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# EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN ACTION

## Formative Dialogues in Teaching Nonthreatening Peer Coaching

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Teaching universities, while claiming to value good teaching, do little to help individual faculty members improve learning in their classrooms. One effective way to help teachers reflect on their teaching and improve their teaching skills is to have a colleague observe and discuss the teaching episode, yet these dialogues seem to be rare. Visits to the classroom, if they occur at all, are usually summative, with little or no discussion, and typically used for the purposes of evaluation. The formative dialogues program, however, provides opportunities for faculty members to request a collegial, nonthreatening observation and discussion of a teaching session. The program is easy to administer and promises to provide opportunities to enhance the learning environment of the health professional classroom.. (J Chiropr Educ 2012;26(1):62-67)

**Key Indexing Terms:** Mentors; Staff Development

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education faculty members are evaluated by their research productivity, their teaching effectiveness, and their service to the community.<sup>1</sup> Summative reports about these areas of productivity are applied to various decisions, including salary, rank and tenure, continuation of annual contracts, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the only classroom visit faculty members typically receive is one that is required for the purpose of placing a record in their file, not one which is designed to provide formative feedback for the purpose of reflecting on teaching and learning.<sup>3,4</sup>

The Center for Teaching Excellence at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) provides a description of a summative evaluation, shown in Figure 1.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the formative review of teaching is more of a partnership between colleagues where a supportive, nonjudgmental conversation can occur in a collaborative and reflective environment.<sup>6,7</sup>

Formative Dialogues in Teaching (FD), a form of peer coaching originally developed at IUP, provides

a formalized approach to peer coaching, allowing faculty members the voluntary opportunity to request to have a supportive colleague observe them in a teaching role and discuss their observations. In my faculty development leadership position at Loma Linda University (LLU), I was looking for a way to move beyond classroom visits that were merely summative to a more formative approach when I learned about the program at IUP. Members of the faculty development committee at Loma Linda University embraced the idea of the formative dialogues and decided to adapt it for their own use.

### PROCESS OF FORMATIVE DIALOGUES

In contrast to a summative evaluation, the FD program at LLU works as in the following manner.<sup>8</sup> First, all faculty members receive an e-mail message, inviting them to request a FD and the list of certified colleagues is included in the message. Next, an individual faculty member decides that he or she wishes to have feedback on teaching and contacts a colleague and sets up an appointment to begin the process. The faculty member and colleague then schedule a preliminary discussion and sign the confidentiality agreement (Appendix A) and

- Someone is assigned to observe a colleague as part of the institutionally structured evaluation.
- Typically there is little discussion before the classroom visit. Often this is via e-mail, not face-to-face.
- Sometimes there is no warning or prearrangement of the date of the visit: it is a big surprise for the person being observed.
- Usually this is a one-visit event.
- The observer often works from a checklist of behaviors or indicators that are departmentally approved.
- There is often little discussion of the observation after it has concluded. That discussion may be simply signing the form or may take place by e-mail.
- The observation summarizes what the observer saw and concluded and stands as a written record believed to be indicative of the usual teaching skills and behaviors of the faculty member observed.
- The written record is preserved in personnel files to be viewed by others in the larger evaluation process.

*Figure 1. Summative evaluation, based on work done at the Center for Teaching Excellence at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.*

decide on a time for a teaching observation. The colleague observes the faculty member's teaching session. After the observation, the faculty member and colleague schedule a follow-up meeting time and discuss the teaching session. No notes are kept by the colleague after the follow-up meeting and the requesting faculty member is encouraged to write a report for his or her own file. The colleague only records that an observation occurred on the date with a faculty member from a particular college.

The preliminary discussion held before the observation allows the requesting faculty member to describe any aspects of the teaching situation that would be helpful to know beforehand, such as the context of the course, the types of students, the objectives, specific challenges faced, and any logistical issues that need to be worked out ahead of time. Some of the specific goals that requesting faculty members might have for their classes could include those listed in Figure 2.<sup>9</sup>

When colleagues observe the class, they will take note of anything that relates to the selected focus areas earlier discussed. Colleagues generally sit in the back of the classroom and are as unobtrusive as possible, not entering into the class discussion at all, simply observing and taking notes. Colleagues can look for student reactions to teacher statements, student off-task behavior, and student responses to teacher statements, as well as teacher behaviors and

approaches. Appendix B offers suggestions on how to conduct a formative dialogue.

It is recommended that the follow-up meeting be held within 2 or 3 days of the observation. This allows a little reaction time for both the instructor and the colleague. The post-classroom-observation discussion is a give-and-take sharing between the two individuals—truly a dialogue—which provides opportunities to ask questions, think about issues, show notes, talk about observations, and look at the predetermined issues about which the instructor requested specific feedback.

