Formative Peer Dialogues
on
Teaching

Handbook

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What is a formative peer dialogue on Teaching?

The program of Formative Dialogues at Moravian College is designed to promote conversations about teaching and to provide assistance to faculty colleagues with a goal of enhancing teaching and learning. This program involves classroom visits by colleagues, in which all conversations and observations remain confidential. It provides a “safe” way to gather feedback on one’s teaching, to reflect on the classroom experience, assignments, and assessments, and to improve student engagement and learning.

The Formative Dialogues program involves an invitation from a colleague who would like a visit, to a colleague on the list of formative dialogue visitors, to visit a class, with a goal of reflecting on teaching. It’s that simple! The Formative Dialogues program is not a procedure for “certifying” the quality of a colleague’s teaching, nor is it designed to be a process where a novice teacher learns from an expert. The learning from a formative dialogue goes both ways. A visitor colleague may be more experienced than the faculty member who has requested a visit, but the process involves a conversation on teaching and can help hone the skills of both colleagues.

The Formative/Summative Evaluation Distinction

While evaluation that is primarily summative can have some elements of a formative conversation, the distinctions set out below show how some of the characteristics of summative evaluations can conflict with those of formative reviews. This is offered in partial explanation of why CAT is offering the Formative Dialogues program with a primary goal of enhancing teaching and learning.

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Summary of the Program

- A faculty member who wishes to have a visit by a formative dialogue colleague consults the list of Visiting Colleagues or the Director of CAT to initiate a conversation. Faculty members who wish to initiate a visit by a Visiting Colleague are requested to identify a visitor outside of their own department. This will reduce the chance that a visitor will be on a faculty member’s evaluation committee.

- The visitor and the visited colleagues agree on a day and time for a classroom observation. A recommended three-part process for the classroom observation is outlined on the next page.

- Both the visiting and the visited faculty members engaged in a conversation will sign a “statement of confidentiality” (see Appendix C.) All conversations remain confidential.

- The Director of CAT keeps an up-to-date list of Visiting Colleagues who are available to be visitors. The Director does not know who schedules visits or when they occur unless the colleague who requested a visit voluntarily shares that information with the Director. The Director will survey Visiting Colleagues at the end of the year to get a count of the number of visits (but no other details about the visits) and, of course, suggestions for improvements on the process.

- Faculty who want to become Visiting Colleagues will engage in a “Formative Conversations on Teaching Workshop” to review elements of the program. After completion of the workshop, the names of faculty who wish to have their names included in the list of Visiting Colleagues will be added to the list, along with their department affiliation and contact information. This list will be posted on CAT’s AMOS site. In order to stay on the list, Visiting Colleagues should participate in ongoing activities.
Framework for Classroom Visits

Step 1. The pre-observation meeting; allow on average about 30 to 45 minutes.

The faculty member and the Visiting Colleague who will observe him or her should meet a few days prior to the planned observation to discuss the visit. The pre-observation meeting allows the visited faculty member to share details about the course, his or her objectives for the class meeting, what has happened up to this point in the semester, whether it has been going well or poorly or something in between, whether a new approach is planned, etc. Some sample questions to ask in this session are contained in Appendix A.

- Discuss the reason for the peer review. Is it motivated primarily by the faculty member’s desire to grow as an educator or is there a particular event or interaction that prompted the request for a visit?
- Provide the syllabus for the course, information about the demographics of the class, and details on particular challenges of teaching this course. Share information about the textbook and any other relevant classroom materials.
- Identify the objectives for this particular class meeting, explain how this class links to the preceding class and to the next class, and talk about the teaching strategies that are planned.
- Identify on what aspects of teaching the faculty member would like feedback. Are there particular teaching strategies or particular student responses that he or she would like to have especially observed? Is the classroom climate, in general, something on which an observer could provide feedback?
- Decide how the observer will be portrayed/introduced to students. A short announcement that the visitor is there at the faculty member’s invitation should be sufficient.

Step 2: The Classroom observation

The visitor should collect information that will promote productive conversation after the classroom visit.

- In all notes and conversations, distinguish between observation, interpretation, and evaluation. Describe concrete observable phenomena and identify patterns of these phenomena. Offering an observation will often help the observed faculty member interpret and evaluate that observation himself or herself.
- Take descriptive notes about what happens during the classroom visit. It is best if the descriptions are free of overly evaluative language and focus instead on concrete actions and behaviors. Also avoid interpretive comments, if possible. For example, a visitor might write, “The instructor spent 3 minutes writing on the board with his back to the class” rather than, “The instructor was not comfortable making eye contact with the class, so he spent 3 minutes writing on the board with his back to the class.” Keeping
interpretative and evaluative comments out of the notes helps in giving descriptive feedback to the faculty member so he or she can form his or her own interpretations.

