Small Group Instructional Diagnosis: A Method for Enhancing Writing Instruction

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In her introduction to *Evaluating Teachers of Writing*, Christine Hult argues that for political, pedagogical, and ideological reasons, the assessment of writing teachers is quite different from the assessment of teaching in other disciplines. Politically, Hult argues, the assessment we do is complex at least in part because we often rely on part-time instructors, adjuncts, and graduate students to do the bulk of the teaching. Pedagogically, writing and the teaching of writing is a murky, complex business, and there is no single teaching methodology that even the best writing teachers use consistently across classrooms and institutions. Hence no single assessment instrument or set of criteria will necessarily tell us when the teaching is seriously flawed or when it is stunningly good. Finally, the goals and assumptions behind certain kinds of assessment conflict not only with each other but also with the aims of the writing classroom. As Hult asks, "What are our reasons for evaluating, anyway? What do we hope to accomplish?" (4).

   In the frenzy of assessment in which we are now (for good and ill) immersed, many of the reasons for evaluating get conflated. Teachers use assessment tools to evaluate what students have learned. Administrators use them to see if teachers are doing what they are supposed to be doing; outside examiners weigh the relative merits of programs, departments, schools, and institutions for a range of purposes and for public and internal consumption: rating and ranking, criticizing and praising, bolstering and eliminating. More often than not, we evaluate performance or products (student work, teacher methodologies), which, to some degree, may tell us how effective the teaching is. But for teaching writing, this is problematic. In his hard look at how universities value teaching, David Bleich explores the concept of "effectiveness" in the classroom. He maintains that in higher education, teaching assessment that purports to evaluate effectiveness often "fails to

address the matter of the ongoing teaching relationship among teachers and students and seems to call most attention to the performance of teachers in the classroom on a class-by-class basis" (17). Rather than assessing performance, Bleich continues, "we [writing teachers] do and ought to strive for reaching our students, for creating an atmosphere of stimulation, excitement, activity, and motivation. We ought to reject the claim that such values can only be assured by a final system of measurement" (18). Edward White reinforces this assertion by maintaining that assessment often runs counter to what we are striving to do in our classes, that is, helping students learn to write (206).

Final systems of measurement, of course, have specific objectives that do not necessarily help teachers teach; this is not their goal. These systems are generally known as *summative* assessment and are geared to demonstrating to whomever is interested (administrators, chairs, deans) how "good" classes are at meeting articulated (or assumed) goals. Summative evaluation does not as directly tackle the issue of improving the teaching and learning, which is what *formative* evaluation is designed to do. Formative evaluations are primarily aimed at influencing and shaping not just the teaching and learning that occurs in writing classes but also the interaction between student and teacher. Formative assessment does not entail—in fact, it resists—a bottom line. By contrast, summative evaluations result in a product, replicating the kind of product-centered approach that results in a final assessment or letter grade.

I find this distinction to be less clear among people in charge of general assessment procedures at universities. When I took over as a WPA, first at DePaul University and then at Western Washington University, one of my primary interests was to help instructors understand what was going on in their classrooms. There was ample summative evaluation—both institutions had a system of class observations by administrative personnel and course-evaluations by students—but very little formative evaluation. If anything, the prevailing wisdom was that these instruments provided information that could serve both functions. If classes were not meeting their objectives, then the teaching had to change. But teaching evaluations and peer observations were limited in shaping change. First, any teacher who has been observed can testify that members of a review committee—however knowledgeable and well-meaning—do not get a complete picture of what transpires in a classroom. Course evaluations by students, even when those students are well intentioned, offer a monologic, more or less rear view mirror reflection of students' opinions of the course or instructor.

At both universities, I instituted a program known as Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID). It was designed to foster to facilitate communication between students and teachers and also to improve the quality of the teaching (and consequently learning) that went on in each classroom. The approach was clearly *formative*, but formative in a way that did not also look or act like a summative, performance assessment. Certainly it may be true that the results of the formative assessment affect what students say on their evaluations, how students write in their portfolios, and what reviewers observe when they watch the classroom in action (in other words, the summative). The focus on the investigation was not on a product but on getting interested parties (students, teacher, teaching peer) to talk with each other about the class in action—or rather, in interaction.

