



SoTL in Process

Empowering Teaching Through Contextualized Student Feedback: Fostering Faculty Agency, Student Belonging, and Evolving Evaluation Practices

ABSTRACT

Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) are a ubiquitous institutional tool for capturing student feedback, yet they often function as tokenistic, end-of-course mechanisms that fail to support meaningful pedagogical development. This paper shares a critical reflection of the traditional SET model and proposes a new approach to a time-old tradition. Grounded in the Students as Partners (SaP) framework, we propose a reimagining of SETs centered on four interdependent principles: respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and reflection. This proposed model also positions feedback as an ongoing, dialogic process that enhances learning for students, educators, and institutions. This model, the Continual Feedback Loop (CFL), is a cyclical framework that embeds feedback before, during, and after a course, ensuring responsiveness to context, learner-centered engagement, and capacity-building for all. The CFL transforms SETs from static, summative evaluations into dynamic tools for co-created learning environments, supporting educator autonomy while amplifying student voices. This approach also addresses systemic barriers in SET practices, including power imbalances, metric limitations, and the marginalization of educators. By shifting the purpose and structure of SETs, our model has the potential to cultivate an inclusive, intentional feedback culture that fosters mutual accountability, empowers both students and educators, and aligns with institutional goals for teaching effectiveness. We conclude with actionable strategies for implementing the CFL at both the educator and institutional levels, demonstrating its practical relevance and potential to transform SETs from a compliance-driven exercise into a powerful instrument of reflective, collaborative educational change.

KEYWORDS

student evaluations of teaching, student feedback, students as partners, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Student feedback is a critical component of teaching development. However, institutional implementation of Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) often reduces that feedback to a transactional, tokenistic, end-of-course mechanism. Although institutions may use different names for SETs, they share common characteristics: standardized, often close-ended Likert-style questions administered across all courses after teaching and assessment have concluded (Uttl, White, and Gonzalez 2017). Much scholarship has explored the harmful nature as well as the limitations of SETs as a valid and reliable measure of teaching effectiveness (see: Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman 2021; Peterson, Biederman, Andersen, Ditonto, and Roe 2019; Wang and Gonzalez 2020). Therefore, we will focus on two alternative critical factors in this conversation: timing and authenticity.

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While end-of-course administration of SETs protects students, it significantly limits opportunities for feedback to be acted upon, reducing SETs' value for students, as there is no impact on their own course experience (Sullivan, Lakeman, Massey, Nasrawi, Tower, and Lee 2023). This end-of-semester summative practice leads to SETs focusing on judgments and student perceptions of teaching quality and satisfaction (Uttl 2024), rather than fostering authentic student reflection or providing actionable insights into their learning. This timing and format shifts SETs to an administrative tool for institutional accountability and surveillance rather than a mutually beneficial process of reflection and engagement, supporting deeper connections between students and educators. For educators, this feedback offers little opportunity for timely and meaningful adaptation to address student needs or to reflect on pedagogical strategies in the moment. For students, the process feels disconnected from their learning, reducing their participation to a performative task with limited relevance to their classroom experience (Ahmad and Olle 2022).

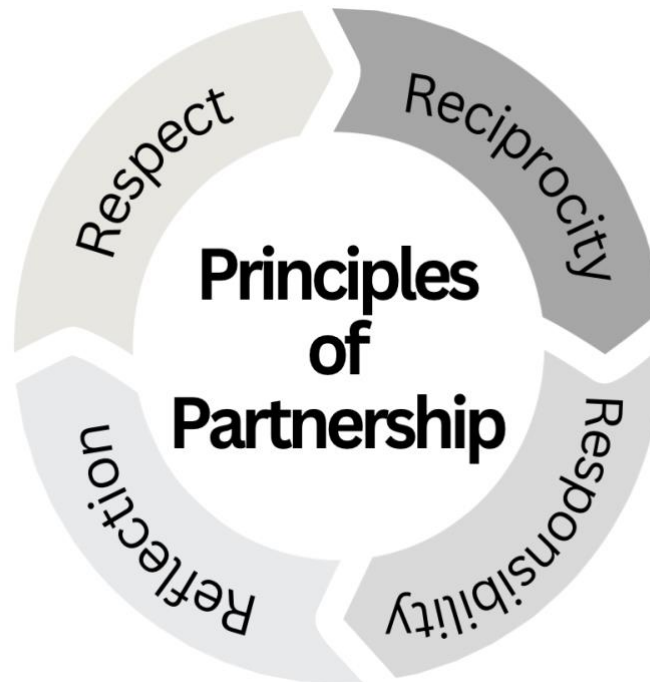
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UTILIZING THE STUDENTS AS PARTNERS PRINCIPLES

