

Midterm Evaluations of Teaching: Summer 2014 Update

Summary

This report gives a brief background of the joint Alma Mater Society (AMS) and Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) Midterm Evaluations of Teaching (MEoT) project, reports the newly tabulated results of the project's implementation in the Winter 2013 academic year, and recommends future plans for the project; full details and history the project, as well as ongoing updates, will be available at the project's future online home (see Section 3.2 below). However, this report is intended to give a snapshot of MEoTs at UBC that is sufficient as a standalone introduction for individuals not yet familiar with the project. Any additional questions about the project or this report can be directed to the AMS Associate VP Academic and University Affairs at avpacademic@ams.ubc.ca.

1. Background

1.1. What are MEoTs?

The MEoT project began from discussions in UBC's Student Evaluation of Teaching Implementation Committee, and was taken up by the AMS in partnership with CTLT. The intent behind this project is to encourage instructors to solicit feedback from students partway through the delivery cycle of a course, in order to spark dialogue about the way the course is designed and delivered. These evaluations are meant to be undertaken in a spirit of partnership between students and professors, allowing formative dialogue and mature, scholarly exchanges to take place.

MEoTs contrast with formal end of term Student Evaluations of Teaching, in which feedback is provided too late for instructors to respond to issues that are raised. Unlike end of term evaluations, MEoTs are not collected by the institution and are not expected to be shared outside of class; rather, their purpose is to start conversation. The format and method of evaluation is also left flexible to instructors in the case of MEoTs, so that instructors can design evaluations based on what best suits their classes' individual teaching and learning needs.

Many instructors already perform these types of less formal evaluations of teaching, and these are even suggested by the *Guide to Teaching for New Faculty at UBC*.¹ The goal of the AMS-CTLT MEoT project is thus not to introduce a completely new practice. Rather, its goals are to create a more centralized discussion and body of resources about MEoTs at UBC, to encourage more professors to adopt this practice, and to provide relevant support to professors where needed.

¹ Sibley, J., Canuto, L. *Guide to Teaching for New Faculty at UBC*. (The University of British Columbia, 2010), 38. http://ctlit.ubc.ca/files/2011/05/Faculty_Guide_2010.pdf

1.2. The Pilot Project: Winter 2012

In collaboration with undergraduate society VP Academics from the faculties of Applied Science, Arts, Kinesiology, and Science, the AMS set up the pilot project in the winter 2012 academic year. VP Academics worked with Associate Deans from their respective faculties in order to identify professors interested in the project. Largely, invitations to participate and subsequent communications about the project came to professors from associate deans, VP Academics, the AMS, or jointly from these.

Twenty-two instructors from the above-mentioned four faculties participated, between them evaluating thirty-two course sections:

Table 1: Pilot Project, Sections Evaluated

Faculty/School	Sections Evaluated
Applied Science	5
Arts	18
Kinesiology	1
Science	8

A number of resources were made available to instructors that wished to utilize them, including an online form-builder tool with sample questions.² It should be stressed, however, that professor flexibility is a key component of this project, and that these resources were intended only as helpful tools that professors were free to utilize if they so chose. Instructors were encouraged to ask a limited number of questions relevant for their context, to review the feedback received, and to discuss the results with their students. Most evaluations were completed on paper.

The results of the pilot were compiled based on surveys that went out to many of the faculty that administered evaluations and to many of the students that participated. Detailed results of the Pilot Project were compiled by the AMS.

625 students filled out the survey; student feedback was positive overall, and the report summarized student feedback as follows:

For the most part, students thought that the opportunity to provide feedback was very positive, and felt that their opinion was acknowledged. They appreciated “having the ability to provide anonymous input to a class while it is in session so that you can benefit from the feedback, as opposed to end of term evaluations.”

Of the twenty-two faculty that administered evaluations, sixteen filled out the survey. All but two of these indicated that the process of administering a MEoT was positive; the report summarized the rest of professor feedback as follows:

The other fourteen indicated the experience was beneficial, that students had “very constructive suggestions” and that this was a good way to obtain a snapshot of the student experience thus far and gave them an opportunity to voice concerns.

