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BRIEF REPORT



The New NSF CAMP Feedback Method for Research Mentorship

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ABSTRACT

The National Science Foundation's Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) aims to cultivate students' ability to craft competitive research proposals. Over three years of CAMP, we tested and iterated different feedback models: the Socratic method, the Value Proposition approach, and the Critical Response Process (CRP). We ultimately designed the NSF CAMP Feedback Method that integrates successful elements from these three models for the presentation of research proposals, feedback mechanisms, and refinement. The proposed method consists of five steps: (1) Proposal Presentation Following a Revised Value Proposition Approach, (2) Statements of Meaning, (3) Presenter as Questioner, (4) Permissioned Opinions, and (5) Reframing. Feedback from faculty and students regarding the NSF CAMP Feedback Method was positive, highlighting its effectiveness in guiding proposal development and fostering a supportive environment. However, challenges were noted, including the reluctance of students to refuse feedback (step 4) due to power imbalances and the potential unpreparedness for receiving and responding to critical questioning encountered in typical academic settings outside the CAMP environment. Despite these challenges, the method offers a valuable framework for enhancing proposal development processes in academic settings, with opportunities for adaptation to suit diverse student needs.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

The National Science Foundation's Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) helps students create strong research proposals. Over three years, we tested three feedback models: the Socratic method, the Value Proposition approach, and the Critical Response Process (CRP). We combined the best parts of these models into the NSF CAMP Feedback Method, which has five steps: 1. Presenting proposals using a revised Value Proposition approach. 2. Sharing statements about what was meaningful in the proposal. 3. Allowing the presenter to ask questions. 4. Giving feedback only with the presenter's permission. 5. Reframing feedback for better understanding. Students and faculty liked this method, saying it was effective in improving proposals and creating a supportive environment. However, some challenges included students feeling unable to refuse feedback due to power dynamics and being unprepared for critical questioning in typical academic settings. Despite these issues, the method is useful for improving proposal development and can be adapted to meet different students' needs.

KEYWORDS

proposal development;
feedback methods;
academic mentoring;
research skills

One goal of the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) curriculum is to help students develop competitive research proposals and learn to mentor other researchers. Each day during the intensive program students presented their developing projects. They received feedback in groups composed of one professor and five students. Over three years of the CAMP program, we tested and iterated three different models of

providing students feedback on their research proposals.

We began by comparing three feedback methods: the ancient Socratic method, the engineering-based Value Proposition approach, and the arts-based Critical Response Process. The ancient, well-known Socratic method facilitates critical thinking through open-ended questioning by the instructor (Elder and Paul 2007) and had been

used in prior iterations of the NSF-funded anthropology methods programs. The Value Proposition approach asks students to identify the need, benefits, approach, and competition (NABC) to develop their proposals (Carlson, Polizzotto, and Gaudette 2019; Westerhoff, Wutich, and Carlson 2021). The arts-based Critical Response Process (CRP) has a four-step guided structure aimed at giving student presenters the agency to guide the process and receive feedback (Lerman and Borstel 2003).

During our three-year research program, we gathered longitudinal data and asked students and faculty what they thought could be improved. From data in Year 1 and Year 2, we developed and tested the NSF CAMP Feedback Method: a blended STEAM model (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) that integrates the most successful aspects of the Socratic method, Value Proposition (NABC) approach, and Critical Response Process (CRP). Guidance for this blended approach, (available on method-s4all.org with the full CAMP toolkit) explains the steps and roles for the instructor, presenters (students), and audience members (fellow students).

Step 1: Proposal presentation following a revised value proposition approach

In Step 1, students have 15 minutes to present their research proposal. Students are encouraged to highlight the context of their research goal using the key aspects of the Value Proposition (NABC) approach (Westerhoff, Wutich, and Carlson 2021). We adapted the original order to address the needs of PhD students with varying experience in research development and design, following recommendations by Prieto (2019).

Need: What is the need or problem that your research addresses, and why does it matter? Here, students introduce the problem, why it is an issue, and why existing research does not address the problem already.

Conversation: Note that this differs from the original NABC, where C was for "Competition." Students had difficulty getting past the term "competition" and felt it was antagonistic. Thus,

we changed to conversation and provided the following prompt: How can your work advance scholarship in this area? Here, students summarize the existing literature, highlight scholarly debates, and identify how their proposed research builds knowledge.

Question: We include the Q for the research question to remind students to put it into their proposals (Prieto 2019). Here, students are prompted to answer: What is your research question (or hypotheses), specifically? Students should clearly present their research questions (or hypotheses) that are formulated to be specific and answerable.

