SEP GTA Toolkit
Formative Feedback

Benefits of Formative Feedback

Research shows that not all students experience the classroom in the same way. GTAs can gain important insights into how students are experiencing their course by regularly asking students for formative feedback about their learning environment. Intentionally gathering feedback can also be an important way for GTAs to model the institutional growth mindset that promotes belonging for students.

While the term "feedback" might conjure impressions of being evaluated or judged, the purpose of formative feedback is not intended to be evaluative. Rather, the process of gathering formative feedback can help GTAs reflect on their teaching, understand what might be helping or hindering student learning, and identify specific ways to improve the learning environment and their connection to students. Collecting feedback across the term allows GTAs to make adjustments and grow their skills in real-time.

For this practice to reap benefits for GTAs, institutions need to foster spaces that are supportive and safe for GTAs to discover, learn, and share with one another. GTAs will be most successful in using formative feedback to improve their teaching if they are able to share and reflect on this process with their peers as part of a community of practice. As facilitators, you can use these opportunities to guide GTAs in using the feedback effectively to improve their courses.

Beyond the classroom, receiving and reflecting on feedback is an important skill that GTAs will need throughout their graduate programs and future professional careers. GTAs can reflect on how formative feedback helped them improve their teaching and use these insights to navigate obstacles in their research lab, or respond to feedback during the dissertation process. Ultimately, GTAs can become more effective at providing meaningful guidance to current and future students and mentees.

Supporting GTAs in the Formative Feedback Process

Cultivating a growth mindset about formative feedback

Asking for feedback can feel challenging - particularly if critical feedback tends to trigger fixed-mindset concerns about skills and abilities. Sometimes, receiving feedback can feel overwhelming and can create anxiety. Using structured formative-feedback approaches can help make it easier for GTAs to ask for – and receive – feedback from students. As facilitators, you can support GTAs in this process by emphasizing that this is an opportunity for them to learn and grow, ensuring they are asking questions that will generate actionable feedback, and providing space in your community of practice to productively reflect on feedback.

Additionally, many GTAs feel pressure to look "authoritative" as a GTA teaching for the first time. Demonstrating an enthusiastic commitment to student learning builds authority, and measuring student learning requires taking in feedback. People who are most confident in their ability are ones that ask for feedback frequently.

Soliciting feedback

GTAs should gather feedback from their students a few times throughout the term. In doing so, it is important that they communicate to their students that the purpose of the feedback is to understand their experiences in class in order to better support their learning. When GTAs take time to request feedback in a genuine way, they can signal care and respect for students.

GTAs might find it frustrating to receive student feedback on aspects of a course that are beyond their control, such as course meeting times, classroom space, course materials or curriculum. To ensure that the formative feedback process is productive, GTAs should focus on areas where they have agency and the ability to make changes. Our guide below provides strategies for effectively gathering and using student feedback within their sphere of influence.

> **Do encourage GTAs to ask**: "What is something that has helped you feel that you belong in this course? If you do not yet feel as though you belong in this course, what is one thing that could help you feel more supported or connected in our class?" This will prompt specific responses from students, and if GTAs receive a lot of responses that students do not feel a sense of belonging yet, they can use SEP practices specifically designed to improve belonging to improve this.
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> **Don't encourage GTAs to ask**: "What do you think of my course so far?" or "How does this course make you feel?" These questions are too open-ended and general, and will likely lead to feedback that is not within GTAs' control.

Responding to Feedback

Responding to feedback is a skill that grows over time. Your community of practice is an important venue for GTAs to practice this skill. As facilitators, you can support GTAs as they reflect on and respond to feedback; here are some principles to guide GTAs' review of feedback:

*   Embrace positive feedback - continuing to use practices that are having a positive impact on students is important to cultivating a growth-oriented classroom environment.

*   Look for themes in the feedback; when multiple students raise the same concern, this is a point of improvement to prioritize.

*   Identify 2 - 3 pieces of concrete feedback that can be addressed.

*   Be mindful of outliers where one student shares feedback that differs from the rest of the group. While the feedback itself might not be useful or relevant for others, try to understand why the student might have given the feedback in the first place - this might be something you can address. For example, if a GTA receives mid-semester feedback indicating most students think the pacing of the course is good, but one student writes, "The lab moves too fast, and I feel lost every week." Instead of dismissing it as an outlier, the GTA considers why this student might feel this way. Perhaps this student is a first-year student, who may have less lab experience than their peers, or is working full-time and less time they can devote to this lab section than others. To help, the GTA starts offering brief recaps at the beginning of each lab and encourages questions and office hour visits.

*   Discuss feedback within the community of practice - sharing successes and challenges can yield practical advice as well as reassurance that peers are having similar experiences receiving and responding to feedback

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Each piece of feedback is one data point, representing one person's perspective about the GTAs' behavior and its impact. It is important to remind GTAs to keep feedback in perspective - while they should not ignore critical, constructive feedback that can help them learn and grow, needlessly negative or biased feedback may not require a response.

Additionally, sometimes GTAs are concerned that if they ask for student feedback, students will request things they can't accommodate. Reassure GTAs that requesting feedback signals that they are listening to and considering students' experience and concerns. It doesn't mean they have to fix or address every concern. To ensure that the majority of the feedback is actionable, GTAs should use questions and prompts that are specific and tied to the practices they are using in class. See our resource on formative feedback for suggested prompts.

Logistical Tips

Anonymity

All feedback from students should be anonymous. This will allow students to be honest in their responses.

Timing
Formative feedback should be solicited 2 -3 times throughout the term. It is important to collect formative feedback early enough in the term that GTAs can realistically act on it.

Responding to Feedback

Click here for our resource for GTAs on gathering formative feedback. This document can be distributed to GTAs to guide them through the formative feedback process.

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