
**Categories**: Student Evaluation of Teaching, Midterm Feedback, Instructional Improvement, Institutional Reform

**Summary**

This handbook offers a wealth of information on the implementation of Midterm Student Feedback evaluations (MSFs). While it presents a broad range of relevant aspects of MSFs, it also goes into considerable detail on several elements of the evaluative process. Though the handbook does briefly discuss a wide variety of MSF formats, it predominantly focuses on the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID). Taken as a whole, the handbook provides a veritable how to guide for implementation of MSFs in general and the SGID specifically.

The handbook begins with an overview of the research on MSFs and the benefits of using them. The extent literature, according to the authors, strongly suggests that MSFs increase student learning, engagement, and enjoyment, and also lead to higher course ratings. The research also presents strong evidence that the MSF offers greater benefits than the more commonly used end of semester evaluations, which suffer from several limitations: feedback is gathered at the end of the semester, when it is too late to improve the class in questions; students and instructors are often less likely to take the evaluation seriously; response rates are typically low, and thus unrepresentative of the class as a whole; and, there is rarely an effort to help instructors understand the resulting data and translate it into an action plan.

In contrast, MSFs offer considerable benefits to both teachers and students. For teachers, much of the benefit of the MSF stems from its timing; by soliciting student feedback at mid-semester, instructors are able to use the data to make changes and positively impact the learning experience of their current students. Additionally, through the use of SGIDs, which rely on the aid of an instructional consultant, teachers gain the help of expert analysis that allows for the effective use of the data generated. The employment of mid-semester feedback also helps instructors build greater rapport with their students, as it provides students with the perspective of their teacher as someone who cares about their learning.

For students, the MSF, if properly used, leads to changes in their class that improve the learning experience. The evaluation process also provides student with a sense of empowerment, as it posits their input as important to the working of the course. In a more abstract sense, the MSF helps benefits students by providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their own learning. Finally, use of MSFs greatly benefits faculty developers by broadening the impact of their expertise on teaching and learning, helping them to build closer connections with the faculty, and strengthening future professional development.

While MSFs offer numerous benefits, their employment comes with certain risks. Effective use of MSFs, particularly the SGID, requires a considerable investment of time and effort. Optimization also requires expertise, which is crucial to accurate analysis of feedback data and its translation into effective strategies for improvement. Perhaps most importantly, MSFs can backfire if the feedback generated is
presented to instructors in a nonconstructive manner or if instructors fail to utilize that feedback in some form.

After laying out the benefits and pitfalls of MSFs, the handbook shifts to a discussion of designing effective surveys. The first consideration in this process pertains to the nature and number of questions used to glean information from students. Careful thought also needs to be put into how to frame inquiries so as to put the proper emphasis on learning, rather than the personality traits of the instructor. Another key consideration relates to the formatting of the questions. While multiple choice or Likert-scale based questions may allow for greater efficiency and quantification, use of open-ended questions tend to provide much greater nuance as well as information far more specific to the actual educational experience of students in a specific class. Similarly, choices must be made as to whether the questionnaires are presented online, though still potentially answered in class, or on paper. In order to provide some guidance on these options, the handbook offers an extensive list of example questions to employ on MSFs, as well as several additional resources from which one can glean greater insight. To conclude this section, the handbook notes that one can maintain the basic framework of the MSF while customizing it to meet specialized interests. For example, one could design an MSF geared towards measuring student experiences in a flipped classroom, or to assess the effectiveness of an online course.

In the next section of the handbook the authors briefly discuss considerations and suggestions for advertising the service of consultants and MSFs to faculty. From an institutional standpoint, the level to which the service of consultants should be presented depends largely on the availability of resources. This of course assumes that the MSFs to be employed are GSIDs, which really rely on the use of trained consultants. Moving beyond the question of resources, the authors emphasize the need to fully explain the nature and purpose of the MSF in introducing it to faculty, and to ensure that instructors realize that it is intended to facilitate improvement rather than punishment or suggest instructional weakness. As in other areas, the section concludes with a sample email that institutions can use to advertise MSF services.

The handbook then turns to a much longer and broadly pertinent subject: conducting an MSF session. According to the authors, consultants can and should employ several best practices when conducting an evaluation. In order to ensure the necessary sense of anonymity, confidentiality, and comfort, consultants need to wait for instructors to leave the room before they begin the process of garnering student feedback. Consultants should also reaffirm the purpose of the evaluation and stress that it is being done at the request of the instructor, who wants student input on how to improve the class. The authors suggest that consultants consider developing a script to properly set up the evaluation process, and offer a sample script for immediate use.

The evaluation itself and the manner in which it is conduct will vary depending on a number of factors. Most importantly, the amount of time for the MSF will reflect the number of questions presented to the students, the manner in which they will answer them (individual vs group), whether all responses are recorded or student groups are asked to come up with consensus statements, and the format of the questions (open-ended versus multiple choice/Likert scale). Should one opt for the use of a traditional SGID survey, which employs open-ended questions, group consensus responses, and reporting by each
of the groups, the process will take between twenty and forty minutes. The advantages of this approach, which “models evidence based practices,” are that it tends to produce greater levels of discussion and depth of thought, and properly prioritizes the type of data and analysis conducive to truly impactful change in teaching and learning. The authors also provide links to several resources offering guidance for conducting MSFs online.