In the remainder of this paper, I will describe the SGID program in detail and explain how I adapted the program for two universities with quite different writing program structures. DePaul University depends on a cadre of new and experienced adjunct faculty with limited term contracts to teach most of its writing classes, while Western Washington University makes use of the twenty-five to thirty graduate teaching assistants from its Masters of Arts in English program to cover the courses. Note that the SGID is not a new program, nor did I invent it. It has been in use—though not necessarily for writing courses—for teaching enhancement at a number of universities, including Purdue, Rutgers, the College of St. Benedict at St. John's University, the University of Nevada (Reno), and MiraCosta College.

Assumptions of the SGID Program

In most cases, SGID is structured so that both teachers and students provide input and receive feedback about their course through interviews that take place at midterm—in time to make changes in the quality of classroom interaction. "Quality" becomes something that all participants determine, including the interviewer, called a "facilitator," who is ideally a writing instructor her or himself. Interviews with instructors and students are done in systematic ways, and the results are discussed in person and in writing with students and instructors only; the information is not relayed to any supervisor or director. The purpose is not to pass judgment but rather to diagnose problems, to enrich the teaching and learning environment, and to promote collegiality.

Although the concept of classroom interviews is not new—Judith Dawson and Darrel Caulley have traced early uses to 1926—the process was refined in 1981. In the next few years, D. Joseph Clark and his colleagues at the University of Washington (notably Mark Redmond and Jean Bekey) used a FIPSE grant to develop and disseminate the process. I first came in

contact with this program in the mid-1990s through Jody Nyquist and Donald Wulff of the University of Washington, who presented their version of the program to a group of administrators and graduate students from the business school and the writing program at the University of Southern California.

The program as presented by Nyquist and Wulff (81–82), relied on several important tenets that undergird the procedures I lay out in this article:

1. Interviews are seen as research and are aimed at information-gathering rather than teacher evaluation.

2. Facilitators do not give answers but instead offer suggestions in a partner relationship with students and instructors. In many cases, facilitators and instructors call upon their own reading, study, and experiences to develop new strategies to help students learn.

3. Interviews are best conducted by peers or colleagues who are themselves part of the process and have firsthand knowledge of the strains, requirements, and concerns in the classroom of their particular program or institution.

4. Because the procedure is designed to be highly interactive, results and suggestions for improvement are arrived at through dialogue and collaboration.

5. The program takes place at midterm so that there is time to implement any changes or improvements.

I will first describe the procedures for designing and implementing SGID in some detail, then report on the follow-up studies I did between 1994 and 2001 on responses to the program at DePaul and Western.

SGID Program

The following sections outline how the program operates in theory.

Facilitator Selection and Training. The SGID program requires an experienced instructor ("facilitator") to work directly with another instructor and the students in the class. In optimal cases, facilitators should be volunteers from the ranks of the faculty (for further explanation, see "Concerns and Considerations" in this article) and should go through a short training program, so that facilitators follow an established procedure that is consistent across sections. Pairings can be assigned; they may be laid out according to scheduling convenience, or faculty may select their own facilitators from those who have been trained.

Instructor-Facilitator Preliminary Meeting. After pairings are set up, the facilitator and instructor meet to discuss the course and determine how the class interview process can best be used to provide useful feedback. Many instructors choose to work with classes that manifest one or more problems—uneven writing, poor class discussions, open or overt hostility to the teacher or to one another. Other instructors have questions stemming from their own sense (and sometimes insecurities) about what's going on in the classroom: Should the class move faster or slower? Is the reading (or writing) too difficult? Too easy?

