

# Involving Undergraduates in Assessment: Assisting Peers to Provide Constructive Feedback

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SOON AFTER IT WAS LAUNCHED IN 2005, the University of California, Merced (UCM) was designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. The campus currently enrolls almost 6,200 students, with projected growth to 10,000 by 2020. For a research university, UCM has relatively high percentages of Pell grant recipients (60 percent) and first-generation college goers (62 percent). Overall, our undergraduates, who represent 94 percent of total enrollment at UCM, are particularly at risk for not finishing a college degree.

The Center for Research on Teaching Excellence at UCM sponsors the Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL) program, which trains undergraduates in research design, data gathering, and effective reporting to support faculty with their assessment projects. In reciprocal communication with students, SATAL students, as well as instructors, need to make sure that feedback is constructive. For example, a student's comment, "This class is too early," is not helpful for an instructor who is looking for ways to improve learning in a class. One of the research projects carried out by the SATAL program last spring was the feedback initiative (FI), targeting the goal of assisting students to provide constructive feedback.

## Feedback Initiative

**Background.** Students are often asked to reflect on their learning to provide feed-

back to peers as well as instructors. For instance, in a "flipped" classroom, an instructor frees class time for students to engage in more collaborative learning assignments, such as peer review. Midsemester or final course evaluations also have students reflect on their progress as learners as well as the instructor's teaching effectiveness. According to Bloom's taxonomy of learning, the ability to evaluate is a skill at the higher

students, and the Panadero and Jonsson (2013) rubrics to mediate improved performance and self-regulation. In the FI a rubric offers students criteria for identifying levels of performance by analyzing the components of the feedback process and by asking who, what, when, where, why, and how to enhance the effectiveness of the feedback. Five instructors of a freshman writing course participated in FI; they taught 221 students in twelve

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end of the taxonomy, which most undergraduates are still developing. However, since very early in their college lives, students evaluate instruction, typically with little or no formal training. For feedback to be a powerful learning tool, instructors should train students to use effective feedback practices, and a feedback rubric could provide the framework to promote this learning effectively.

The SATAL Program developed the Feedback Initiative (FI) to synthesize research on giving and receiving feedback. Ultimately three lines of research guided the design of this empirical study on feedback: Brinko's (1993) feedback-giving practice to improve teaching, the Hattie and Temperley (2007) analysis on what information should be fed back to

sections. To assess the impact of FI on students' feedback, the SATAL program collected direct and indirect evidence.

**Training.** In a fifty-minute in-class presentation, students were trained to provide constructive feedback. A team of two SATAL students led each classroom presentation, which included PowerPoint slides that presented (1) a working definition of feedback, (2) situations in which feedback is required, (3) a feedback rubric with criteria for providing constructive comments, and (4) a follow-up group activity. SATAL students guided their groups by scaffolding application of the rubric and guiding the wording of constructive feedback. The groups reconvened and presented to the

entire class their revised feedback. By using a slideshow presentation and lesson plan, the SATAL program ensured that the project was presented in similar ways in each of the participating twelve sections in this first-year writing course.

**Assessment.** To assess FI, the SATAL students collected and analyzed various forms of direct and indirect evidence. During the in-class FI presentation, students completed a pre- and posttest with feedback samples recorded before and after the activity to document the presentation's impact on students' comments and students' level of engagement with feedback training. After the presentation, students completed a minute paper in which they summarized what they learned and noted any questions that remained unanswered on the topic. Also, instructors assisted with the FI data gathering by providing a verbal summary of their impressions of students' engagement during the FI presentation session and their analysis of final course-evaluation results for the statement, "This course has taught me to give and attend to feedback." The SATAL program conducted focus-group sessions with freshmen from the participating writing sections, and finally, SATAL students shared their own perceptions of FI.

## Results

**Students' Samples.** Student feedback samples from before and after the presentation and a peer-review session were collected to include as direct evidence of student learning. The *before* FI presentation feedback samples briefly address weaknesses in grammar, style, and content. *After* the FI presentation, student samples demonstrate their awareness of audience and purpose and closer attention to the rubric criteria. In decreasing order of frequency, the rubric criteria most used by students when providing feedback to their peers were the following:

1. Offer specific suggestions that model appropriate behavior (215, or 90 percent)
2. Focus on content rather than on the person (146, or 61 percent)
3. Provide a balance of positive and negative feedback (138, or 58 percent)
4. Include accurate and specific data that are clear about irrefutable evidence (119, or 50 percent)
5. Keep comments nonjudgmental and descriptive rather than evaluative (109, or 46 percent).

