

# Gathering formative feedback through mid-semester evaluations

Kiruthika Ragupathi

Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning  
National University of Singapore



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## Why use mid-semester course feedback?

Student evaluations were originally seen as a feedback mechanism by which students could inform teachers about their experiences in a course/module. Over the years, this function has been largely superseded and is used by administration for summative purposes—such as for decisions regarding promotion and tenure or teaching awards — and by students to make judgments for the selection of their courses/modules.

The most widely used method for evaluating teaching is the end-of-semester feedback questionnaire. The questionnaires however arrive too late, and in any case do not benefit the students doing the evaluation. Nor do the questionnaires usually encourage students to give the specific comments an instructor might need either to identify how well students have understood the material or to spot weaknesses in classroom presentation, organization, pacing, and workload. These end-of-term student evaluations are also usually standardized in order to make comparisons across disciplines.

Numerous other methods such as emails, teacher-designed feedback forms (e.g., mid-semester feedback), classroom assessment quality circles can be used to improve teaching and enhance student learning experience. The feedback activities that take place during the semester are much more effective and are generally informal evaluations with both qualitative and quantitative questions. Such immediate and ongoing feedback allows teachers to make timely adjustments to course organisation, to experiment with pedagogical innovation, and to get concrete feedback about student learning experiences. The findings from a mid-semester process is confidential and is used constructively by the instructor.

Structured mid-semester evaluations can provide specific feedback on what the students like/dislike about a course, what they feel needs change/improvement, and students' ideas on how to carry out the improvement. The constructive criticism from students will help instructors identify the teaching methods that best contribute to students' understanding of the material. These evaluations also provide the unique advantage of exposing students to what their peers think of a course's strengths and weaknesses. Mid-semester course surveys can be easily designed and administered at any point during the course of the semester by the individual instructor. Responses to such surveys can be processed within the boundaries of each module's domain and are only accessible to the individual instructor.

The key benefits of the mid-semester evaluations over end-of-semester evaluations is in its flexibility that enables instructors in customizing the instrument to address specific details of the course, its immediacy in reporting the data and in implementing the necessary changes. There is ample evidence in the literature to confirm that students' formative, mid-term evaluation of courses can lead to meaningful improvements in instruction, student learning outcomes and attitudes. Research also indicates that professors who do mid-term evaluations may lead to achieve higher end-of-term evaluations (Overall & Marsh, 1979; Cohen 1980).

This guide is designed to help you design, conduct and use mid-semester feedback for formative purposes of improving teaching and to enhancing student learning.

## Mid-semester feedback techniques

- **One Minute Paper**

This quick technique helps the instructor find out what students have gotten out of the course or a given day's class or tutorial. This tool works well with both large and small classes. It is a simple survey with two questions like: What is the most important thing you have learned in this course? What is the least important thing you have learned? The questions can be modified in various ways, but they should remain flexible, open-ended and be adapted to fit your needs. (Source: Thomas & Angelo (1993). "Classroom Assessment Techniques")

- **Start-Stop-Continue**  
This simple evaluation tool provides feedback on students' classroom experiences. This technique can be used to collect feedback on a variety of areas such as reading materials, tutorial sessions, learning activities, practices, teaching methods, use of technology.  
*(Source: Strobino "Building a Better Mousetrap." The Teaching Professor, Jan 1997)*
- **Dear Professor Letters**  
This feedback tool is used "get to know students on a personal level; to have an ongoing, individual conversation with them throughout the semester; and to monitor their progress in learning course content." This is designed to ask students to write about their cognitive and affective experiences in the class. It not only keeps the lines of communication open throughout the semester but also allows the teacher to improve the teaching techniques and to observe how the content is impacting the growth of his/her students.  
*(Source: The Teaching Professor, May 1998)*
- **Student Liaisons (individual / group)**  
Form a classroom committee of three to five students to meet with you regularly to discuss your course (e.g., strengths and weaknesses). It is important to let other students in the class know who the committee members are, so they can connect with them outside of class and encourage committee members to speak with other students individually or in groups to elicit constructive feedback.
- **Teaching Journals**  
A teaching journal can be a valuable tool for collecting feedback and improving instructional planning not just for the new teacher but also for the experienced instructors. After each class, the teacher records his/her observations about the class – the types of questions asked by students, where examples or illustrations could have been added, how a learning activity was received, where an explanation could be improved. It might be good to start out by identifying three things that worked well in class and three things most in need of improvement.  
*(Source: The Teaching Professor, June 1988)*
- **Structured mid-semester evaluations**  
These structured evaluations may include a few questions, usually 2-3 open-ended questions and a few quantitative questions. These evaluations questions ask students to respond to specific aspects of the course, their own learning activities, or the instructor's teaching and specific ideas on how to improve the course.