At this preliminary meeting, facilitators refer to the questions in appendix 1 as a rough guide. The facilitator asks the instructor questions such as these:

a. What are your goals for the class? What do you want students to do? To know? To learn?

b. What is the general atmosphere of the class?

c. How is time spent in a typical class?

d. How do you make sure the students understand what is going on?

e. Are there any questions you want to ask the students?

f. What do you think your strengths are? The class's strengths? What would you want to change? What will your students like best about the class?

The facilitator then tells the instructor how he or she plans to approach the students, and they discuss what the instructor might be expected to do or say in the following class periods.

Facilitator-Class Meeting. On a pre-arranged day, the facilitator meets with the students in the instructor's class, in the absence of the instructor, to obtain the data. The facilitator lets the students know that he or she is there at the behest of the instructor, that what information he or she gathers will be shared only with the instructor, and that comments are anonymous and confidential. The facilitator then directs students to form small groups, select a group recorder for each group, and reach a consensus on the answers to the "Feedback Form" (see appendix 2). Students are invited not only to contribute comments on what they feel has worked well in the class or what needs improvement but also—and this is very important for the next step—to

generate concrete suggestions for changes. The facilitator then circulates among the groups, urging students to develop their comments as fully as possible.

Following ten minutes of small group work, the facilitator reassembles the class. The findings of the individual groups are then compiled for everyone to see, preferably on the blackboard or an overhead. A student recorder also writes down comments and suggestions. This summary and group discussion process continues with the facilitator attempting to determine what are consensus opinions and what are minority opinions. They work until the students seem satisfied that the facilitator understands clearly the information being recorded.

One of the distinct benefits of this stage in the interview process is that it invites the students to engage in discussion with each other about the relative merits and drawbacks of their own criticisms and suggestions. They do not always agree with each other, and the encouragement to try to come to consensus asks them to weigh relative strengths and weaknesses carefully. Often they come out with a better understanding of why the instructor might be doing what he is doing. Even so, dissenting opinions are also solicited and noted (see "Concerns and Considerations").

Instructor-Facilitator Follow-Up. Soon after the class meeting, the facilitator writes up a report (about two pages single-spaced) on the assessment generated in the class interview and shares this with the instructor. Not only does this give the instructor something concrete to appraise, but it also helps to synthesize the final discussion between facilitator and class, including the students' specific suggestions for the instructor and ways to implement changes. These reports should be as vivid as possible, including the details from the classroom observation, direct quotations from the students (who remain anonymous), a description of the atmosphere in which the discussion takes place, and the facilitator's observations and impressions.

The instructor and facilitator then meet to discuss the results and develop a strategy that will be responsive to the data and the specific needs of the instructor and students.

Instructor Classroom Reconnection. Finally, at the next class meeting, the instructor and students discuss the results. The instructor verifies some of the findings with the students and introduces some changes he or she would like to make, clarifying the rationale behind these preferred classroom activities.

How SGID Worked at DePaul University

During the period of this study there were 150 writing sections offered per year at DePaul, ranging from a two-quarter first year writing sequence to advanced expository and argumentative writing courses. The writing faculty included eight tenure track faculty, twenty faculty on yearly appointments and twenty-seven part-time faculty. (As of this writing, there are only three tenure-track faculty and thirty-eight part-timers.) By far, the majority of the writing courses at DePaul are staffed by instructors who are untenured; at least half the instructors are on campus irregularly, many of them holding down other jobs (only some of them teaching jobs) at locations spread out through Chicago and its suburbs. Although we try to meet as an entire group at the beginning of the academic year and in December for orientations and staff development meetings, instructors often lack opportunities to get to know one another, to talk about teaching, or to collaborate on instructional projects or problemsolving.

When my assistant director, Eileen Seifert, and I instituted the program at DePaul, we asked six of the most experienced instructors (most had one-year appointments, several were part-time) to be facilitators. Each facilitator was paid a small stipend of around $75 for about three and a half hours of extra work. We met early in the term for training and to discuss the procedure, going over questions, logistical problems, concerns, and suggestions.