Our conversation reimagines feedback as a dynamic, ongoing, and dialogic process that actively engages both students and educators, mirroring models centered on learning — both for and about learning — that we aim to cultivate in our classrooms (Boud and Molloy 2013). Grounded in the partnership principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014), we propose reframing SETs as a shared endeavor rather than a one-sided act imposed by institutions. Our model attempts to operationalize these principles within a standardized institutional feedback mechanism, bridging the gap between partnership ideals and historical practices of teaching evaluations. In addition, we added reflection as a fourth principle, highlighting its role in creating an adaptive, equitable, and evolving feedback culture that meets the needs of students, educators, and institutions alike (Figure 1).

By embedding respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and reflection into SET practices, feedback shifts from a single-point activity into a process that drives continuous improvement before, during, and after a course. These principles form a cyclical and interconnected foundation for fostering equitable, collaborative, and impactful staff-student-institutional partnerships. This circular design reflects the ongoing, non-linear nature of partnerships, where respect fosters trust and belonging, reciprocity enables mutual exchange and shared learning, responsibility anchors ethical accountability, and reflection ensures the process remains dynamic, adaptive, and responsive to changing and contextual needs.

This SET culture empowers educators and, in turn, their students. While much SET discourse emphasizes student empowerment (Klemenčič 2018), we argue that empowering educators is vital and often overlooked. Our SET model prioritizes meaningful partnerships between students, educators, and institutions while educators' autonomy is respected, and co-creation is encouraged. Such a culture equips educators with actionable insights to refine teaching while reinforcing professional agency, confidence, and adaptability, which then ripples into increased teaching effectiveness, deepened student engagement, and an enriched learning environment (van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, and Beishuizen 2017).

Figure 1. Principles of partnership inspired by and adapted from Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014)



Principle 1: Respect

Respect acknowledges the value of every participant’s voice, experience, and perspective. In the context of SETs, respect ensures educators and students feel heard and valued. For students, this involves inviting their lived experiences and intellectual contributions during the learning process as an important context for understanding our teaching practices. For educators, respect is shown through institutional recognition of their expertise and judgment, avoiding reductive interpretations of single sourced feedback. Unlike traditional SETs that decontextualize feedback, our model situates feedback within the lived realities of both students and educators, recognizing the complexities they face in creating effective learning environments. Respectful SET practices include co-constructing questions, ensuring students and educators feel ownership of the process and creating space for what is most valuable in their shared experiences.

Principle 2: Reciprocity

Reciprocity highlights the mutual exchange of insights and learning, transforming SETs into a collaborative process. Unlike traditional SETs, which cast students as passive evaluators and educators as mere recipients, reciprocity reframes SETs as a shared endeavor fostering a dialogic process. In this process, students share their learning experiences, and educators communicate their pedagogical intentions and reflections. By embedding reciprocal feedback, such as mid-semester discussions where students offer insights and educators transparently explain how this input will inform course adjustments, SETs transform into a participatory process for students and educators.

Principle 3: Responsibility

Responsibility anchors the partnership in ethical accountability, ensuring a commitment to shared goals. It requires all participants to approach feedback with integrity and to actively contribute

to the process in ways that promote meaningful outcomes. For educators, this means listening attentively to feedback, reflecting on its implications for teaching and learning, and making considered adjustments to their teaching practices. It also involves recognizing and communicating the challenges they face, such as institutional policies or curriculum limitations, while demonstrating a willingness to adapt within those constraints. For students, responsibility means providing thoughtful, specific, and constructive insights rooted in their learning experiences. In SET contexts, institutions also bear responsibility for ensuring that educators are supported in interpreting and using feedback effectively, rather than reducing it to mere performance metrics.