While all the above techniques can be useful depending on your purpose and goals of using mid-semester feedback, it is highly effective if you use the structured mid-semester evaluations with a specific focus based on your needs.

## Strategies for implementation

- **Identify the purpose and goals of employing mid-semester feedback**  
Identify the purpose of why you would like to use mid-semester feedback before-hand and what you hope to gain from it.
- **Decide on what questions you want to ask**  
Plan your questions based on your identified purpose and goals, and ask clear questions (Cooper, 2013). When looking at your instructional methods, focus on what can be changed during the semester and ask your students for specific responses about particular issues rather than a general evaluation of the course or your teaching. Add a mix of multiple choice and long

answer questions to obtain specific feedback; however remember to keep it short.

(Source: *“Effectively Using Informal Early Semester Feedback”*, 1987)

- **Reinforce to students that you are looking for constructive feedback that you can respond to during the semester**
- **Schedule mid-semester feedback at a time that you think is appropriate to the course**  
If you are teaching a course for the first time or have significantly revised a course you have taught previously, you may want to canvass students as early as three or four weeks after the semester begins. If you are teaching a course you have taught many times before, you may want to wait until mid-semester before asking planning for a mid-semester evaluation. (If you solicit feedback immediately after the mid-semester, most of the comments may relate to the exam.) In addition, if you observe that students are having difficulty with the material or course requirements, you may want to probe the issue immediately.  
(Source: *“Effectively Using Informal Early Semester Feedback”*, 1987)
- **Share and discuss the results with students**  
Summarize the common feedback and general trends obtained from the survey and share it with the class (Cooper, 2013). It would be good to explain how you will try to improve upon your methods and act upon the received feedback.
- **Make small modest changes**  
Always take the tinkering approach when making changes to your course based on mid-semester evaluation. Make small modest changes and don't abandon a change the first time it doesn't seem successful, tinker with it further to make little adjustments and see how it can be improved.

## Developing good questions

The *“Seven Principles of Effective Teaching”* developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987) has been a guiding force for quality education, and represents a philosophy of engagement, cooperation, learning community, interaction, quality, and efficiency. These seven principles can be used a starting point for developing good mid-semester evaluation questions. The seven principles are listed below:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Uses active learning techniques
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

Open-ended questions are those that can provide valuable insight while likert scale questions can provide useful statistical feedback. You know your course best, so tailor your questions to target areas you feel may be problematic. Questions can gather information on a wide variety of course topics such as the quality of the textbook, lectures, assignments, discussions, group work, labs, classroom environment, TA's, and readings.

This section provides a set of sample questions for gathering responses about specific issues rather than a general evaluation of the course or your teaching. Questions can be designed to gather information on a wide variety of course topics such as classroom environment, lectures, discussions, group work, learning activities, quality of reading materials, and assignments. However, as discussed in the previous sections, take the time to customize the questions based on your identified purpose and goals of your course. As you know your course best, tailor the questions to cater to areas that you may feel are problematic. The key is to **ask clear questions that can provide specific, concrete, behaviorally oriented information is useful to improve your teaching.**

## Sample questions: Qualitative feedback (Open-ended)

### Related to student learning experience

- Which aspect of the course is most helpful to you?
- Which aspect of the course is least helpful to you?
- Aspects of the course that enhance your learning experience.
- Aspects of the course if modified or improved could enhance your learning experience.
- What is the most important/valuable thing you have learned in this course so far?
- What is the least important/valuable thing you have learned?
- What has been most helpful for your learning in this course so far?
- What has caused you the most difficulty in this course so far?
- What concepts or ideas in this course do you feel you do not fully understand?
- What suggestion(s) can you make that would enhance your learning experience in this class?
- What I really like about this course is:
- What I really dislike about this course is:
- What is one thing you could do that will enhance your learning experience?
- In what ways is the format of the class helpful or detrimental to your learning experience?
- What is helping you to learn in this class?
- If I could change one thing about this course, it would be:
- Describe what you believe to be the most important idea or skill you have learned from this course so far.

