

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



Heise, B., & Himes, D. (2010). The course council: an example of student-centred learning. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 49(6), 343-345.

Jeffs, C. & Piera, Y. (2016). *Focus on formative feedback for teaching development: A guide*. Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved from <http://ucalgary.ca/taylorinstitute/resources/formative-feedback>



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