We asked all instructors in the program—including those serving as facilitators—to participate in this program at least once during the academic year. For all but those new to DePaul, the choice of term or class was up to the individual instructor. New instructors were asked to participate during their first quarter.

At the completion of the program, I asked instructors to give me informal feedback. The following, from Jana French when she taught first-year English as an adjunct at DePaul, was fairly typical of the kind of responses I received from instructors. Jana's response attests to the process as a whole :

> I was initially nervous about participating in the SGID, anticipating that my worst fears would be confirmed and my students would say that our 103 course was dull, disorganized or (that universal kiss of death) "boring." In fact, as I left our classroom on the day of the diagnosis, I felt a sense of powerlessness and paranoia. At the same time, I was curious; I had no idea what they would consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of the course.

In the end, I was surprised and pleased by the results of the diagnosis. It confirmed what I'd already thought was going on in the class—positive and negative—and gave me concrete ideas for ways the course could be improved, most of which I implemented. My students also seemed to appreciate the philosophy of the SGID. Not only did it give them an opportunity to air their concerns about the course, but it also provided a forum for discussing these issues. During the next class period, I was able to clarify misunderstandings revealed in their responses to the questionnaire (specifically, their concerns about notebook grading and the expectations of them in their workshop groups). I think they were relieved to know that I agreed with their analysis of what was going well in the course and what needed improvement. Ultimately, the diagnosis seems to have opened channels of communication in the class between the students and me, as well as within student workshop groups. This improvement in communication is manifest in our class discussions, which have become livelier and more interactive (perhaps because the students feel more individual accountability and "voice" in the classroom). Since the diagnosis, I've also noticed an improvement in the more reticent students' willingness to volunteer during class discussion and to take an active role in their workshop groups.

I was extremely pleased with the quality of interaction established by my facilitator. She approached me as a colleague—a fellow instructor with something to learn from her facilitator role—in both our initial discussion and our follow-up meeting. She showed genuine interest in my classroom philosophies and strategies, and we consequently spent an hour comparing notes, commiserating over problems in our classes, and brainstorming to develop better assignments from the anthology we were both using.

In retrospect, the SGID has already proven more useful than teaching evaluations I've had in the past. Not only was it far less artificial and invasive than traditional observations, it enabled me to understand my students' perceptions of the class and their role in it. We've consequently been able to work, as a class, to address shared concerns. For example, we've made some small but significant adjustments to the syllabus, primarily in the timing of assignments and the amount of time I

will spend with each group on draft and revision days. We've also decided to pursue one of the more radical suggestions in the SGID report: to reserve the last ten to fifteen minutes of workshops for voluntary "open mike" readings of the papers-in-progress.

Several things are worth noting here. First, the SGID provides a forum to get answers to questions that the teacher and students are afraid to ask. In the process, they discover that these questions are not so "stupid" after all and that the answers to these questions are quite illuminating. Further, it is not just getting answers to questions—the sharing of information—that seems to be important. The opportunity to voice one's opinions seems to facilitate the *process* of communication between teacher and student, in and outside of class. The fact that the instructor has been instrumental in providing this forum—that he or she is interested enough in having students' feedback to set up this experience—gives the students a strong sense that they do indeed have some significant influence on their intellectual growth and development in the class. In writing classes, where mutual respect, open lines of communication, and a free exchange of ideas is crucial, this brand of "liberatory" activity seems to have a significant effect.

Another instructor, Frank Bonacci, pointed out, "It's the kind of experience I wish I'd had as a beginning instructor instead of the usual trial-by-departmental-observation and student evaluations." Like French, Bonacci was also impressed by the opportunity to exchange ideas with other instructors on writing and teaching materials and methods, ideas that often went beyond the specific SGID concerns. Bonacci liked the idea that the program fostered a certain amount of collegiality among faculty—part-timers and adjuncts in particular who often travel great distances to get from one teaching job to another—who otherwise probably would have remained nodding acquaintances at best. Facilitator Ken Bill explained that he felt he learned more from the process than the instructor and class he was trying to help. Specifically, he said that his interview with another instructor's students helped him understand how students experience courses and how they react to classroom activities and assignments, some of which are relatively common across sections.

