Guide to Collecting Mid-Course Feedback at UBC

Prepared by the office of the AMS VP Academic and University Affairs

1. Introduction

Collecting Mid-Course Feedback (MCF) gives instructors a chance to conduct an informal, formative evaluation of a course partway through its delivery cycle, and to encourage two-way dialogue between instructors and students. This is meant to be done in a spirit of collaboration between students and instructors, so that instructors can start conversations about teaching and learning with their students.

At UBC, the Alma Mater Society (AMS) and Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) have partnered in an ongoing project aimed at encouraging instructors to provide opportunities for collecting MCF through surveys and similar means, and to identify instructors who already do so in order to engage them more deeply in dialogue around the process. Full details of this project can be found at http://midterm.teaheval.ubc.ca.

This guide gives suggestions for UBC instructors to create and implement mechanisms for MCF. However, since needs vary significantly between instructors, Faculties, courses, etc., the goal of the MCF project is not to impose a rigid set of rules for collecting feedback. One of the main advantages of MCF over UBC's end of term Student Evaluations of Teaching (SEoTs) is that processes can be adapted to instructors' unique needs. Thus, the guidelines below are meant as suggestions, adaptable at the discretion of instructors.

These guidelines are based on various sources: general pedagogical principles, the findings of other institutions, and research in the UBC context specifically. The AMS and CTLT are continually assessing this project, and these guidelines may be adapted based on the results of future assessment. Footnotes marked with an asterisk (*) indicate a link to a UBC-specific student or instructor perspective on MCF.

2. Why Collect MCF?

While not an exhaustive list, these are several potential benefits this process can provide:

- **Improving student perceptions of end of term evaluations.** Research has suggested that students who participate in evaluations of a course part-way through the term may be more likely to take end of term teaching evaluations more seriously.[1] Likely, this is because when instructors illustrate to students that their feedback is taken seriously, it shows them that evaluation processes like UBC's SEoTs are valuable. Given the importance placed on SEoT results at UBC, this outcome is in the interests of faculty and students alike.

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[1] M. J. Brown, "Student Perceptions of Teaching Evaluations," *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 35, no. 2 (2008): 177-181.

- **Improving instructor-student relationships.** AMS research has shown that many UBC students feel UBC as an institution does not prioritize student learning, or is not invested in creating a supportive environment for students;[2] many students also feel that a stressful academic environment has negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing.[3] Engaging students to collect MCF is a small gesture that can go a long way to alleviating these anxieties: by engaging students as co-creators in the construction of a course, instructors show that students' voices are taken seriously, and they instill the classroom with a spirit of collaboration and partnership that illustrates their investment in students.*

- **Increasing student motivation to learn.** Research suggests that being in a supportive classroom environment is important because it is a main factor that positively impacts students' motivation to learn.[4] Motivation can also be improved by giving students an increased sense of control and flexibility over their own learning experiences,[5] which can be achieved by allowing students to give input into the way a course is delivered.

- **Encouraging reflective learning.** To become active, lifelong learners, students must practice reflecting on their learning.[6] Collecting MCF and the dialogue this process fosters are tools to prompt this reflection. For example, this process allows instructors to identify areas where students have particularly negative or positive feelings about certain teaching or assessment practices, and to engage in conversations about the pedagogical rationale behind these. This benefit also applies to instructors seeking to learn how to improve their teaching practices, by helping them to seek targeted feedback about their teaching and to reflect on this feedback.[7]

Finally, it may be helpful to consider that MCF is *not* intended to…

- **Be modeled after end of term SEoTs.** In addition to being less generic and more customizable to instructors' unique needs, MCF allows instructors to gather feedback while a course can still be changed. Also unlike SEoTs, results are not collected by the university; instead, how results are used is left up to the discretion of the instructor.

- **Be restricted solely to evaluating pedagogy.** Of course, MCF provides a very good opportunity for instructors to gauge how students perceive their teaching. However, they can also be used to collect feedback on other aspects of a course. This will be covered further below in s. 3.2.

- **Return particularly surprising feedback.** Less than half of UBC instructors that have responded to surveys about their experiences with MCF have indicated that they were surprised by their

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[2] Kiran Mahal, *Academic Experience Survey Report 2013* (Office of the VP Academic and University Affairs of the Alma Mater Society of UBC Vancouver, 2013), 196, http://www.ams.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AMS-Academic-Experience-Survey-2013-FINAL-Electronic.pdf.