- Focus on the aspects of the class on which the faculty member asked for feedback.
- Observe students as well as the faculty member.
- While a primarily observational tone is encouraged, it is appropriate for the observer to comment on what he or she has learned from the observation.

**Step 3: The post-observation meeting**

This meeting should occur as soon as possible after the visit. This will help ensure that memory is still fresh for both faculty members. Timely feedback also helps the visited faculty member reflect on the experience and decide whether to implement changes, and if so, when and how. Some suggested questions to get the conversation started are in Appendix B.

- Invite the visited faculty member to comment first. It may be helpful to pose to the visited faculty member such questions as: Was student behavior typical in the visited class? Did the class go about as you had expected or were there some surprises? Is there anything you wish you had done differently during the class? The visiting faculty member must be an active listener at this meeting.
- General descriptive comments on the part of the visiting faculty member may help begin the conversation. Some possible observations might include, “Your class was very lively.” “This seems to be a quiet group.” “Students talk a lot to one another during group work.”
- Allow enough time for a constructive discussion of the visitor’s notes and feedback. At the same time, the observer should focus on a few more important points rather than a long list of comments and suggestions that may be overwhelming.
- The observer should encourage the visited faculty member to link events that happened in the observed class to the course objectives and learning goals discussed at the pre-observation meeting.
- If requested, the observer should offer suggestions and alternative strategies. Remember that the visited colleague is the one who is in charge of the conversation. Suggestions should be focused on behavior that the visited faculty member can control.
- The conversations need to be focused on the visited faculty member’s goals, not the observer’s opinions or standards.

This process is time-consuming, for sure, but potential benefits are huge. Visiting colleagues are encouraged to invite the colleague whose class they visited to observe one of their classes when feasible. Visiting and visited partners are also encouraged to schedule multiple visits if time permits.
References


Appendix A: Sample questions for the pre-observation meeting

It is not necessary to ask every question in this list. Some questions will be more relevant than others, depending on the needs and concerns of the visited faculty member.

Questions about the course:
1. What is the course? How does it fit into the curriculum? Does it count towards LinC? Is it a major requirement or elective? Does it have prerequisites?
2. What do you want to students to learn in this course? What topics are included? What should students be able to do when they complete this course?
3. What do you expect students to do in preparation for this class? Do students generally come to class prepared in the way you want them to?
4. How do you measure students’ learning? What assignments, tests, quizzes, etc do you give to students? How is their final grade computed?

Questions about the students:
1. What types of students enroll in this course? What backgrounds do they have, what are their majors? Do students in the course have similar learning styles or are they widely different?
2. If we could eavesdrop on students as they describe this course, what might they say? How would students describe the course goals and your expectations? What would they say about classes and assignments?
3. What about this course do students especially like? What do they find challenging?
4. What kind of relationship do you want to have with the students in your class? Have you accomplished this?
5. Have you modified your teaching because of the needs of our students? Why or why not?

Questions about the instructor:
1. What is one of your best teaching experiences? What is one of your worst?
2. How long have you taught this course? How have you changed this course since the first time you taught it?
3. What do you think are your teaching strengths?
4. What would you like to improve in your teaching?
5. What would you like to focus on now?

Questions adapted from Erickson, B. L. and Scorcinelli, M. D., “The First Meeting with the Client.” Practically Speaking: A Sourcebook for Instructional Consultants in Higher Education, Chapter 4, pages 25-28.
Appendix B: Sample questions to start the post-observation discussion

Questions about the class:
  1. Did the observed class fit into your course plan as expected?
  2. Did the class go as you had expected or were there some surprises?

Questions about the students:
  1. Did the students behave/react as you expected?
  2. Do you think the students got out of the class what you wanted them to?

Questions about the instructor:
  1. Is there anything you would do differently if you had a “do-over” of the observed class?
Appendix C: Confidentiality Statement

Formative Dialogues on teaching provide an informal, collegial opportunity to reflect on our roles as teachers. As coordinated through the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (CAT), Formative Dialogues are to remain totally confidential. Such confidentiality includes the need to maintain the requester’s anonymity by not revealing the requester’s name and other attributes including, but not limited to, gender, discipline or age. All discussions relative to the visit, conducted before, during, and after the classroom visit, will remain confidential.

In demonstration of this commitment to confidentiality, the Formative Dialogue Visiting Colleague undertaking this dialogue has signed this confidentiality statement and has presented this signed copy to the requester and to the Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

__________________________________  ______________
Formative Dialogue Visiting Colleague                       Date