### Related to student activities

- Is the pace of lectures too fast/too slow/about right?
- How many hours a week, on average, do you spend on this course?
- What do you feel about the organization and presentation of course materials.
- Are you able to make evident the connections between different elements of the course (e.g., lectures, readings, labs, assignments)?
- Do the lectures help you learn? Why or why not?
- Do the class and/or online activities help you learn? Why or why not?
- Do you feel comfortable asking questions in class? Why or why not?
- Are you peers comfortable in sharing opinions or asking questions in class? Explain.
- What do you think is the purpose of our tutorials?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the tutorials?
- How could tutorials be made more helpful for your progress?
- What concepts or ideas in this course do you feel you do not fully understand?
- How many hours do you take to complete the assigned readings/assignments? Do you take notes or prepare questions on the material?
- What is making learning difficult?
- Describe the positive and challenging aspects of completing your final assignment.
- Describe how your classmates are contributing to your learning in this course.
- If there is one thing about the readings you don't understand, please describe how you respond to it (e.g., do you check with the instructor, look up information online, discuss with your classmates, wait to see if it will be covered in lecture, etc.).
- Which topic have you found the most difficult so far? What do you think made it difficult?
- Did the worked-out problems in class help you to understand how to work out questions on your own?
- Did you find the assignments relevant/interesting/challenging? Why or Why not?
- Are the assignment/lab experiment procedures clearly explained?

### Start/Stop/Continue Technique

- What should your instructor start doing (with respect to her/his teaching)?
- What should your instructor stop doing (with respect to her/his teaching)?
- What should your instructor continue doing (with respect to her/his teaching)?
- List any instructional practices, or behaviours that you would like the teacher to start using.
- List any teaching practices, policies, or behaviours that you would like the teacher to stop using in the classroom.
- List those elements which you would you like to see continued.

### **Sample questions: Quantitative feedback (Likert-scale)**

#### Related to student experience

- I am developing the skills I need in this class.
- I understand the material in this class.
- I can apply what I've learned in this class to new situations.

#### Related to course in general

- I find the class very difficult.
- I find this course challenging.
- I would recommend this class to someone else.
- I find the format of this class (lecture, discussion, problem-solving) helpful to the way that I learn.
- I feel that this class format engages my interest.
- I find that this class stimulates my interest in reading about this subject outside of class.
- The design/structure/pacing/navigation of the course supports my understanding of material.

#### Related to learning activities

- I feel comfortable speaking in this class.
- I feel comfortable sharing my opinions, questions, and ideas in tutorials.
- I learn better when the instructor summarises key ideas from a class session.
- I find the comments on the written work helpful to my understanding of the class content.
- Lectures are clear and organized.
- I feel that class discussions help me in understanding the readings.
- Essay questions provide an opportunity to demonstrate my grasp of the material.
- Tutorials enrich my understanding of the course.
- The suggested readings are useful in answering the assigned questions.
- The readings help me understand lecture material.
- The activities, materials, and assessments are interesting and engaging.
- The out-of-class assignments are helping me learn and prepare for the exams and tests.
- There are sufficient opportunities to practice and get feedback on what I am learning.
- The assessments match what we are being asked to learn.
- The instructions for completing assignments are clear.

#### Related to experience with the instructor

- The instructor is approachable.
- I feel comfortable approaching the instructor with questions or comments.
- The instructor motivates me to learn.
- The feedback I am getting from the instructor is helping me learn.
- The tutor's feedback helps me understand how to improve my future essays.

## Sample structured questionnaire

Through this mid-term evaluation/feedback, I would like to find out what you think of the class so far and what might be improved over the rest of the semester. This evaluation is completely anonymous. Although this is completely voluntary, I would greatly appreciate your feedback.

