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# Class representatives: Collaborating with students to improve teaching & learning in a large first-year course

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# **Class representatives:**

## **Collaborating with students to improve teaching & learning in a large first-year course**

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# **Class Representatives**

The Instructor's Perspective

# How can we assess how well a course is going?

- Ideal situation: class is small enough that can talk with students one-on-one & interact with them as they work with course material
- Allows us to get to know students and find out first-hand what is unclear & how the course is going



# How can we assess how well a course is going?

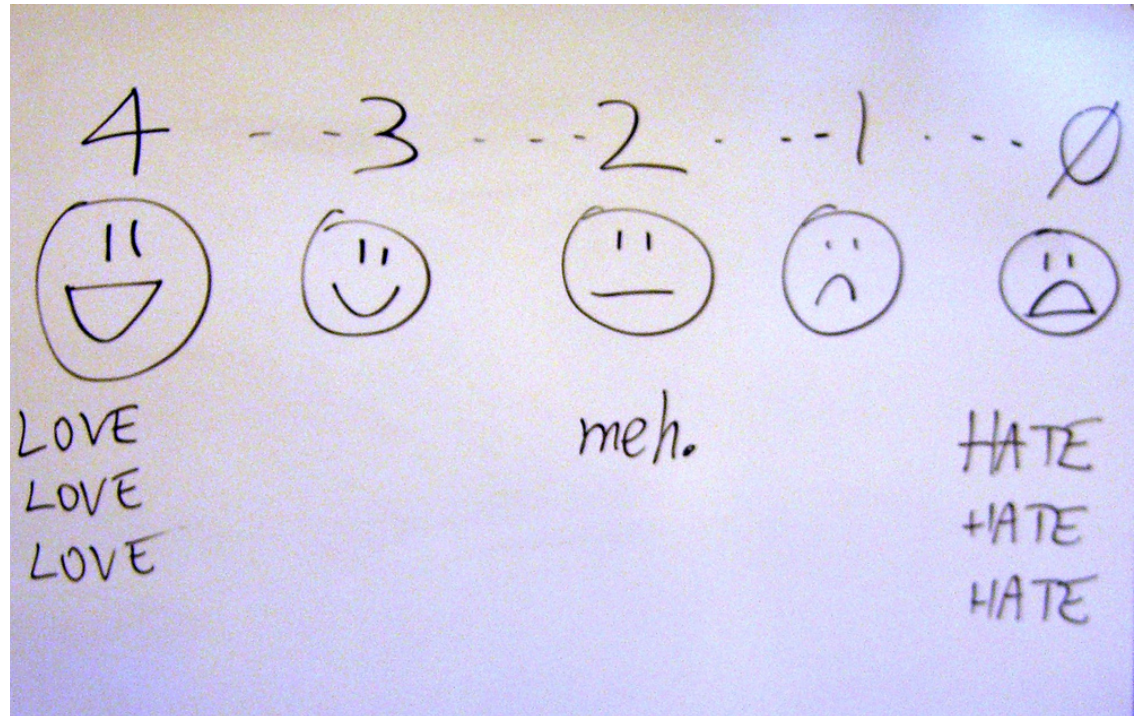
- For many of us the reality looks more like this image: in these large classes, it is very difficult to gauge student understanding and to get to know students
- Experience of teaching in such classes is often one of disconnection and anonymity
- Usually rely on end-of-term evaluations to assess how the class went



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# Limitations of written evaluations:

- End-of-term evaluations only allow for improvements to subsequent teaching
- Provide only a “snapshot” of teaching at one point in time; not continuous feedback
- Lack of dialogue with students makes it hard to interpret student comments
- Many aspects of a course are not assessed e.g., how well do labs & lectures tie together?



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# Alternative strategy for feedback: Class Representatives

- Ask for volunteers in first class (~10-12; will be some attrition)
- Meet once per week (~30 min); get feedback on all aspects of course
- Instructor must be prepared to listen without being defensive; important to create informal atmosphere
- Inform rest of class about what was discussed and any changes that will be implemented as a result



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# Positive Outcomes for Instructors

- Opportunity to see class through new lens & revise teaching strategies during course
- Provides continuous feedback/evaluation
- Opportunity to get to know at least some students; counteracts feelings of anonymity/disconnection



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# **Class Representatives**

The Student Perspective

# The Transition from High School

- Classroom dynamics very different from high school
  - Class sizes much larger
  - Often less participation
  - Often very limited interaction with professor
- Effects on students
  - Fear of asking questions or approaching professor for help
  - Detachment from class reduces motivation; can feel helpless
  - Grades suffer



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# Who are Class Representatives?

- What do they do?
  - Facilitate communication
  - Give immediate feedback, unlike course evaluations; less likely to get meaningful feedback at end of term
- Which students volunteer? Do they represent everyone in the class?
  - While it is the more-motivated students who tend to volunteer, they associate with different groups within the class & also hear comments from wide range of classmates (e.g. those sitting around them in lecture; lab groups)



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# Positive Outcomes for Students

- Ease of transition from high school & into higher-level courses: gain confidence in approaching other instructors
- Feel more engaged and involved due to having a voice in the course; this is true for more than just class representatives, provided that instructor communicates outcomes of feedback from class reps to the class as a whole
- Personal attachment to the course increases motivation to invest time & energy in the course; performance in course reflects this



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**Questions? Comments?**  
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