² This tool can be found at <https://formbuilder.ctlt.ubc.ca/>

All of the faculty members who responded to the survey said students were engaged, that response rates were high, and that the responses were thoughtful.

Overall the MEoT Pilot Project was a success, indicating potential for the project to be continued and expanded upon in future years.

2. Winter 2013 Results

2.1. Term One

To capitalize on the success of the Pilot Project, the MEoT project was continued in Term One of the winter 2013 academic year. In an attempt to bring in more participants, the AMS planned to establish a different chain of communication with professors. VP Academics from each faculty's undergraduate society were asked to make a presentation about the project to the students representing department-level clubs. Each of these student representatives were then asked to take information to their department heads, requesting buy-in for the project and suggestions for additional professors to invite. The AMS VP Academic's office made itself available in a support role where needed.

Unfortunately, this communication strategy proved far less effective than the more centralized, top-down communication of the Pilot Project. The structure was such that heavy reliance was placed on department reps to continuously relay information between heads and faculty to VP Academics and the AMS. This resulted in confusion on all sides, and often chains of communication were dropped or lost. It also proved difficult for the AMS and VP Academics of larger faculties to keep track of professors who had been contacted and who had administered evaluations, so ultimately no detailed records were kept.

Furthermore, it was difficult for the AMS to directly address concerns raised by faculty in various departments. Some student representatives reported meeting negative attitudes towards the project, but it was often unclear whether these stemmed from the way students were communicating about the project. For example, despite the fact that one of the AMS's goals was to stress flexibility in the formats and methods through which professors administer evaluations, one recurring concern reported back to the AMS was that faculty felt the project mandated a rigid structure.

These results suggested that the communication strategy adopted in this term was much too far-reaching, and that a more conservative, top-down approach would need to be re-considered.

2.2. Term Two Results

Based on the poor results of Term One, two decisions were made to give the project a more narrow focus in Term Two. Firstly, since a particularly strong enthusiasm for the project was expressed by the Arts Undergraduate Society (AUS) and the Faculty of Arts Dean's Office, the decision was made to target the project mainly at Arts professors, in order to gain a strong footing within that faculty. Secondly, the success of the Pilot Project compared with the term one round showed the effectiveness of limiting the chain of communication to professors by having invitations and follow ups come directly from associate

deans and undergraduate society VP Academics, rather than delegating these responsibilities to departmental club representatives; thus, this was the strategy re-adopted for communicating with Faculty of Arts professors in Term Two.

Professors invited to participate in this round of the project were those who either exhibited interest during the Pilot Project, or who were identified by AUS councillors as professors likely to be interested. Invitations were sent jointly by the Faculty of Arts Associate Dean, Students and the AUS VP Academic. A total of ten professors agreed to administer evaluations, although it was not documented how many sections each of these professors evaluated.

Professors who agreed to administer evaluations were sent a follow-up survey in March 2014, in which they were asked the following questions:

Table 2: Winter 2013 Term Two, Questions for Faculty

1. Do you believe that incorporating a midterm evaluation into your course was beneficial or not? (please explain briefly)
2. How many course sections did you evaluate?
3. How engaged in the midterm evaluations were students, e.g. in terms of participation rates, quality/thoughtfulness of comments, etc.?
4. Were you surprised by any of the feedback you received and, if so, how?
5. What feedback did you receive from students during the discussions following the midterm evaluations?
6. Identify aspects of this midterm evaluation that you think were particularly positive or negative
7. Would you advocate for midterm evaluations to be more widely adopted in your discipline?

Five professors submitted responses; three of these administered evaluations in one course section, one in two course sections, and one in three course sections, for a total of eight sections evaluated between survey respondents.

Overall, these faculty members' experiences administering MEOts were positive, and the results of this survey were similar to those of the Pilot Project survey. While only one professor indicated that student feedback received was surprising, all five professors said that incorporating a midterm evaluation into their course was beneficial, and three directly expressed satisfaction over discovering things of which they wouldn't otherwise have been aware (e.g. areas of the course about which students were dissatisfied). All five professors also said that their students were very eager and engaged with the process, providing comments that were thoughtful and helpful.