Student responses were equally favorable. One facilitator reported that after two of his four classroom visits, he had students approach to him and offer unsolicited praise for the innovation. One student called it "a great touch" and wanted to know if and when SGID would be offered by the rest of the university (the program actually was expanded for a time on a limited basis). An instructor reported that although he could not address every student concern, the students seemed surprised and delighted that he took their

ideas seriously. One student tracked me down after her classroom SGID and asked if we could do one for her biology class. Overall, teachers reported improved classroom discussion, increased participation, better attendance, and boosted camaraderie. One instructor summed it up: "Bottom line, I really dig this approach. It's about time that idiotic space between students and teacher—in the context of pedagogy—is reduced."

SGID also had some other benefits; that is, the process itself can be an occasion for student learning. In a class I facilitated—which happened to be a graduate class in research methods in the Master of Public Service program—one of the student discussion groups maintained that the professor assigned too much difficult reading. Another group acknowledged that although it was difficult, it was highly appropriate in quantity and quality. A vigorous discussion ensued about the distinctions between graduate and undergraduate courses and expectations. Several students made a persuasive argument that graduate level reading should be complex and difficult—that students would not be learning as much otherwise. What followed was an impromptu group conversation among the students that included advice and suggestions on how students could approach complicated texts. In other words, the students resolved some of their own issues unprompted.

Another response, perhaps atypical but nonetheless compelling, came as a result of a SGID for the chair of my department. He asked me to be a facilitator for his advanced composition and style class, because although he felt it was going okay, pockets of resistance to his class format and activities were manifesting in class discussion. During the SGID interview, I found his students to be quite lively and candid as we worked through the issues. Two weeks later, after he had made some adjustments in procedures for classroom discussions and assignments, he came to me with a remarkable story. That day in class, the students were analyzing the style of an essay by a professional writer and the discussion had become quite animated. Almost all students participated in the discussion, eagerly shared views, probed more deeply into the analysis, and debated. Toward the end of the class period, a student exclaimed excitedly that this was the best and most thought-provoking class discussion she had ever participated in. The class burst into spontaneous applause.

Although spontaneous applause may not become a staple of our classrooms, at the very least students seemed pleased to be invited into the process of determining the direction of their class at a point where they are familiar with the goals of the class and where things can happen that directly affect them. It gives them added responsibility and helps to make composition classes—which depend upon student engagement—much more interesting arenas of learning for teachers and students.

How SGID Worked at Western Washington University

Western's writing program, in contrast to DePaul's, consists of seventy-eight sections of English 101 (Writing and Critical Inquiry) taught by about twenty-five to thirty graduate students who are in the first or second year of their Master of Arts in English program. As of this writing, English 101 is the only writing course incoming students at Western are required to take.

The graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at Western have concerns that differ significantly from those of the adjuncts at DePaul. First, they have to negotiate the schizophrenic terrain of taking on, almost simultaneously, the dual role of teacher *and* student. At Western, as it is in other institutions, not all of the graduate students in the program plan careers in teaching writing, so often the motivation for teaching is less than ideal. Further, GTAs at Western begin teaching after one week of training and orientation, and although they take a graduate course in teaching writing during their first term at Western and get other forms of support, they are almost universally nervous and insecure about their teaching skills (Were they doing the right thing? Were their students learning anything? Did their students even like them?). Finally, as Brian Bly discovered in a study of graduate student teachers (2–9), most GTAs, although they care deeply about their students and about teaching writing, quickly learn that they are underpaid and undervalued.

