Formative Feedback
for Teaching Assistants (TAs)
at UVic | 2022-2023

Suggestions regarding implementing a variety of feedback approaches that support the professional development of TAs university-wide

University of Victoria

1.   Introduction

How can teaching assistants (TAs) learn effective teaching skills? One method is practice, practice, and more practice. However, practice on its own does not necessarily improve one's teaching (McKeachie, 2006). Practice needs to be complemented by carefully designed feedback that offers TAs, whether beginning or experienced, guidance as they develop as teachers. In addition, to offer the best undergraduate education possible at the University of Victoria, it is essential that TAs are supported to become better teachers. Approximately 30% of first- and second-year courses at UVic include TA-led tutorials, labs, or discussion sessions, which emphasizes the support that TAs require.

The goal of this document is to provide suggestions as to how best to offer formative feedback to TAs. Formative feedback supports teachers as they develop their teaching skills, as opposed to summative evaluation, which tends to rate or rank teaching performance after the teaching is completed. For this reason, formative feedback is preferred over summative evaluation.

As beginning teachers, TAs gain valuable information about their role as an instructor when they can receive different types of feedback. The primary purpose of feedback is to improve teaching. Consistent, structured, and constructive feedback about the performance of their duties and responsibilities will improve teaching performance, which in turn builds confidence and creates a positive cycle. Additionally, undergraduate students deserve an opportunity to provide feedback to let TAs and the department know how their learning is being supported or how the teaching could be improved. The opportunity to provide feedback lets students know that their input is valued and tends to result in increased communication between TAs and students. Lastly, course supervisors and the department will gain a greater understanding of how to advise future TAs regarding how to conduct lab, tutorial, or discussion sessions.

TAs should keep in mind that these formative feedback tools are only a small part of a continuous teaching improvement process. It is recommended that TAs practice on-going self-reflection about their teaching and take advantage of the broad range of resources available to them on campus, such as the workshops and programs available through the Division of Learning and Teaching Support and Innovation (LTSI). TAs can also take advantage of the Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC) in their department, who can assist TAs in developing feedback forms specific to their needs. Furthermore, once TAs approach the job market, their ability to reflect on their teaching will be extremely beneficial in a variety of professional employment contexts.

In what follows, you will find general information about requesting feedback, methods for obtaining feedback from students, and lastly types of feedback that a TA may request from colleagues on campus.

We hope this information is useful for TAs and course supervisors. The professional development programs at the LTSI strive to help graduate students professionally develop in tandem with their graduate degrees. These suggestions were compiled to initiate a broad campus conversation about how best to provide formative feedback to TAs regarding their TA roles and responsibilities and do not replace or are in any way the same as the Course Experience Survey (CES). If you have ideas and/or suggestions, please feel free to contact the LTSI TA Coordinator at ltsitac@uvic.ca.

2.   Requesting feedback: some general considerations

Here are some important suggestions to follow when implementing any type of feedback:
-   Request feedback early so that concerns, either from the TA or students, can be addressed.
-   Always ensure that feedback is anonymous. Students must feel secure that their feedback will not affect their grades.
-   Remember to limit feedback questions to areas in the course that the TA or course supervisor has control over.

- Do not solicit or encourage comments on the personal aspects of a TA.
- The feedback form should be distributed at the beginning of the tutorial, lab or discussion session. If the feedback form is given out at the end of class, students tend to rush through the form.
- Clearly state the purpose of the feedback form (for example, to enhance student learning).
- Consider providing a disclaimer at the top of the feedback form.

A suggestion:

> "*Thank you for taking the time to provide feedback. The department welcomes all suggestions, but please ensure that your suggestions are about how the TA can improve the (insert - lab/tutorial/discussion) session and structure. Even though the TA and department will consider all suggestions, it may not be possible to implement changes to structure this term. However, your suggestions will help us improve the (insert - lab/tutorial/discussion) for the future.*"

3.   Methods for obtaining student feedback

FAST EARLY FEEDBACK[1]**:**
This type of feedback is delivered within the first few tutorials, labs, or discussion sessions. It addresses areas such as the TA's voice projection, writing clarity and pace, which are all easily adjusted. See *Appendix 1* for a sample Fast Early Feedback Form.