In response to question 7, four out of five professors indicated that they would advocate for midterm evaluations to be more widely adopted in their respective disciplines. The remaining respondent expressed a worry that "generic" midterm evaluations would be imposed on all courses; this response—along with another response indicating that the most positive aspect of the experience was "being able

to choose the time and nature of the evaluation” in a way that fit the instructor’s needs—highlights the continued importance of giving professors flexibility in administering evaluations.

While additional negative feedback was scarce, there were two more instances in which professors identified points of dissatisfaction. One respondent indicated that the processes of creating questions and tabulating results was frustratingly time consuming, given that the evaluation was administered in a large class. This suggests that, while flexibility in creating class-tailored surveys is important, it is also important to make sure that professors have access to additional support if needed. Another respondent expressed frustration over the attitude of some students during open discussion of survey results. This instructor was disappointed to find that a few students dismissed or criticized their classmates’ feedback, one in a “particularly strident” manner. While this experience did not discourage the instructor enough to cease administering midterm evaluations in future years, it showed a need for more preparedness in case this type of situation arises again.

3. Moving Forward: Recommended Action for Winter 2014

The success of the Pilot showed that it was worthwhile for the AMS and CTLT to continue pursuing the MEoT project, and the results of the winter 2013 term two instalment reinforces this. However, the significantly less favourable results of winter 2013 term one suggest that the project still faces difficulties which need to be overcome. This section will propose new strategies for the project moving forward; along the way, it will pinpoint several of the main areas of difficulty that the project has had, showing how this renewed strategy is equipped to combat these.

3.1. A Narrowed but Inclusive Focus

As the winter 2013 results demonstrate, the project has a much greater potential for success when it is not spread too thin among too many individuals, particularly when it comes to chains of communication. Given that there have been very high levels of interest and participation in the project from the Faculty of Arts in both 2012 and 2013, during which close connections and partnerships have been fostered and continue to grow, it would be in the project’s best interest to continue placing strong emphasis on engaging professors in Arts. As the successful instalments of the project have shown, the top-down communication strategy, in which communications come largely from the dean’s office in collaboration with the AUS, AMS, and CTLT, should be retained.

With a high amount of time and resources being put into the Faculty of Arts, it would be impossible to retain a narrow focus while also engaging other faculties to the same extent. However, at the same time, if this project is eventually to grow to engage a significant portion of UBC’s professors, it would not be prudent to completely cut off ties with other faculties. While the AMS will not directly engage with other faculties about the project to the same extent, there should still be measures in place to allow other faculties to opt in to participating. While being inclusive, however, these measures should ensure that student representatives taking on this project in other faculties are committed to keeping up a

satisfactory level of communication that ensures the project doesn't fall by the wayside and result in dissatisfaction among faculty similar to that of winter 2013 term one. Thus, over summer 2014, the AMS should work with constituency VP Academics to determine a strategy for including other faculties interested in the project that is able to achieve inclusivity, but that ensures a high standard for communication is met.

3.2. An Online Home for the Project

The AMS, AUS, and CTLT are working over summer 2014 to create a new online home for the MEOt project. This will be a website that compiles informative history and resources about the project, and that also incorporates a blog feature. This blog will be used for sharing updates about the project, and also to share entries written by professors or students about their experiences with MEOts. In addition to this, there will be an increased effort this year to keep and update a central mailing list of interested professors and students, which will be compiled based on past participants and those who express interest in the future. This will allow information and blog posts to be disseminated efficiently, and will also allow for simplicity in sending out invitations to administer evaluations.

