

Stanford's new course evaluation process provides the campus a renewed opportunity for considering student perspectives on their learning experiences in Stanford classes. For instructors, these course evaluations can provide insight into what is working well and suggest ways to develop your teaching and better promote student learning—particularly in relation to the specific objectives you are working to achieve. Understanding how students reflect on their learning is a useful tool among the many options for developing instructional practice.

Course evaluations represent just one type of window into the teaching and learning process and are most useful when complemented by other methods. There are many approaches to gathering valuable insights, ideas, and information to support good teaching; that is, teaching that helps students learn disciplinary skills, approaches, and concepts that they can productively bring to new situations.

Evaluations focused on developing good teaching differ in their objectives from evaluation efforts designed to inform appointment and promotion decisions within departments.

The methods described below are designed to help you better understand how your teaching supports student learning.

Feedback from students

- **Classroom assessment techniques.** These short, in-class, anonymous, and typically ungraded activities are designed to give you and your students useful feedback on the teaching-learning process as it is happening. Techniques include minute papers, usually assigned at the end of a session and asking two questions: “What was the most important thing you learned in class?” and “What important question remains unanswered?” Student response systems (clickers) are also a potent classroom assessment technique, with a strong research base showing that, when used well, they lead to improvements in learning in addition to helping gauge instructional effectiveness.
- **Mid-quarter student feedback.** To gather student perspectives on what is going well and what can be improved in your course, staff from VPTL would be happy to conduct Small Group Feedback Sessions during your class. Online options for student mid-quarter feedback are also available for all classes. Another option is administering your own questionnaire for students to fill out anonymously that focuses on those issues that are of most interest to you. You may additionally want to ask students informally after class or during office hours what’s going well and what isn’t. Follow up on students’ feedback by discussing suggestions and incorporating appropriate changes in your class right away.
- **Assessment of student learning.** Examination of the quality of work students produce (e.g., papers, lab reports, tests, portfolios) reveals a great deal about areas for instructional improvement—especially if these assessments are designed and analyzed by experts. Generally, assessments of student learning are the most helpful evidence regarding the effectiveness of teaching. In addition to homegrown assessments, such as teacher-written exams, there are standardized assessments such as concept inventories (as used in physics and biology) that have been shown to indicate how well students understand key concepts in a discipline. Think-aloud

problem-solving sessions are yet another tool that can be used at any time during instruction to help understand what students are learning from the course.

- **End-of-course evaluation forms.** The customizable forms Stanford is now using provide the opportunity to examine responses regarding distinct learning goals and elements of the course. The full range of responses, including written comments and not just average scores, can help better understand students' learning experiences within the course.

Support from colleagues

- **Classroom observations.** A powerful way to develop your teaching is to ask a friend, colleague, or consultant from VPTL to observe your class. It's important to guide observers on what specifically you would like them to look for, particularly regarding how ideas are presented and students respond. Peer observations are usually most effective when they include prior review of the course syllabus and materials, discussion of class objectives with the instructor, and guidelines that can help structure observations to maximize their helpfulness.
- **Evaluation of course materials.** Examination and refinement of syllabi, assignments, exams, papers, and so on, capitalizes on the expertise of peers and VPTL consultants. Working informally on sharing ideas, participating in special programs like VPTL's Course Design Institute, building a community of colleagues addressing similar issues, or seeking individual consultations with VPTL can all help improve your course materials.
- **Coordinated alignment of offerings.** Many faculty find that discussing learning objectives with colleagues helps them better know what they should offer students in their courses. Groups of colleagues within a department teaching related courses could together determine, for example, what students may or may not have learned in an early course in a sequence and what would be appropriate concepts to address in a follow-on course.

Instructor self-reflection

- **Video recording.** Having a video recording of your class is an invaluable way to see how your teaching appears to your students. Watching it with a colleague or a VPTL consultant can make your analysis of your teaching more productive and help you decide whether you want to make any changes.
- **Teaching Inventories.** These types of inventories are designed to help faculty more systematically reflect on how they structure and conduct their courses. The [Teaching Goals Inventory](#)¹ is oriented to all disciplines and can help you rate the importance of a broad range of goals in relation to what you want students to achieve in your course. [The Teaching Practices Inventory](#)²—used mostly in STEM, but being tested for the social sciences— allows you to measure the level of active student engagement in your course.

Overall, carefully developing learning goals, aligning class activities to promote those goals, and assessing students based on their opportunities to practice new skills and apply new concepts within the context of a course are key factors in making students' learning experiences as rewarding as possible.

For more information, please see our website at vptl.stanford.edu

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1. http://fm.iowa.uiowa.edu/fmi/xsl/tgi/data_entry.xsl?-db=tgi_data&-lay=Layout01&-view

2. www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/TeachingPracticesInventory.htm