a group.

The two most important things about the first meeting are:

- to create an informal atmosphere that encourages constructive and honest feedback. I bring Timbits or cookies or some sort of snack (to this and to subsequent meetings) to reinforce the casual and collegial atmosphere;
- to plan how you will follow up in class. I make sure to spend a few minutes in the next class explaining that I met with the class reps, outlining their role and indicating how students can contact them. It’s important to update the class about what you discussed with the class reps, especially if there are any changes that you’re making in response to the discussions (even little things like pace of lectures). Students have told me that just knowing I meet and discuss issues with the reps makes them feel that there is a better atmosphere and better communication in the class. You need to report back regularly about the class rep meetings, but this first report is perhaps the most critical.

How much time does it take for the weekly meetings?

The first meeting takes the longest, and can be about 45-50 minutes; subsequent meetings are generally 30-40 minutes at most, depending on the topics being discussed. Later in the term, when the issues that the students raise have been discussed and settled (e.g. the pace of class), the meetings are often shorter, perhaps 15-20 minutes; however, these meetings are often when students ask about bigger issues relating to their program overall or to the discipline.

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Do you chair the meetings? Do you prepare an agenda?

I “chair” the meetings in that I start the meetings and wrap the discussion up as well as pose questions and ask for feedback, but prefer to use the term “facilitate” rather than “chair” as the atmosphere needs to be very informal and welcoming. I make notes of what the students say but make it very clear that I am not writing down who said what (and I show them this, early on).

I generally have an agenda in my mind, in terms of what specific questions I will ask and/or specific topics that I would like to discuss, but I only jot these in my notebook rather than circulating an agenda—again, this choice is based on creating a relaxed/informal atmosphere. As for the first meeting, after welcoming everyone, I leave for ~5 minutes so they can talk among themselves.

Are there questions that guide these discussions?

In my experience, it is important to have some planned questions to get the discussion started. Some of these are specific questions e.g. *How did you feel about the amount of time allocated for the team assignment last class?* But many of the questions are very open ended, such as the ones I use to start most meetings (*What is going well? What is not working so well?*). I have also found, at least early in the term, that when there are lulls in the discussion I need to prompt the students by asking questions such as *What other concerns or suggestions do you have?* This encouragement seems necessary at least at first, until they become more comfortable offering their feedback.

How do you respond to student suggestions that are not practical/possible for your course?

In my experience, students generally become comfortable offering constructive criticism when they see that I will listen and consider what they are saying. I have hardly ever had anyone who was confrontational or rude, and I try to listen and not be defensive. If they are critical of something that I am not willing to change (e.g. late policies for lab assignments), I will listen to their concerns and then explain the rationale for the policy. For such topics, I will often say that I will think it over and get back to them at the next meeting; even if I don’t make the change, they know that their views were heard and considered. I’ve also found it effective to ask them if there are alternatives that they can think of for the policy that would work for both them and me; often we have a good discussion and their suggestions have sometimes improved course procedures.

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Concept and Design

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