

USING EARLY SEMESTER FEEDBACK

Early semester feedback refers to collecting and analyzing student feedback on your teaching and their learning at a time when they can be of most use -- during the semester. Collecting and responding to this feedback has been shown to improve student engagement and learning.

How Does this Differ from End-of-Semester Surveys?

While end-of-semester surveys focus on summative evaluation, often through quantitative scores, early feedback is designed to be formative, focusing on how to meaningfully improve teaching and student learning during that semester. As such, early semester feedback should be structured as a dialogue with your students. They provide information, which you use as an entryway to explaining and adjusting your teaching methods.

The process actively involves students in assessing their own progress and communicating their learning needs. Early feedback requires you to thoughtfully listen, react, and be prepared to make changes in your teaching during the current semester. It involves taking risks to learn how well you and your students are doing, recognizing that you have room for improvement.

What are the basic features of the early feedback process?

Early feedback typically has these four features:

- Systematic collection of information from as many of your students as possible
- Targeted focus on class elements that can be changed, e.g., assignments, homework, pace, activities
- Information that is descriptive and diagnostic
- Instructor shares interpretation of data and plans for responding to it

How do you determine what to ask the students?

Often, the most useful information in early feedback is obtained when students are asked open-ended questions, such as:

- What about the environment, activities, and structure of this course are helping your learning?

- What specific suggestions do you have for changing the environment, activities, or structure of the course to better help your learning?

Generally, the most useful information in early feedback is diagnostic and descriptive. This information helps you determine specific areas for improvement. You might also use this as an opportunity to collect information about student learning activities, by asking students to describe challenges, how they are spending their time on assignments, and what components of the course are most effective.

We do not typically recommend asking students for general evaluative information. Knowledge of the student's overall opinion of your teaching is not very useful information for making mid-semester changes or improvements.

When is the 'best' time in the semester to use the system?

There is no one 'best' time; the 'best' time will be determined by your reasons for obtaining the feedback. Here are some guidelines:

- For new courses: you may collect feedback as early as week two or three
- For existing courses: you may wait until weeks five to eight
- If you observe a problem: you may want to request feedback immediately

What do you do with early feedback once you have it?

- Interpret the students' feedback looking for common themes or repeated suggestions, while trying not to focus only on criticism or one-off comments.
- Determine what changes in your teaching could be made to address the comments you receive. Also, reflect on why you plan to continue doing other things.
- Communicate and discuss your interpretation and plan of action with your students.

Discussing your actions and reactions with the students indicates that you do indeed listen to or read their comments and care enough about their learning to respond. How you handle this discussion shows that you took the early feedback seriously and responsibly. This conversation does not need to be difficult, here are some guidelines:

- Thank the students for the time they took and for their comments.



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- Share both positive comments and suggestions that you found meaningful.
- Select a limited number of comments, do not draw out the discussion so long that the students lose interest.
- When discussing a teaching strategy or assignment, which you cannot change, give your rationale for doing so.
- Remember that students gave you feedback in good faith. If you cannot maintain a positive and accepting attitude when discussing the results with your students, consider other approaches to sharing (a carefully crafted email for example).



SELF-ANALYSIS FOR EARLY FEEDBACK (EF)

This is a self-development tool that you may use to record your impressions about the early feedback results and to plan the debrief with your students.

NAME: _____ CLASS: _____

1. What results surprised you the most?

2. What topics/items have you chosen to talk about to your students and what do you plan on saying? Will you be able to implement some of their suggestions?

3. What are the most important thing(s) you have learned from this experience?