How TAs can respond to Fast Early Feedback – items in this category can be easily addressed. For example, TAs can easily increase their voice level or decide to wear a microphone if necessary; or they can write larger and clearer on the blackboard. This type of feedback allows TAs to adjust their actions immediately in the next tutorial, lab or discussion session so that students will notice that their feedback was taken into consideration.

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[1] Adapted from http://www.engr.wisc.edu/services/elc/tahand.pdf

CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES (CATS)[2]:

Feedback of this type takes place at the end of a lab, tutorial, or discussion session. It is anonymous, quick, and easy to administer. TAs get an immediate sense of whether students have grasped the concepts taught or need further instruction.

What are two quick and easy CATS that TAs can use?

a) One minute paper – at the end of class, the TA asks students to write on an index card or piece of paper what major concepts, procedures, or definitions they learned that class. By scanning the cards, the TA quickly determines if students were able to articulate the main points of the lesson.

b) Muddiest Point – TAs can ask students to write down the one concept that was *not* clear. This quickly identifies the problematic concept(s).

Responding techniques for CATS – TAs address the concept(s), procedures and/or definitions in a subsequent class, provide further instruction, direct students to additional resources, and/or include the concept(s) at an upcoming exam review session to ensure that the material is understood by all students.

MID-TERM:

It is a great idea to get substantial feedback from students before the end of term. This way, TAs receive early feedback and can implement changes if necessary. Here are some suggestions:

a) Carefully plan the right time to request feedback. For example, asking right after a test will likely only solicit comments related to the test.

b) Think of midterm feedback as a collaborative project with the students, focused on working together to make the course better.

See *Appendix 2* for an example of a feedback form suitable for administering at mid-term.

How TAs can respond to mid-term feedback – it is courteous for a TA to acknowledge any issues that were identified. TAs should summarize

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[2] Classroom Assessment Techniques come from Angelo & Cross (1993).

the main points gathered from the feedback forms and share with students what was stated as positive and what could be improved. The TA should emphasize to the class any suggestions that cannot be addressed right away but will be useful for future offerings of the course. This also provides the opportunity to tell students why certain suggestions cannot be changed – for example, that the number of tests must remain the same or to verify why that text was chosen.

SMALL GROUP INSTRUCTIONAL FEEDBACK (SGIF)[3]
This feedback process involves inviting the TA Coordinator from the LTSI as a facilitator to obtain feedback from students in the tutorial, lab, or discussion session about the format and content of the course. SGIF allows students to discuss collectively any suggestions they may have for tutorials, labs, or discussion groups. By way of group discussion, students are given the opportunity to articulate constructive and productive feedback. Students often identify gaps or repetition in the curriculum between courses in a department. SGIF is also extremely effective when a new teaching method is being used in the course and provides immediate feedback. The facilitator guides students' discussion to attain answers to the specific questions that the TA and course supervisor are interested in, as opposed to students misinterpreting questions and/or not providing enough details about why they like or dislike a particular teaching method or assignment. The process proceeds as follows:

a) The TA, course supervisor, and facilitator have an initial meeting to review the tutorial, lab, or discussion session goals and other specific goals for the feedback session. The facilitator will suggest asking students what instructional strategies have helped them learn, and what could be implemented in the tutorial, lab, or discussion session to enhance their learning. Sometimes, TAs want to receive answers to specific questions about certain teaching techniques or assessments used. New questions may need to be designed to accommodate these additional goals.

b) The facilitator conducts a 25- to 30-minute feedback session in the tutorial, lab, or discussion session with students. The TA and

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[3] SGIF is sometimes referred to as small-group instructional diagnosis (SGID) and was originated by Dr. Joseph Clark at the University of Washington.

course supervisor are not present during the feedback session.

c) The facilitator prepares a report that summarizes student feedback in the aggregate and arranges to meet with the TA and course supervisor to discuss.

d) The TA and course supervisor use the report to inform decisions regarding implementation of student suggestions immediately or at a future date, as well as plan how they will address the generated feedback with their students.