Turning to the next step in the MSF process, the authors present some guidelines on how to report feedback to instructors. This requires two separate but related activities. The first is the analysis of the feedback and presenting the findings in a written report. In writing the report, the consultant must consider several factors in order to optimize its impact. While a number of elements can be added, the report should at minimum include the questions asked and the consensus responses to them. The handbook also suggests that the report include a few representative comments. In doing so though, care must be taken to ensure the anonymity of the author(s). Once written, the report should be sent to the instructor prior to the face to face meeting to discuss it. They also stress that the report should be shared only with the instructor, regardless if the feedback discusses issues pertaining to some broad aspect of the college or the institution as a whole. Again, the handbook provides a template for a written analysis.

Meeting with the instructor constitutes the second activity in the reporting process. The handbook suggests the use of a “sandwich method,” in which the consultant begins with the aspects of the course that the students like, then cover some of the most common suggestions for improvement, and conclude with an overall summation. It is important to frame the summation in a constructive manner and to avoid being overly critical, as a failure to do so might cause the instructor to reject both the MSF and the students feedback. Rather, the report should focus on “areas for growth and improvement.” The authors also emphasized the need to avoid making comparisons to other classes in the summation. After offering advice as to how to present analysis of the MSF to instructors, the authors provide an extensive list of common issues or suggestions raised by students in their feedback.

One of the toughest aspects of the MSF consultation, according to the authors, is offering suggestions as to how the instructor should respond to the feedback provided by students. In essence, this stage of the process involves turning the data gathered in the MSF into a viable plan of action for instructional improvement. Instructors can, as might seem obvious, be resistant to making various changes in their courses and pedagogy. It is important in this regard therefore to avoid making too many suggestions for change, as doing so can overwhelm the instructor. The authors offer some examples of common suggestions that result from MSF consultations (e.g., providing students with guided notes for lectures).

In the final subsection of the handbook’s discussion of the MSF process the authors present some general suggestions as to how instructors should address the feedback they receive with their students. The handbook advises instructors to thank their students for providing their input. It also emphasizes the need for instructors to clearly discuss not only what changes will or will not be made, but also to provide rationales for those decisions.
The next section of the handbook offers some thoughts on how to effectively scale up MSF services at an institution. Depending on the level of resources available, the authors note the possibility of recruiting and training faculty members to serve as consultants. Doing so, however, necessitates additional considerations as to how to effectively train faculty consultants. One possible solution is to create a hybrid system in which faculty consultants conduct MSF sessions and then discuss the data with a professional instructional coach before meeting with the instructor. The authors also point out that it is not uncommon for faculty who participate in the MSF process to prefer to have a colleague from a department different from theirs to conduct the evaluation. The improvement of technology and internet resources offers a variety of additional solutions to the problem of broadening MSF services. Along these lines, online surveys or evaluations followed by class discussions, as well as the use of classroom response systems have been used as alternatives to the traditional approaches to MSFs.

The final section of the handbook offers some thoughts on the future of the MSF. Despite growing evidence of their benefit, MSFs are still used only a relatively small scale. This conundrum likely reflects both a lack of awareness and trained consultants. As the section above mentions, technology may help solve this problem, as it has broadened our ability to gather feedback from students in an anonymous fashion and allowed for the creation and implementation of improved surveying tools. A final potential solution is to further develop midterm feedback evaluations that combine the central concepts of the MSF with self-assessments taken by both instructors and students.

Applications

Given UDC’s current focus on promoting advanced teaching and learning, this handbook offers a wealth of information that would seem to be well suited to aiding us in our mission. The handbook is a veritable how-to on creating, implementing, and using Mid-semester feedback evaluations, particularly in the form of small group instructional diagnosis. As such, it is of particular interest to those who are engaged at the institutional level in promoting improved instruction. More specifically, the handbook offers any instructional consultants at UDC a clear guide, as well as additional resources, for developing MSFs and implementing them on a relatively broad level. It also provides baseline advice on broadening any such efforts through the recruitment and training of faculty to serve as adjunct consultants, so to speak. Beyond the staff level, the handbook is equally valuable for faculty who wish to either begin using MSFs or improve those that they already employ. Indeed, faculty could readily adapt the processes described herein to conduct either do it yourself MSF evaluations in survey form or work with colleagues to conduct the type of sessions focused on in the handbook. Though such efforts would lack expertise of analysis, they would still serve the larger purpose of working to improve teaching and learning at UDC. Finally, though the handbook does not discuss the employment of MSFs as vehicle for conducting S.o.T.L. research, it nonetheless implicitly does so. The use of MSFs in a series of courses and assessment of the data collected therein would, it seems to me, create an excellent opportunity to simultaneously improve instruction and develop publishable research.
Citations of Interest