[3] Ibid., 38-67

*This UBC student felt this very message was communicated by his instructor using MCF: http://midterm.teacheval.ubc.ca/2014/08/23/student-perspective-viet-vu-4th-year-honours-economics/

[4] Olle Ten Cate, Rashmi A Kusurkar, and Geoffrey C Williams, "How self-determination theory can assist our understanding of the teaching and learning processes in medical education. AMEE guide No. 59." *Medical Teacher* 33, no. 12 (2011): 961-973.

[5] Susan A. Ambrose, Michael W. Bridges, Michele DiPietro, Marsha C. Lovett and Marie K. Norman, *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Hoboken: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 89.

[6] Ibid., 190

[7] Ibid., 221

students' feedback.[8] However, although feedback about the way students perceive a course was usually not extreme enough that instructors were surprised by it, the majority of instructors nevertheless did discover student perceptions about which they were not previously aware— including both negative perceptions about practices that could be fixed or explained, as well as positive perceptions about practices that could be continued and reinforced.

3. Crafting a MCF Survey

3.1. Formatting the Questions

It is not necessary to create a long survey; no more than five, well-targeted questions should be sufficient. Based on instructors' overall needs, they might choose a mixture of question types such as, but not limited to:

- Multiple Choice
- Likert scales
- Open-ended, short answer
- An open-ended, short paragraph about the course in general, or a specific facet of the course (e.g. students' learning, instructor's teaching)
- Ask students to divide a sheet of paper in half, and place positive aspects of the course on one side and negatives on the other[9]
- A checklist asking students to check off the things that the instructor, themselves, and other students have or have not done satisfactorily

Some instructors may wish to spend less time on the process of collecting MCF, or may simply not be able to spare much class time; such instructors could include fewer questions and may forego open-ended, qualitative questions. Similarly, instructors may ask less detailed questions if they feel a course is already going particularly well. Instructors' priorities and needs will likely fall somewhere in the middle of these spectrums.

3.2. What Aspects of the Course should be Discussed?

The aspects of a course on which an instructor chooses to solicit feedback will also vary greatly depending on unique needs. Several possible areas include:

- **Teaching.** Instructors might choose to solicit feedback about students' perceptions of their teaching in general. They could also use MCF as an opportunity to assess things like new methods they are experimenting with or attempting for the first time.*

  Sample Questions: Teaching
  What aspects of the way this course is taught best enhance your learning?
  What aspects of the way this course is taught have the most negative impact on your learning?
  What suggestions can you offer that would make this course a better learning experience?

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[8] Reports about instructor feedback on this project can be found at http://midterm.teacheval.ubc.ca/about/
[9] Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Silences as Weapons: Challenges of a Black Professor Teaching White Students," *Theory into Practice* 35, no. 2 (1996): 79-85.
*This UBC instructor used MCF during experimentation with course pacing:
http://midterm.teacheval.ubc.ca/2014/09/08/instructor-perspective/

- **Course Content.** Instructors might also use MCF to gauge perceptions of a course's content. Instructors can ask whether students feel content covered in class, on homework, or in textbooks is coherent, sufficiently challenging, practically applicable, useful for encouraging independent learning, etc.

  Sample Questions: Course Content
  Please rate the following statements on a scale from 1 to 5:
  -I am able to make overarching connections between each week's material
  -The material covered in class is challenging and intellectually stimulating
  -Problems covered in class help me understand how to work out additional problems on my own

- **Classroom Environment.** As discussed above, there are benefits to creating a supportive learning environment for students. However, it is not always easy to observe whether students in a class feel comfortable in the environment created by instructors and fellow students, especially because students may feel nervous about coming forward with concerns. Collecting MCF is one easy mechanism for obtaining anonymous feedback on classroom environment.[10] Instructors could ask about student perceptions of their availability outside of class, their investment in student learning, etc. Furthermore, instructors that teach courses about sensitive subject matter—things like race, gender, or religion—might use MCF survey questions to make sure students feel respected by the way their classmates and instructor handle this material.