END OF COURSE:

Typically, student feedback is requested at the end of the course via a formal scripted form. The script may ask a variety of questions, or be as simple as asking students the following three questions:

a) What worked? b) What didn't work? c) If you were teaching this lab, tutorial, or discussion session, what would you do differently?

This format can be very effective in getting a general indication. However, without some prompting, students may not be able to recall exactly what worked. If interested in receiving feedback about details of the course, use direct questions. For example:

a) "Did you find that the reflective writing pieces at the end of lab, tutorial, or discussion helped you comprehend class material?" or

"Were the demonstrations clear and helpful in providing sufficient suggestions to complete the assignment?"

ONLINE FEEDBACK:

You can request feedback in multiple digital formats: UVic's Microsoft Forms, UVic's SurveyMonkey, or a survey in the course's Brightspace page. All three of those options utilize single sign on using your NetLink ID. Once a feedback option is created and the link is shared, students simply need to click on the link and answer the questions. The advantage with this tool is that it provides, in addition to the written responses, a visual representation of the feedback submitted.

4. Solicited Feedback from Peers or Colleagues

A TA may request feedback from peers or other colleagues. This is an excellent way for TAs to receive a variety of different points of view about their teaching and potentially obtain future references. Each observer is asked to provide a written feedback letter that identifies what the TA did well and what could be improved. Additionally, a TA may request that the observer videotape the teaching session so that the TA can view it later. If TAs do request a video, advise them to watch the tape in several ways: with no sound on so that they can concentrate only on hand and body movements; fast forward so that they can take note of repeated movements that could be tempered; and in normal mode with friends and family so that the TA receives further feedback about the clarity of their teaching.

PEER OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

One of the most effective forms of receiving feedback about teaching is through peer observation[4]. It can be organized in a formal or informal manner. Formally, if your department supports a Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC), the TAC is required to set up peer observation of TAs in the department. Informally, two TAs can agree to observe each other and provide feedback. This is an excellent and safe way to receive feedback from colleagues; it also demonstrates excellent collegial practice. We recommend that the suggestions provided in *Appendix 3* on how to conduct a teaching observation are followed.

COURSE SUPERVISOR OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

In a mentor-type relationship, TAs can utilize the feedback received from a course supervisor to enhance their current and future teaching work. We recommend that the suggestions provided in *Appendix 3* on how to conduct a teaching observation are followed. The department may consider making course supervisor observations mandatory for new TAs, a practice that is occurring more frequently at UVic and elsewhere. If implemented, we recommend that the course supervisor observe the new TA within the first three weeks of the semester.

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[4] Downloadable feedback forms for in-person or online teaching observations can be found on the LTSI website.

TA COORDINATOR OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

By request, the TA Coordinator makes arrangements to visit the TA's tutorial, lab, or discussion session at an agreed upon time and observes the session. The TA will then be invited to meet with the TA Coordinator to discuss the observation. The TA will leave with a letter detailing what was observed and can be used for the TA's teaching dossier.

5.   Personal Self-Reflection

TUTORIAL, LAB, OR DISCUSSION SESSION JOURNAL

This form of documentation allows TAs to keep a running account of each tutorial, lab, or discussion session that they facilitate. The journal, whether physical or electronic, includes lesson plans and notes recorded after each session. TAs are encouraged to take time during the session, if available, or immediately after the session, to record the following:

a) What worked?

b) Where did students need clarification?

c) What types of questions did students ask?

d) What could be done differently?

e) Did you feel confident teaching this topic, and why or why not?

f) What additional resources do I need?

The journal may or may not be shared with others. Ideally, the journal can be used as a catalyst for discussions with the course supervisor each week or bi-monthly, so that the course supervisor can provide feedback about TA concerns, offer suggestions on lesson plans, and keep on top of the questions and issues arising in the session. The journal is a useful tool when reviewing the term and for planning the next term with an organized and documented account of actual events that took place in the learning environment. In addition, an appealing outcome is that it will save time in the future!