Principle 4: Reflection

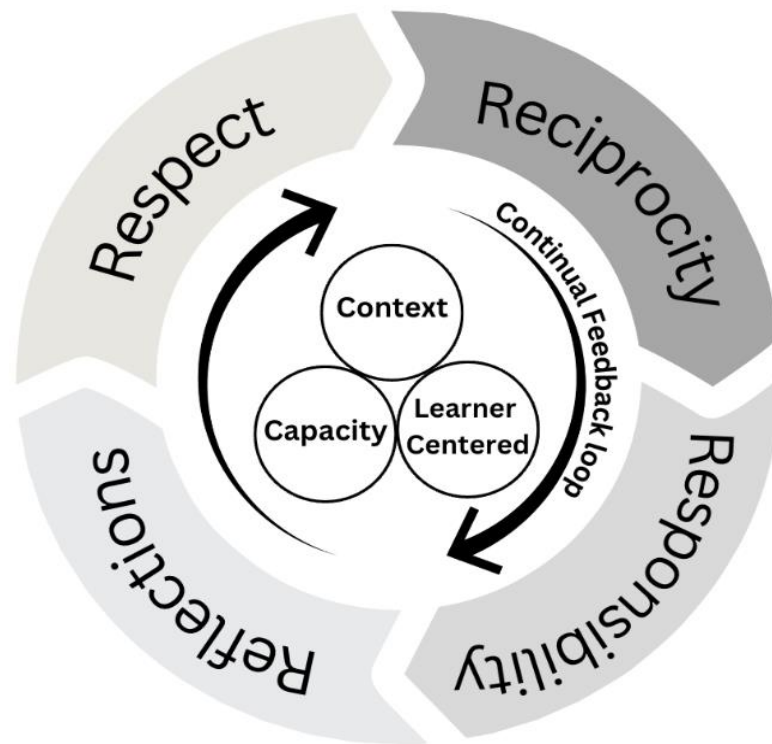
Reflection is a unique addition, recognizing that feedback is not a one-time event but an ongoing, evolving process. It ensures that respect, reciprocity, and responsibility remain dynamic and responsive. For educators, reflection means considering how their teaching aligns with the students' needs and using feedback to guide pedagogical adjustments during course design and the semester. For students, it involves assessing how their feedback aligns with their own learning goals as well as those established for the course. Institutions benefit from reflection by recognizing the dynamic nature of feedback and supporting both educators and students during this process. This reflective cycle distinguishes our approach from traditional SETs, creating a culture of adaptive learning.

Unlike general partnership models, our SaP-informed approach is specifically tailored to the challenges of SETs. It acknowledges the inherent power imbalances, the potential for misinterpretation of feedback, and the institutional pressures that educators often face. By reframing SETs as a collaborative process grounded in these four principles, we emphasize that feedback is not just about student perceptions or educator performance; it is about creating a shared space for learning, growth, and understanding, and it invites multiple modalities for collecting student feedback to be used in partnership with each other.

FROM TOKENISM TO INTENTIONALITY: THE CONTINUAL FEEDBACK LOOP FOR CONTEXTUALIZED FEEDBACK

To shift the culture of SETs, we propose the “Continual Feedback Loop” (CFL) (Figure 2), a framework grounded in the principles of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and reflection. CFL can be applied to existing SET processes and additional teaching evaluation frameworks. This cyclical, interconnected model positions students as co-creators in the SET process, moving from passive recipients to active contributors in an educational dialogue (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011), and adapts SETs into an exercise of critical thinking, reflection, and agency—fostering deeper engagement and a greater sense of belonging (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). For educators, SETs are often perceived as serving institutional or administrative purposes rather than being a reflective tool for growth (Uttl 2024), reducing their value and transforming them into compliance measures. The CFL reframes SETs as an inquiry tool for teaching, where student input informs adjustments to courses and teaching methods that better align with educational contexts (i.e., who and what we teach).

Figure 2. Continual Feedback Loop (CFL)



Reimagining SETs as a collaborative, cyclical process stems from the recognition that teaching and learning both thrive when feedback is embedded as an integral and constantly iterative part of the educational experience (Carless and Boud 2018). Traditional SETs operate as one-way, summative exchanges, offering limited opportunities for real-time reflection, growth, or mutual engagement (Carless 2019; Boud et al. 2013; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Such static approaches fail to leverage feedback as a dynamic tool for creating responsive learning environments. While mid-semester SETs provide in-the-moment feedback, we often do not return to them at the end of a semester or the start, when that feedback may be used to adapt or revise our courses.

Our approach redefines SETs as a meaningful, intentional dialogue that evolves with the needs, expectations, and goals of educators and students. The CFL operationalizes the SaP principles to provide a structured yet flexible foundation, embedding active reflection on student feedback before, during, and after a course, reinforcing the value of student voices in shaping the learning and teaching experience.

The CFL framework incorporates three interconnected components:

- *Context* ensures feedback practices are responsive to the specific institutional, cultural, and disciplinary environments where the learning occurs. Context-sensitive feedback accounts for diverse student backgrounds, subject nuances, institutional priorities, and generational differences—ensuring relevance, equity, and meaningful engagement.
- *Learner-centeredness* prioritizes students’ voices and agency, aligning with the principles of respect and reciprocity to foster co-ownership and belonging. It ensures feedback reflects students’ lived experiences, needs, and aspirations while recognizing their intersectional identities, which helps us better understand context. This approach shifts the focus of SETs so

that they revisit learning outcomes, allowing both educators and students to assess their progress toward these goals.

