

Making Sense of Student Evaluation Feedback

Teaching Assistants make a significant contribution to the teaching mission of UC Merced. That contribution is made possible by a Teaching Assistants' high degree of motivation as well as their high standards for themselves and their students. This memo provides essential ways TAs can translate their motivation and high standards into increasingly expert teaching practices.

Teaching assistants will receive an opportunity to assess their teaching skills when they receive student evaluations of their courses. Making sense of student feedback can be challenging so we offer the following tips for examining evaluations.

When considering student evaluations:

- Pick a good time and location. Give yourself enough time to digest at least some of the information, have privacy, and can give you some mental 'space' to analyze the information.
- Track quantitative results. Consider how the summary rating received for each item fits with your own teaching goals and expectations for teaching.
- Look for patterns in students' comments—identify trends, note what you have done well and what needs improvement.
- Take your experience into account. If you are new to teaching, the school, or even the course, you may still be learning about various aspects of being a teaching assistant, such as course content, teaching skills, student interaction, and expectations from the course instructor and lab coordinators.
- Take the context and characteristics of your course into account. Research shows that student evaluations often are more positive in courses that are smaller rather than larger, and elective rather than required. Also, evaluations are usually more positive in courses in which students tend to do well.

When dealing with negative student feedback:

- Know that almost all instructors receive negative feedback at some point in their careers, including those who are senior and highly successful.
- Allow yourself to acknowledge that it can feel hurtful or make you angry, but also provides a pointer toward important areas for your continued development.

When deciding how to further your development as a teacher:

- Bear in mind the most frequently mentioned areas for teaching improvement in analysis of student evaluations within and across universities: 1) clearer, more specific in-class communication; and 2) clearer, more explicit organization of course content.
- Consider scheduling an appointment at the Center for Research on Teaching Excellence for a consultation to help you interpret your evaluations. Research suggests that teachers who consult with someone about their evaluations are more likely to score higher on the next set of evaluations than others who do not discuss them with anyone. **To schedule an appointment, please email the center at crte@ucmerced.edu or call 209-228-7950.**

When planning steps to improve the feedback you receive in evaluations, consider the following options:

- Use one minute evaluations at the end of selected class sessions, asking students to note the main idea they learned that class, or two ideas about a major construct considered, or a question about content, and so forth.
- Talk with the class about their interim feedback, and explicitly put into practice one of their suggestions.
- Before the final course evaluation, explain to the class the importance you place on their input.

Adapted from "Some Guidelines and Principles to Consider In Making Sense of Evaluation Feedback" by Kathy Hoover-Dempsey, Associate Professor, Psychology & Human Development, Peabody College.

Teaching Resources

TAs who are teaching in a new format or setting, are unaccustomed to the American classroom, or are simply interested in improving their teaching are encouraged to utilize the following resources.

Teaching Discussion Sections

Discussion sections provide opportunities for collaboration and active learning that do not always take place in a traditional lecture context. The role of a discussion section goes beyond clearing up any confusion remaining after the course material has been presented in lecture. Discussions also provide students with the opportunity to manipulate and apply course content, resulting in deeper learning.

Facilitating Laboratory Sections

Labs should be a process of discovery for students as they uncover the mechanisms behind important scientific principles. Your goal as a TA is to make the most effective use of the lab period in order to give students a beneficial, hands-on experience of doing science. There are aspects to teaching labs that are sometimes difficult. However, a smooth-running lab section and sound teaching techniques will provide your students with a successful and enjoyable learning environment.

TA's interested in improving their teaching skills are encouraged to utilize the following resources.

1. Center for Research on Teaching Excellence (CRTE) offers the following services

- Teaching Matters Workshops
- Individual Consultations
- Instructional Internship Program
- TA Resource Page

CRTE: please email the center at crte@ucmerced.edu or call 209-228-7950. Website: <http://crte.ucmerced.edu/>

2. English Language Institute (ELI) provides the following services for International Teaching Assistants (ITAs)

- Provide semester-long workshops and coursework to enhance English proficiency in speaking and listening comprehension
- Assist in the cultural adjustments sometimes required to teach and study in an American university through workshops and individual consultations
- Observe and, optionally, videotape ITAs teaching and from this evidence assist ITAs to enhance their language and instructional skills
- Provide one-on-one support for students using pronunciation software
- Collaborate with ITAs to develop individual plans for improving English language use
- Coordinate conversation partnerships for students wanting to practice their language skills in an informal arrangement with native speakers of English

ELI Website: <http://crte.ucmerced.edu/ELI>

3. Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL) services: satal@ucmerced.edu or call 209-228-4766.

SATAL Website: <http://crte.ucmerced.edu/satal>.

4. Instructional Lab assistance:

- Instructional Lab Coordinator - Physical Sciences: Dr. Donna Jaramillo-Fellin, djaramillo-fellin@ucmerced.edu
- Instructional Lab Coordinator - Life Sciences: Dr. Jim Whalen, jwhalen2@ucmerced.edu

5. Assistance with subject matter:

- Contact the instructor of the course
- View the course syllabi: <http://naturalsciences.ucmerced.edu/academics/courses>
- Discussions with fellow Teaching Assistants