Approach: What are your research methods? This part of the proposal presentation should clearly describe the methods for sampling, data collection, and data analysis—and explain how these methods contribute to answering the research question. Students should explain why these are the best methods to answer the research question and/or how they are unique from what has been done before.

Benefits: What are the expected research benefits, in terms of theoretical contributions and practical value? In this last part, students are asked to explain how their proposed research addresses the research need (stated at the beginning) and how it contributes to the conversation (i.e., the scholarly literature). For NSF proposals, students can explain the intellectual merit and broader impacts of their work here.

A note on the structure of giving feedback

Once the student has presented their proposed research within 15 minutes, it is time to give feedback. Here, the feedback structure incorporates aspects from the Critical Response Process and Socratic methods. It is important for the instructor to facilitate the process and make sure students are adhering to the structure. Instructors need to explain how to ask "low-threat questions" meant to flatten any judgment rather than asking a critical question. An example would be asking, "Can you tell us why you chose your sampling strategy?" versus a higher threat question, "Don't you think random sampling would be best?"

Step 2: Statements of meaning

Developed from the Critical Response Process (Lerman and Borstel 2003), statements of meaning give opening feedback about what is impactful in the project. The first time presenting, and perhaps in subsequent presentations, the statements of meaning come directly from the audience members. The goal is to provide feedback to the presenter on aspects of their work and build an environment of support. The instructor leads the discussion by asking, "What was unique about this proposal to you?" or "What did you find meaningful or notable?" Those who listened, including the instructor, then share what they found notable about the proposal. While the statement of meaning does not have to be a compliment, it should have a supportive frame. Note, that this step can be skipped in repetitions of the presentation to the same audience.

Step 3: Presenter as questioner

In this step from the Critical Response Process, the presenter asks questions to the audience about feedback they feel they need. For instance, say the student who presented is unsure if they articulated their theoretical contribution well. They could ask, "How can I make my theory section stronger?" Here, if the instructor sees an underlying issue with the research question that should be addressed before discussing the literature, they may pause the feedback and address this. The instructor could ask permission to ask questions, such as, "Let's step back because I think we need to further define your research question before answering how the theoretical contribution can be articulated in a stronger way. Can I offer some opinions and ask you some questions?" If the student responds in the affirmative, then the professor can redirect through questions, such as: "I think the research question may work better if it is narrower; would it work to focus on a specific population or field site?" Here, the instructor is providing critical feedback on specific issues, but using an open-ended question to guide the student in a Socratic thought process of figuring out a solution. The

instructor can keep asking guided, open-ended questions to help the student along.

Step 4: Permissioned opinions

This step also comes from the Critical Response Process. Here, audience members, and the instructor, need to ask before giving specific feedback. For example: "I have a suggestion about your sampling design, do you want to hear it now or later?" The tag of "now or later" allows the presenter to avoid saying no, as it may feel difficult to refuse someone face-to-face, and keeps the door open for hearing the feedback. The presenter could respond with, "Thank you, but not right now. I have a lot to think through already; perhaps next session, or in writing?" Alternatively, the student presenter can opt-in and the instructor opens up permissioned opinions to the audience.

Step 5: Reframing

This last step is taken from the Socratic method and allows the student presenter to sum up the information and define a plan to move forward. The instructor and audience members can help either to reframe or to add nuance to the reframing.

The pitfalls and benefits to the NSF CAMP Feedback Method

Over the course of three years of testing and fine-tuning, the NSF CAMP Feedback Method was well-received by both faculty and graduate students. The clear guidelines of what should be included in the proposal, taken from the Value Proposition approach, helps students focus the proposal. Additionally, faculty and students appreciated the combined Critical Response Process and Socratic styles to provide guidance and feedback. The statements of meaning help create a supportive environment early in the proposal development process, and students appreciate that they have control of the process and the opportunity to refuse feedback. Faculty like that they have the ability to interject early on if needed. The last reframing step is also

quite beneficial for students who may have had to process a lot of feedback.

Our research revealed two possible downsides to using the NSF CAMP Feedback Method. First, no student ever refused to hear any opinions. While this may be due in part to students' motivation and buy-in, we interpret this as an indicator that power dynamics are difficult to overcome. Even in an environment widely regarded as safe and supportive, students typically did not feel they could say no in front of or to their instructors. Second, students noted that when they had to present for other scholars—outside of the NSF CAMP process—they sometimes felt caught off guard by critical questions or judgmental feedback. Despite these potential pitfalls, we hope that others will adopt and adapt our method to fit their students' needs.

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