



FAQ about incorporating class representatives into a course

Heather Addy PhD, Teaching Professor Emerita, Biological Sciences, University of Calgary
(Updated Sept 2022 to include information on both in-person and on-line class rep meetings)

1. How do you recruit class representatives?

In the first few classes of the term, I show a slide that invites students to be class reps, 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).

I also post the information as a News item on D2L but taking the time to talk about it in class is critical—it shows the students that this is something I think is important.

2. How do you decide on the meeting time?

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 determined the meeting time, thank those people who can't attend for their interest in being a class rep.

For the meeting room: I have either booked a departmental meeting room or a classroom for these meetings. Some terms we have been able to use our classroom, if the class rep meeting is right after our class and the room is not booked.

3. How many class reps are selected/needed?

I have ended up with about 6 -8 consistently for my smaller classes (of 90-150 students) and about 10-12 for the large first-year classes of ~400 students. 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.

I also learned that 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. Now I just invite all the students who are available at the meeting time and have not had any trouble with the group being too large.

4. What do you do at the first meeting?

As for the first class of the term, the first class-rep meeting is crucial in setting the tone for the term. Here's what I do in my first meeting:

- I start with introductions: each of us introduces themselves, including preferred pronouns if

they choose to share those, where we're from, major, year and some sort of "ice-breaker" e.g., the highlight of your summer. I typically continue to use an ice-breaker question or some other quick check-in at the start of each meeting, to set an informal tone and help us learn more about each other

- *For in-person meetings:* For the first few weeks, we re-introduce ourselves because there are often new people joining, and it takes a while to learn names (at least for me!).
- Next, I provide a brief rationale 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.
- 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 their 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. In large classes before the advent of social media, the reps reported that most of the input they got was 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 did seek them out.
- In recent years, the class reps have started to use social media as a way for students to contact them; I leave that choice and organization to the class reps.
- 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 ~10 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.
 - *For in-person meetings:* I leave the room and wait down the hall, so that the reps don’t worry that I will overhear their discussion.
 - *For on-line meetings:* I move the class reps into a breakout room
- Note that for the first meeting of the term, the students often need more time to talk among themselves—sometimes I have ended up waiting down the hall from the meeting room for

20–25 minutes! I used to worry that this lengthy discussion among themselves was a sign that there were big problems with the class and a long list of issues to discuss but have learned it just indicates that they are having a good discussion and getting to know each other.

The two most important things about the first meeting are:

- to create an informal atmosphere that encourages constructive and honest feedback.
 - *For in-person meetings:* I bring Timbits or cookies or some sort of snack (to this and all 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.

5. 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. These meetings are often when students ask about bigger issues: concepts that we've discussed in class, next steps in their studies or careers, etc.

Overall, incorporating class reps into a class is not very time consuming at all: apart from the weekly meetings, the only regular tasks are the reminder emails to the class reps and providing a brief update at the start of the next class and/or via email. And the weekly meetings are typically really enjoyable; I have often found class rep meetings to be the highlight of my week.

6. 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 of sorts in mind, in that I've thought about what specific questions I will ask and/or specific topics that I would like to discuss. I email the class reps the day before our meeting to remind them of the meeting and will outline any specific questions I want them to discuss so that they have time to think about it before our meeting. But I don't create or circulate a formal agenda; while I jot notes to myself during the meeting, there are no minutes of the meeting. The goal is to create a relaxed/informal atmosphere.

7. Are there questions that guide these discussions?

In my experience, it is important to have some planned questions to get the discussion started in the first few meetings of a term. 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?* In particular, it is important to ask about what is not working, as they may be uncomfortable raising those issues out of a concern that it might make me angry or hurt my feelings. This encouragement seems necessary at least at first, until they become more comfortable offering their feedback.

8. 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 focus on listening without being defensive, asking questions and/or summarizing students' concerns or suggestions to be sure I understand. 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.

The bottom line is that you don't have to implement all the changes that students suggest but you do need to listen and reflect and help them understand your rationale.

9. What is the overall impact of having class reps on the class?

- The weekly feedback allows me to rethink strategies, make incremental improvements as the course progresses, and deal with problems as they arise.
- I find the frequent interaction with motivated students to be very energizing; their ideas and suggestions have resulted in positive changes to my courses and assessments.
- Having class reps is an opportunity to see my course through a new lens: it gives me some idea of what it is like to be a student in my class.
- While only a small number of students become class reps, the other students report that having class reps in the course conveys the message that student voices and concerns are valued. Many students also report that they feel motivated to work harder in the course because they see that I am willing to put in the extra effort to work with class reps.
- 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, creating a very positive and supportive class environment.

Contact:

Heather Addy, addy@ucalgary.ca