- *Capacity* focuses on equipping students and educators with the skills and resources to engage meaningfully in the feedback process. For students, it builds agency and belonging, empowering them to take ownership of their learning. For educators, it provides actionable insights that may enhance inclusive and engaging teaching practices. For institutions, building capacity can shift how students and educators engage with each other and their learning environment (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry 2016).

TANGIBLE MOVES FOR PRACTICE

The CFL framework offers a transformative approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) by bridging theoretical principles with practical implementation, fundamentally reimagining SETs as dynamic, dialogic processes. Unlike traditional models that treat feedback as a one-way, summative assessment, CFL embeds the principles of reciprocity, respect, responsibility, and reflection in order to foster a culture of mutual engagement. It positions both educators and students as active participants in shaping the learning experience, ensuring that feedback is context-sensitive, learner-centered, and capacity-building. This approach enhances feedback quality and aligns with critical pedagogical theories; it promotes agency, co-ownership, and sustained growth. CFL's unique value lies in its ability to operationalize partnership principles within diverse educational settings, transforming SETs from mere performance evaluations to tools for continuous learning and shared accountability.

SETs are typically administered and designed based on their intended function (MacLeod 2000). When institutions use them solely for institutional purposes, they risk becoming perfunctory measures of teaching effectiveness, disconnected from the realities of the learning experience. The CFL disrupts this static approach, redefining feedback as a dynamic, evolving process that empowers all stakeholders, including institutions. By centering feedback on authentic engagement rather than compliance, CFL enables educators and students to collaboratively refine teaching and learning practices. Building on existing literature and our experiences, we have compiled initial strategies at both the individual and institutional levels (Table 1). These strategies are not definitive solutions but starting points for further exploration, allowing for practical, adaptable applications of the CFL framework that genuinely reflect the complexities of contemporary teaching and learning.

Table 1. Educator and institutional recommendations for the implementation of the CFL

	Educator-level	Institutional-level
Continual feedback loop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing SET data during the course construction and revision process, building on mid- and end-semester data Articulating to students any changes you made based on SET data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalizing SET processes as formative, collected at more than one point during a course. Encouraging the use of SET data in narrative form.
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize personalized questions to explore who you teach, what you teach, and how you teach. Be transparent with students about unique teaching/learning contexts (e.g., hybrid delivery, gateway course). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure SETs offer the opportunity for educators to use several open- and closed-ended personalized questions. Pair formal SET data with course and aggregated student demographics.
Learner-centered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind students often how course learning outcomes are met by course activities. When developing course outcomes, consider the wording of SET questions and utilize similar language. Go over SET questions with students to help them understand what the questions are asking within the context of their learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use learning-focused language in SET questions and in how institutional SETs are titled. Regularly evaluate SET questions in relation to institutional initiatives and priorities related to teaching.
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use model providing constructive feedback for students. Share examples of useful SET feedback and what was valuable about it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide educator resources that develop student capacity to actively engage in the SET process (e.g., adaptable slides for explaining SET processes) Engage with institutional units (e.g., a university center for teaching and learning) to offer workshops, consults, and programming for educators.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS THROUGH EMPOWERING STUDENTS

A central tenet of this paper is that empowering educators is intrinsically connected to empowering students. While higher education focuses on student empowerment, this is incomplete without equally supporting educators as they cultivate reflective and adaptive practices. The CFL bridges this gap, creating a sustainable ecosystem where feedback becomes a collaborative, iterative process fostering growth for educators and students while still meeting institutional needs. It empowers educators to adapt their practices, enables students to witness the impact of their contributions, and promotes reflective growth and mutual accountability. When students see their feedback acted upon in real time, they recognize the value of their voices, fostering ownership, belonging, and investment in their learning. For educators, the cyclical nature of the model reframes feedback as a tool for growth rather than judgment. It allows them to embrace a dynamic, responsive teaching identity, strengthening confidence and encouraging experimentation. The model empowers educators to adapt their practices, enables students to see the impact of their contributions, and

promotes reflective growth and mutual accountability while offering institutions measures of teaching effectiveness reflective of their institutional priorities. This shift moves feedback beyond tokenistic exercises, fostering an ongoing dialogue that benefits all stakeholders and cultivates a more inclusive and transformative educational experience.

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DISCLOSURE

We did not use generative AI and/or AI-assisted technologies at any stage of the writing and preparation of the manuscript.

ETHICS

The work was exempt from ethical review.

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