Instructors typically find these discussions to be helpful and request follow-up observations and dialogues. It is up to the colleague to determine if more observation might be useful. Generally it is recommended to limit the FD to just one observation at a time, especially if there is a backlog of requests. Occasionally, faculty members request a written record of the observation and dialogue for their files and to use for promotion and/or tenure. Colleagues do not provide written feedback, only verbal feedback. Faculty members who wish to have a record of the FD may write their own report.

## CERTIFICATION OF COLLEAGUES

Colleagues are faculty members who volunteer to attend workshops and provide assistance to fellow

- Improving discussion
- Enhancing motivation
- Improving use of time in class and getting students back from breaks
- Developing small group activities
- Re-evaluating assignments
- Selecting content for the teaching session
- Deciding on teaching methods
- Creating grading rubrics
- Providing helpful feedback
- Managing the difficult students in the back of the classroom
- Reducing reliance on reading PowerPoint slides

*Figure 2. Potential goals for a formative dialogue observation.*

faculty members who request a peer counseling experience. The certification workshop takes approximately 3 hours and provides a clear idea of the difference between summative and formative evaluation and how to conduct a formative dialogue. Colleagues are expected to keep simple records and to remain a part of the FD community. This includes regular posting on the FD campus website and attending meetings and ongoing faculty development events. Campuses can celebrate their colleagues with various types of honors, including a medal to be worn at graduation, provision of certificates, or listing of names on plaques. Noting one's involvement in the FD program may be appropriate in one's curriculum vita. Colleagues are not paid for their services, but provide them out of their love of teaching and learning and service to their institution.

## HOW TO START A FD PROGRAM ON YOUR CAMPUS

To start a FD program on campus it is important to hold a certification workshop for the initial group of colleagues. Some campuses bring in an expert to help them develop an initial set of documents and

hold the certifying workshop. An individual or office will need to be assigned to monitor the program. The university's teaching and learning center is a logical place to house the program. The program then needs to be promoted to the faculty. A sample promotion e-mail or flyer message is included in Appendix C. The program director needs to encourage colleagues to dialogue with each other, offer helpful services to their fellow faculty members, and collect simple descriptive data at the end of each year. The program director will also need to sustain the program by holding periodic certification workshops to add new colleagues and may wish to set up a colleague website to house resources, such as forms and other documents.

## AN EXAMPLE

What follows is an example of how the FD process works on our campus. The names of the faculty members are fictitious but the scenario is not.

Brittany, a new teacher who was not sure about how well she was teaching, was ready to "talk with someone about her teaching," as had been advertised by the FD flyer. She called one of the colleagues on the FD list and set up an appointment with Sheila,

a faculty member in one of the other schools on campus. The two of them got together later that week to talk about the upcoming observation. The next week Sheila observed Brittany's class and then discussed the class session afterward. Shortly thereafter, Brittany wrote some reflective notes on how she could improve several aspects of her teaching, from which she later prepared a report that she used for her rank and tenure review to support what she was doing to improve her teaching.

The following are some sample points from Brittany's report:

On October 23, I had a formative dialogue with a certified colleague of the Formative Dialogues in Teaching program. My colleague discussed my teaching with me after viewing a class session in my course. I experienced the following benefits from the conversation:

- Improving my "set"—I learned that the beginning of my classes needs to be shorter, more focused, and more interesting. Now I try to always start class with an activity that will heighten interest in my topic.
- More active learning—I discovered that I was expecting students to sit and listen without any active learning breaks for 30-minute stretches, which is too long. I am now doing more pause procedures, buzz groups, and short writes to keep my students engaged and interacting with the course content throughout the 2-hour lecture.

I think there is a relationship between the changes that I have instituted in my teaching and the fact that my students are evaluating my classes more positively now than ever in the past.

## DISCUSSION

There are many advantages for the campus that provides a FD program for its faculty. Faculty members seem to genuinely value the program and make statements such as, "Thanks for putting this program together. I have had two dialogues this year with two different colleagues and found them both to be extremely helpful." One administrator stated, "We love this program. We can suggest the program to our faculty with poor student evaluations and they invariably improve. Our costs are essentially zero. Accrediting agencies are positively impressed with the program, and, somehow, it works." Program directors have reported that it is usually easy to recruit faculty members to be colleagues and that this creates a community of faculty members that meet regularly to talk about issues relating to observing and talking about teaching.

The most important benefit of the program, of course, is the potential for improving the learning environment through helping teachers focus on details of planning and carrying out their teaching in stimulating and effective ways. Colleagues, after conducting a few dialogues, often find themselves particularly motivated to attend more faculty development seminars to learn more about new ways of engaging students, so that they will have helpful suggestions for others.