  Sample Question: Classroom Environment
  Sensitive material in this course is discussed by the instructor and my classmates in a way that…
  a) Always respects my feelings and the feelings of other students
  b) Usually respects my feelings and the feelings of other students
  c) Sometimes respects my feelings and the feelings of other students
  d) Rarely respects my feelings and the feelings of other students

- **Evaluation of Self and Peers.** In addition to the way a course is taught, the success of a course may depend largely on the participation of students: their attendance, their active participation, and their level of preparation for class. To help students come to terms with the ways in which they are responsible for the success or failure of a course, instructors might include a question that asks students to evaluate the quality of their own or their peers' participation in class.[11] This type of reflection can help students to be more conscious of the way other students perceive them, and to set standards for themselves.

  Sample Question: Evaluation of Self and Peers[12]
  Please check those items that are applicable to your work in this course so far this semester.
  __I read assignments before the corresponding class
  __I prepare a list of questions about material I do not understand before coming to class
  __I take notes regularly during class

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[10] Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works*, 184-185.
[11] Nancy Loevinger, "Using A Mid-Term Evaluation to Give Students Responsibility for the Course," *Teaching Concerns*, Univ. of Virginia Teaching Resource Center newsletter, January 1993.
[12] Adapted from: Marva A. Barnett, "Whose Course is it? Students as Course Co-Creators," *Teaching Concerns*, Univ. of Virginia Teaching Resource Center newsletter: Appendix H.

> *__I participate in class regularly by raising interesting questions, responding to others' points, or making other substantive contributions that facilitate learning for myself and others*

3.3. Further Resource: Online Tool from CTLT

CTLT has created an online Form Builder tool for ease in creating MCF surveys. It includes sample questions on a variety of topics and in a variety of formats from other institutions and from other instructors who have used the tool, and it also allows instructors to write their own questions. Questions can be easily dragged from a bank to create a short survey, which can then be exported as a pdf document for printing and distribution to a class. Questions from this tool could also be easily copied and pasted into an online survey tool for instructors who prefer to use an online platform. The tool can be accessed through a CWL login at https://formbuilder.ctlt.ubc.ca/.

4. Collecting MCF

The way feedback is collected from students will depend once again in many ways on instructors' unique needs. The following are some considerations instructors could take into account.

4.1. Timing

Likely, MCF should be collected sometime around weeks 5-7 of a course. This is early enough that instructors can still make changes to courses and also so that there is a clear distinction between MCF and SEoTs; it is late enough that students can provide meaningful feedback.

If MCF is solicited in class, instructors should set aside no more than five to ten minutes. This could be at the beginning, at the end, or in the middle of a class. The beginning is useful to ensure that students' responses aren't swayed by a lecture that they particularly do or do not enjoy, and that they aren't rushing to leave.[13] However, some instructors prefer to use the end of class so that they can leave the room and designate a student volunteer to collect results. Using the middle of a class could have the disadvantage of interrupting it, but could also ease difficulties involved in using the beginning or end.

4.2. Communicating Purposes and Expectations*

Students should understand that their input will be valued and followed up on, that it will be kept anonymous, and that MCF surveys are distinct in important ways from SEoTs. To ensure that students provide useful answers, instructors can outline the rationale behind collecting MCF: that the process is based on principles of collaboration between students and instructors, and provides opportunities for reflection on both sides. Instructors can also convey expectations about how students should approach writing responses, such as encouraging specific, targeted feedback.

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[13] University of Carleton Education Development Centre, "Learning from our Students": http://carleton.ca/edc/wp-content/uploads/Learning-from-our-Students.pdf

*This UBC student also suggests instructors announce their intention to collect MCF early in the term, so students know to think reflectively and critically throughout: http://midterm.teacheval.ubc.ca/2014/09/11/student-perspective-tanya-shum-4th-year-international-relations-and-french/

4.3. Mode of Delivery

Some possibilities include:

- **Paper survey.** Distributing paper surveys in class can ensure high response rates. Instructors could also distribute them to students to fill out outside the classroom, in which case students should have around a week's window so that they do not feel forced or rushed.[14]

- **Online Survey.** Instructors could opt to design their own short online survey using various survey tools. Again, if instructors ask students to fill out online surveys outside of class, they should ensure surveys are left open for a window of about a week. Instructors can also set aside class time for students to fill out online surveys and ask students to bring devices for this purpose. Taking advantage of students' comfort with personal devices during class can ensure high response rates, while allowing for more ease of reading and analysis than paper surveys.*

- **Overhead Questions.** Questions could be displayed on a projector or chalkboard and students asked to write their responses on paper.