**Minute Paper.** After the FI presentation, students completed a minute paper activity. Among the most-repeated responses, students mentioned that they learned "How to provide constructive feedback" (78, or 33 percent), "Providing positive feedback" and "How to phrase negative feedback" when providing constructive feedback. With regard to the questions students still had on FI after the presentation, 182 students (82 percent) did not have any further questions. A majority of the students offered no suggestion on how to improve the FI presentation (118, or 56 percent).

**Instructors' Observations.** Reflecting on what went well, instructors reported the following findings:

1. The presentation was interactive, informative, and helpful for planning upcoming peer-review activities (5, or 100 percent).
2. The class was engaged and participated well during the presentations.
3. Writing samples on the whiteboard and making changes to these was very helpful for students "to model how the commentary on the board could be revised."
4. Students found helpful the idea of sandwiching positive and negative feedback (2, or 40 percent).
5. FI would influence the way instructors would provide feedback to students in the future, because now students were providing them with more specific information as a result

of giving and receiving more constructive peer feedback. Instructors could be more effective at helping students, and thus students could become better writers: "The presentation will also shape my commentary to students." This result was also evident during one-on-one conferencing (2, or 40 percent).

**Focus Group Summary Report.** On a 5-point scale with 5 being the best, most of the students rated their feedback skills as 4 (35, or 67 percent) or 5 (11, or 22 percent) after the presentation. Most of the students agreed or strongly agreed that their ability to assess and provide constructive feedback could be improved through training, and that a rubric could effectively guide them (38, or 74 percent). Although some of the students concluded that having a feedback rubric was helpful, they noted that it was not just the rubric that assisted them, but also the assistance they received from presenters (33, or 65 percent). Students stated that they would utilize the rubric in the future (41, or 80 percent). Also, by providing better feedback to their peers, they believed they became better writers.

**Final Course Evaluations.** Instructors collected students' comments about FI in the midsemester and final course evaluations. FI was highly valued when students responded to the statement: "This course has taught me to give and attend to feedback." Most of the students (85 percent) rated this statement "frequently" or "always," and some attributed their improved ability to offer useful feedback to the FI session directly. Students also mentioned FI usefulness in other parts of the course evaluations, as in the statement: "Identify and evaluate aspects of this course that have been especially helpful to you."

**SATAL Students' Reflections.** All five SATAL students who participated affirmed the need to train peers to provide  
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valuable feedback. Collecting student feedback is SATAL students' main job, and they have experienced firsthand how much students struggle to provide constructive and useful feedback when they assess a course or program. Some students benefited from the presentation more than others by paying close attention and applying the rubric during the activities. The fact that FI was presented by peers added some extra value to the importance of providing constructive feedback. Overall, SATAL students

improves students' reflections on their learning. Results indicate that students could benefit from direct instruction on how to provide constructive feedback with the aid of a rubric, because most of the participants indicated they found the rubric useful and that they "will utilize it in the future." Although an anecdotal concern, FI does take away time from class; to address that issue, more research is needed to provide evidence of potential positive effects of FI on students' critical thinking skills.

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recognize the importance of investing some class time to train students on how to give constructive feedback, and in particular for peer-review exchanges in writing classes.

## Helpful Hints

The lines of evidence demonstrated that scaffolding students' comments by providing them a rubric and modeling how to improve their comments on the board were key activities noted by the students and instructors as very helpful. Students' engagement with FI was very high (89 percent). The top three most used criteria were (1) offer specific suggestions that model appropriate behavior, (2) focus on content rather than on the person, and (3) provide a balance of positive and negative feedback. Another gain identified in the study is that by providing and receiving better feedback, students ultimately become better writers. For course evaluations, some evidence suggests that feedback training

## Applications

The specific context of a relatively new university that enrolls a majority-minority undergraduate population and routinely appoints a high percentage of new faculty each year requires a highly contextualized approach for SATAL assessment of teaching and learning. The FI provided predominantly freshman students with a rubric and strategies that develop feedback skills to navigate a variety of learning activities effectively. FI has proven to have a three-way win for the SATAL students, their peers in the class, and faculty. FI findings have been shared through SATAL presentations during faculty and staff meetings and symposia on campus. In particular, we have encouraged faculty teaching predominantly freshmen to review students' most-used rubric criteria in class and consider the benefits resulting from training students to provide constructive feedback for their day-to-day teaching practices as well as final course evalua-

tions. One of seven axioms of classroom assessment noted by Angelo (2008) is stated, "If an assessment is worth doing, it's worth teaching students how to do it well."

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