The evaluation is divided into three parts: a quantitative assessment of the class, an open-ended question about the best and worst aspects of the class and a final section for the purposes of self-reflection.

### Part 1: Best and Worst Aspects of the Class

- What has been most helpful for your learning in this course so far?
- What has caused you the most difficulty in this course so far?
- What concepts or ideas in this course do you feel you do not fully understand?
- What suggestion(s) can you make that would enhance your learning experience in this class?

### Part 2: Opinions about the Class

Please use the following five-point scale to respond to the questions.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lectures are clear and organized.						
The readings help me understand lecture material.						
The activities, materials, and assessments are interesting and engaging.						
I feel comfortable sharing my opinions, questions, and ideas in this course.						
I find that this class stimulates my interest in reading about this subject outside of class.						
I feel comfortable approaching the instructor with questions.						
The feedback from my instructor is helping me learn.						
I would recommend this class to someone else.						

### Part 3: Self-reflection

- What is the one thing that you would personally do to enhance the learning experience in class?



## Sharing evaluation results with students

Administer the mid-semester using a survey tool within the LMS (e.g., IVLE, LumiNUS). This will automate the process and make it easy for both you and your students. The likert-scale questions are easily summarized using the reporting and statistical analysis tools within the LMS and can be helpful in interpreting the results. However, analyzing the open-ended questions can be challenging.

Share the results with your students is a key step in the mid-semester feedback process. You can follow these steps to analyse and share the results:

- Use the reporting and statistical analysis tools within IVLE to summarize the results
- Identify general trends and common themes for each open-ended question. Make use of word-clouds to create a visual summary of the themes based on the frequency of appearance.
- Identify the items that you can deal with and follow through.
- Consult with a colleague or mentors about the results and identify areas to improve
- Share and discuss the results with your students
- Tell students how you will address their concerns
- Explain how you will try to improve upon your methods and act upon the received feedback
- Make noticeable changes to the course

## Technology tools for gathering feedback

Purpose	Tool
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Survey tool allows you to ask many different questions in one survey and gather data from your respondents.</li> <li>• Receive feedback from students (e.g., mid-semester feedback). Ask many different questions in one questionnaire that will allow you to gauge their overall experience or identify areas that may need to be fine-tuned</li> <li>• Encourage students to use anonymous feedback to give feedback on your module, learning activities and assessment tasks</li> </ul>	<b>LumiNUS Survey</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Poll tool allows you to quickly create a question and gather data from your respondents.</li> <li>• Ask only one question at a time.</li> <li>• Anonymity is not allowed in polls.</li> </ul>	<b>LumiNUS Poll</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions, gather live responses (polls &amp; short answers) from students, and see instant results (animated graph, chart, or word cloud)</li> <li>• Gauge student understanding of concepts, do just-in-time teaching to correct misconceptions.</li> <li>• Gather short answer responses from students and display as a word cloud.</li> </ul>	<b>Poll everywhere</b>

## Conclusion

When implemented carefully, mid-semester feedback will prove to be very useful – be it with the help of written or online feedback. Students appreciate the opportunity to provide input especially when this input will directly benefit them. However, it is best that this input be solicited in a formal setting in the middle of the course after the students have some understanding of the course material. A third-party facilitator to administer the questions encourages students to be more open, thoughtful and responsible with the feedback they give.

Mid-semester evaluations will help instructors be aware of how the educational techniques, strategies and approaches is perceived by the students. It generates an increases awareness of their teaching in instructors and will help them identify student concerns and misunderstanding that act as barriers to student learning. As an instructor, you must be prepared, to make changes to the teaching style when possible during the semester. Students will appreciate the fact that their concerns were heard, their ideas considered, and changes made. The overall result is an improved learning environment. Mid-term course feedback can promote two-way communication amongst teachers and students, thus allowing lecturers to further comprehend student concerns.

When time comes for the end-of-semester evaluations, you can compare and see if the problems that you tried to address from the mid-term feedback were resolved. As an added benefit to those of you seeking positive course reviews for promotion and tenure, this early assessment can greatly improve the end-of-term course evaluations. Therefore, in conclusion it is a useful tool in helping staff monitor their teaching by identifying their own strengths and understanding student concerns while identifying areas to improve.

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