The motivation behind these strategies is to create an informal online learning community of faculty and students that centers around MEOts. Based on conversations about the design of this website that have taken place between the AMS, Faculty of Arts, AUS, and CTLT, the design of this website should be guided by the following three principles:

- **Informative:** The website should clearly describe the goals and motivations behind the MEOt project, and should be kept up to date with information and reports about both current and previous years' instalments. It should contain resources for professors seeking assistance with administering evaluations (e.g. a list of best practices, suggested questions, etc.), and should clearly outline contact information for seeking further support. The blog portion should be updated regularly with information about the project and related events, as well as engaging entries that discuss personal experiences with MEOts. Overall, this space should be a "one-stop shop" that anyone interested in MEOts can visit to have their curiosity and concerns addressed.
- **Interactive:** In addition to offering information about MEOts, this website should be a place where individuals can come to actively engage with the project. It should provide opportunities for professors and students to share their experiences through submitting blog posts, and its functionality should allow for comments and discussions to take place. Ideally, it will be a place that includes active discussion about teaching and learning that is centered around MEOts, and will thus encourage repeat visits.
- **Collaborative:** The purpose of MEOts is largely to foster a spirit of collaboration between students and professors. This is reflected in the collaboration behind the implementation of the project, since this includes the AMS, undergraduate societies, CTLT, dean's offices, and professors. The website should try to further this spirit of collaboration. As a forum for discussion, it will allow both students and professors to exchange ideas. The nature of the blog

posts should also be driven by this spirit of collaboration as much as possible; for example, rather than post separate entries written by students and professors respectively, there should be an effort to seek out professors and students from the same course sections to write entries that include the experiences of each.

The creation of this new online home in the spirit of these three guidelines should help to address several of the main difficulties that the MEoT project faces by achieving the following:

- **Providing a Central Hub for MEoTs at UBC:** One of the obstacles that this project faces is that, although many professors currently administer MEoTs both of their own initiative and through the AMS-CTLT project, there is currently no central hub for professors to come together to engage with this topic outside of their classes. This gap makes it difficult to unify the separate practices of many professors into one, unified initiative, which could potentially add significant momentum to the project. This website will allow professors to engage with colleagues and students from across disciplines and faculties, creating a more centralized MEoT community at UBC.
- **Spreading Engagement throughout the Year:** Currently, outreach and engagement from the AMS and CTLT about the project is concentrated into relatively short periods during the academic year, namely the middle of each term immediately before, during, and immediately after evaluations are administered. This poses a barrier to the project in that it does not allow for sustained levels of engagement to take place; rather, professors participate in the project, follow-up takes place immediately afterwards, and then outreach is halted until the next time evaluations are administered. In order to foster a large-scale change in attitude towards MEoTs in UBC's teaching and learning culture, it would be beneficial to sustain engagement throughout the year. One of the main goals behind creating a website that is highly informative, interactive, and collaborative is to ensure that a sustained community can be developed around MEoTs at UBC that does not fizzle out during less peak times.
- **Ease of Communication:** There have been some difficulties to do with communication, particularly when it comes to addressing concerns about participating in the project. It is impossible when writing initial email invitations to professors to foresee and include information that addresses all concerns that will be raised. Having one central place that hosts all information about the project will help to alleviate these difficulties: rather than receiving an invitation that is limited in scope, potential participants could be sent a link to a single website containing a well-crafted description of the purposes behind the project, as well as multiple informative resources. The interactive nature of the website will also make it a place for potential participants to raise concerns in a public forum for discussion, rather than communicating these concerns to the AMS and CTLT through various, disparate channels.

3.3. September 2014 Event

During the 2012 Pilot Project, a successful Midterm Evaluations of Teaching Forum event was hosted by the AMS and CTLT, in which participants were able to partake in brainstorming sessions based around the topics of what a successful midterm evaluation of teaching should look like, and what questions should (or should not) be asked on an evaluation.³

In addition to developing an online hub for the project, the AMS, AUS, and CTLT will be planning during summer 2014 for another MEoT-themed event during the third week of September 2014. This event will serve as the launch of the MEoT website and blog, and will invite both faculty and students to participate in some combination of presentations and discussions. Information about this event will be circulated as soon as it has been developed and confirmed. This event will aim to engage members of the UBC teaching and learning community in dialogue about MEoTs, with the hope that this dialogue can be continued and sustained through an interactive website after the event is over.

³ The event was covered online by CTLT: <http://ctlit.ubc.ca/2012/12/13/midterm-evaluations-of-teaching-forum/>