As to be expected, there are challenges, the biggest of which is to keep the program uppermost in the minds of the faculty community. Reminders are necessary. Faculty colleagues need to be encouraged to offer their services and look for creative ways to open up opportunities for conversations to take place. Frequent reminders to deans of schools and program directors must be sent, indicating that this is a resource that they can recommend to their faculty—not only to new or struggling faculty, but to all faculty. To be successful, Formative Dialogues in Teaching must not carry the connotation of remediation. FDs are to be mutually supportive and collegial conversations between colleagues for the purpose of gaining new insights from each other and expanding ideas about the joys of teaching. This is of interest to all faculty members, not just new faculty or those frustrated with their student evaluations. Additional challenges exist in the form of monitoring the program and keeping records. Since the program is voluntary, it can be difficult to get faculty colleagues to keep and report accurate records. Much more information is needed about how to make the FD conversations truly helpful and to measure their apparent success.

## CONCLUSION

I have suggested that summative evaluations of classroom teaching are not enough. Faculty members desire and seem to benefit from voluntary classroom visits, conducted for the purpose of creative conversation about the teaching observation and approaches to teaching and learning. A campus that values good teaching but finds itself in short supply of funds and personnel to help teachers improve learning in their classrooms and laboratories might consider instituting a Formative Dialogues in Teaching program. The program meets with positive responses and promises to offer tangible benefits to the higher

education faculty member looking for new and more effective ways to enhance learning.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author is a Formative Dialogues Program Director. Otherwise, she has no conflicts of interest.

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## APPENDIX A

### CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

(This form may be downloaded at no cost from: [www.journalchiroed.com](http://www.journalchiroed.com))

The Formative Dialogues in Teaching program is designed to be fully formative: nonsummative, nonevaluative, and not documented. By signing below, the Formative Dialogues in Teaching Colleague indicates that the only thing that will be documented in writing will be the fact that a dialogue took place with a colleague from a particular school. No names nor departments nor any other specific information regarding the dialogue will be catalogued. The colleague will not reveal any information to any other person regarding the dialogue except as provided above. In demonstration of this commitment to confidentiality, the Project Colleague has signed this confidentiality statement and has presented it to the requestor.

Requestors may document anything they wish about the dialogue and may use the information to support promotion decisions as desired.

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*Formative Dialogues  
in Teaching Colleague*

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*Date*

## APPENDIX B

### TIPS FOR COLLEAGUES CONDUCTING A FORMATIVE DIALOGUE ON TEACHING

(This form may be downloaded at no cost from: [www.journalchiroed.com](http://www.journalchiroed.com))

- ☐ Assure the instructor of the complete confidentiality of the dialogue.
- ☐ Make sure the instructor understands the nature and purpose of the dialogue.
- ☐ Do not create unrealistic expectations of the dialogue.
- ☐ Encourage the instructor to set the focus of your classroom visit.
- ☐ Focus your observation on the behavior—not the person.
- ☐ Focus your observation on what is done, not what should have been done.
- ☐ Remember that being critical does not equate to being negative.
- ☐ Make sure the dialogue is “reflective” but still “fresh.”
- ☐ Do more listening than talking.
- ☐ Draw out the instructor’s feelings, concerns, and thoughts on her/his teaching.

- ☐ Allow the instructor to set the direction of the dialogue.
- ☐ Maintain the focus of the dialogue on the instructor's interests and goals.
- ☐ Keep the dialogue open-ended.
- ☐ Do not overload the instructor—maintain a manageable focus.
- ☐ Provide opinions and suggestions only when asked.
- ☐ Be positive and encouraging.
- ☐ Work with the instructor to form future goals and strategies.
- ☐ Do not make judgments of the instructor's teaching.
- ☐ Do not tell the instructor what she/he should do.
- ☐ Do not talk about or compare the instructor to other instructors.
- ☐ Allow the nature and/or occurrence of a follow-up to be a shared decision.

## APPENDIX C

### SAMPLE MARKETING COMMUNICATION

(This sample may be downloaded at no cost from:  
[www.journalchiroed.com](http://www.journalchiroed.com))

#### SOMEONE TO TALK TO . . .

As you begin another academic year in the classroom, amid a sea of fresh, young faces, do you

sometimes feel you'd like to do something different—that you'd like to feel more connected with your students or simply enjoy your classroom experience more, but can't seem to come up with how, exactly, to do this? Ever wish you had someone to talk to about these feelings—not another formal teaching evaluation that will go into your personnel file, but just a friend or colleague with whom you could really talk about your classroom experience? The Formative Dialogues on Teaching Program can help. This may be just what you've been looking for. This unique program makes available to any faculty member or teaching associate on campus an opportunity to have a friendly, informal, and completely confidential dialogue on your classroom experience with a Colleague of the Formative Dialogues on Teaching Program. Each Colleague has been trained in the art of providing truly formative support on any classroom issue about which you may have a concern.

If this looks like something that may enhance your classroom experience—or if you'd just like to learn more about it—simply contact the Program Director, or you can come to a hands-on workshop on Formative Dialogues on Teaching and learn more about it. Either way, the Colleagues of Formative Dialogues on Teaching are ready to talk with you whenever you feel you need them.