Appendix 1[5]

Fast Early Feedback Course Section _____

Do I speak audibly and clearly	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Do I speak too softly?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Do I speak too fast?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Do I use filler words (um, ah) too often?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Can you read my writing?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Do I write too small?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Is my writing messy?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Did you understand all the instructions and class procedures that I announced?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Did I make the material interesting?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Did I remember to encourage questions?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Did I answer questions effectively?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Am I teaching at an appropriate pace?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	
Was I respectful of your needs?	Yes	No
	5-----4-----3------2------1	

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[5] Adapted from Teaching Assistant Evaluation and Improvement Handbook: Dept. of Engineering, University of Wisconsin
http://www.engr.wisc.edu/services/elc/tahand.pdf

Appendix 2

Sample Mid-Term Feedback Questionnaire 1

Explain clearly what has supported your learning in this course? Please give examples.

What could be done further to support your learning in this course? Explain and suggest what might be done differently.

In this course, I have used <name new innovation/specific teaching method>. Please explain how this has helped your learning in this course?

Please provide other suggestions?

Sample Mid-Term Feedback Questionnaire 2

Keep, Start, and Stop

The objective of mid-semester feedback is to offer constructive information to your instructor BEFORE the end of the semester. Your answers and comments will remain anonymous. If you require more space, please use the back of the sheet.

1.   Please write down one thing you would like the instructor to keep doing.

2.   Write down one thing you would like the instructor to stop doing.

3.   Write down one thing you would like the instructor to start doing.

4.   On a scale of 1-7, with 1 being low and 7 being high, how is the lab going for you?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5.   Why did you choose this number?

Thank you!

Appendix 3   Teaching Observation Form

Instructor:	Peer Observer:
Date:	Course:
Number of students registered/in attendance:	Classroom characteristics:

Table 1: Quality of learning environment

Points to consider	Comments
Clear opening and welcome that begins on time	
Creates positive class environment	
Outline of class provided that seems logical and coherent	
Provides clear intended learning outcomes	
Situates lesson material relative to the course	

Points to consider	Comments
Checks students' prior knowledge	
Gives several examples of each concept, some being concrete everyday examples	
Defines new or unfamiliar terms	
Confirms students' learning	
Offers help to students	
Summarizes, wraps up lesson, and ends at appropriate time	

Table 2: Level of student engagement

Points to consider	Comments
Students are active members of the learning situation	
Handles student problems and concerns effectively	
Student rapport exhibited; encourages feedback from students	
Evidence that instructor knows students (most, not just a few)	

Points to consider	Comments
Provides opportunities for student questions	
Incorporates student ideas into lesson	
Asks students and the whole class questions	
Responds effectively to student questions	
Demonstrates respect around issues of diversity	

Table 3: Range of instructional methods to support student learning

Points to consider	Comments
Planned and variety of activities for students that are clearly aligned with learning outcomes	
Use of multiple teaching aids that are appropriate and sufficient for topic(s) and engages students visually, audibly, and interactively (blackboard, whiteboard, video, audio, etc.) to address diverse student needs	
Demonstration of equipment/techniques, if required	
Use of graphs, diagrams, images to facilitate explanation	

Table 4: Overall effectiveness of communication ability

Points to consider	Comments
Demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject	
Demonstrates mastery of the subject material	
Demonstrates intercultural sensitivity	
Use of voice (speed, tone, volume, clarity)	
Pace	
Eye contact	
Effective use of non-verbal communication	
Appropriate movement throughout the room	

Other observations:

When preparing feedback for the instructor, keep in mind that useful feedback[6] is…

- descriptive and constructive rather than judgmental,
- specific rather than general,
- focused on behaviour that the teacher can do something about to support students' learning,
- provided with opportunities for further discussion,
- provided with clear suggestions for improvement,
- based on observations, and
- an opportunity to learn.

For a version about online teaching, please see our website.

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[6] Adapted from University of Minnesota, Center for Teaching & Learning Services website

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