- **Clicker responses.** Multiple choice questions could be displayed, and clicker responses collected. This provides quickly tabulated, quantitative feedback. Data should not be displayed in real time as students respond, in order to ensure responses remain candid and anonymous.

5. Following up on MCF

Instructor follow up is the most important part of this process. More than elsewhere, it is within this part that MCF can yield fruitful results.

5.1. Sorting Responses

Especially when MCF is collected in large lectures, sorting through responses may seem like a very time-consuming process. The following is a list of tips on how to read through and sort responses efficiently.[15]

- **Throw out off-the-wall comments that do not provide you with useful information and forget about them.** Unlike impersonal end of term evaluations, MCF provides a more tangible connection between student feedback and instructors as audience to it. Nevertheless, there may still be students who provide negative criticisms that are not constructive or useful.

- **Throw out the positive comments that don't tell you anything specific.** Comments such as "Best class ever" do not provide information that is useful for reflection.

- **Savour the comments that are meant to be negative, but that let you know you are doing your job.** Occasionally, students may provide negatively-framed comments such as "this professor made us think" or "this professor expected a high standard of work."

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[14] Ibid.

*For a UBC instructor's perspective and suggestions on collecting MCF electronically in class, see
http://midterm.teacheval.ubc.ca/2014/09/11/instructor-perspective-simon-bates-physics/

[15]Adapted from: Connie Buskist and Jan Hogan, "She Needs a Haircut and a New Pair of Shoes: Handling those Pesky Course Evaluations," *The Journal of Effective Teaching* 10, no. 1 (2010): 51-56.

- **Divide thoughtful criticisms into two groups: those you can change and those that you cannot change.** These will be the most important, as they can be used most fruitfully in follow up discussion. In one group, include comments about parts of the course that could be tweaked to improve student learning; in another, include comments on aspects of a course that cannot be changed for important pedagogical reasons, or because of factors like department policies.

5.2. Presenting Results to Students

Even more so than just collecting feedback, presenting MCF results to students shows that instructors are committed to the underlying principles of the process, and that they have taken some time to reflect on feedback. This also gives students a chance to reflect on the whole class' feedback. Ideally, instructors would set aside a short period of a class—no more than 10 minutes is adequate—to present MCF results and to seek further student input and dialogue. However, if instructors are unable to devote class time, even sending an email summary inviting further comments can be useful.[16]

It may be most beneficial to prioritize discussing recurring feedback of two types: on aspects of the course that can be changed to accommodate students' needs, and on aspects of the course which can't be changed but for which the rationale can be explained to students. Regarding the latter type, it may be that students cannot immediately see the rationale behind how certain practices fit into the overall course in terms of teaching strategy and content delivery. While instructors are able to view the organization of their courses in terms of their big-picture structure, students may fail to grasp such rationale. Instructors, through follow up MCF discussions, can draw these types of connections more explicitly for students.

Instructors can also discuss the rationale behind aspects of a course on which students gave particularly positive feedback. This can highlight to students where they themselves have identified what helps to facilitate their learning, helping them to reflect on the ways they learn best.

It may seem that sharing students' feedback about a course, an instructor, or their peers will be a tense process. However, many instructors see a chance to foster a friendly classroom environment by injecting some humour and light-heartedness into this process.[17] This can further enhance feelings of instructor-student partnership and even make students more sympathetic to the challenges instructors face.

5.3. Sustaining Reflection

Finally, there will be more opportunities throughout the rest of the term for brief reflection on issues arising from MCF. Instructors can continue to keep feedback in mind as the course progresses, and from time to time they can take a moment to explicitly point out to students the rationale behind aspects of the course that relate to previous MCF discussions. If instructors tweak their delivery of courses later in the term, they can make it known to students that changes are based on their feedback. Practices like these do not take much extra time, but can go a long way to creating a classroom environment informed by the benefits of MCF to students and instructors.

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[16] Barnett, "Whose Course is it?," Appendix A.

[17] Carolin S. Keutzer, "Midterm Evaluation of Teaching Provides Helpful Feedback to Instructors," *Teaching of Psychology* 20, no. 4 (1993): 240.