Collegiality takes on a different tenor for graduate students than it does for part-time adjuncts. The graduate students at Western not only shared offices but also shared desks, mostly in two large rooms that had a skylight but no other windows. All GTAs at Western saw each other regularly, so getting together and talking about teaching problems and successes and sharing activities and assignments was not as big an issue as it was at DePaul. In addition, the anxiety about the demands of teaching and the rigors of graduate school fostered differing sorts of support among the graduate students. Many developed strong friendships based on working through these struggles together. Others felt in competition—sometimes vicious competition—with other GTAs as teachers and graduate students.

Teaching experience was also an issue that affected graduate students' responses to assessment. Even the most advanced graduate student teachers have only two years of experience in our program (since it is an MA program), so experience was a limited and sometimes hot commodity. All of these forces contribute to some real problems in acquiring the kind of authority that is important to running any kind of class, particularly in negotiating the interactive pedagogies that are characteristic of most writing

classes. Ultimately, these problems led to significant dread and sometimes panic about the prospect of being observed, assessed, or in any way evaluated while they were trying to learn what to do and how to do it.

Western requires that all faculty be observed at least once a year, and the GTAs were no exception. I implemented the SGID program specifically to give GTAs feedback *before* they were observed, arguing as persuasively and honestly as I could that this assessment would *not* be factored into any form of administrative assessment. I asked all second-year (experienced) instructors (there were eleven) to serve as facilitators to the first-year instructors during the first quarter, which would replace first-quarter formal observations previously administered by the director of composition or the assistant director. Instructors had the option of submitting the write-ups that their facilitators did for them to me—as director of composition—for inclusion in their teaching file. Eight instructors took advantage of this. Instructors were not paid extra for this work, but they did have reduced responsibilities. In the past there had been an informal system of mentoring during the fall term in which first-year instructors met with second-year instructors to discuss teaching issues. I dispensed with this in the interest of the SGID, under the assumption that mentoring is an inherent part of the SGID process. In the winter and spring quarters, second-year instructors were asked to do SGIDs for each other.

In the post-SGID interviews, instructors admitted feeling "terrified" or "scared about what students would say" before the process began. Some GTAs were certain that their students would somehow see them as shams. Although they appreciated having a SGID facilitator (also a student) visit their class instead of an administrator, there was a pervasive fear among many instructors that students would complain about their being novice teachers. As it happened, those fears were unfounded. What did emerge was that the process served to confirm and disconfirm what instructors already knew (or guessed) about the course and the students. For example, one instructor who had students do short presentations on style and usage feared that these were going badly—that they were dull and unhelpful to the class. The students felt the same but had some good suggestions about adjusting them, which the instructor put in place much to the students' surprise. Another instructor used fastwrites (a kind of freewriting) in her class and thought the students were bored with them. The students, however, were not; in fact, they wanted more time to do them.

The process seemed to open up lines of communication at a number of levels. After the facilitation, students often felt more comfortable talking to the instructor individually and in class about questions and concerns relating to the course. They had already discussed issues with the facilitator and

among themselves and had a better understanding of their opinions and a better sense that the instructor was interested in their opinions. The instructor, reassured that her students liked her and were getting something out of her course, felt more at ease and invited student feedback more openly than before. One instructor mentioned that she felt she could better anticipate students' questions and concerns. Instead of profusely apologizing to her students—as she did the first quarter—she now feels less defensive and more sure-footed. As a result, she feels that she explains concepts and assignments more fully and explicitly than before and is more accurate in reading students' reactions. Communication also improved between instructors themselves, who liked the opportunity to talk with more experienced instructors about specific issues in their classrooms and to swap teaching ideas. In the Western writing community, first-year instructors often stick together, partly because their offices are located in the same space, apart from the second-year instructors' offices. The SGID brought the two groups together in what turned out to be a fairly happy collaboration, despite the competitive aspects within graduate programs.

Concerns and Considerations

The above examples list two fairly common program setups: a writing program that relies on adjuncts and one that relies on graduate students to teach most sections of first-year writing. There is, of course, an array of other configurations, but I hope these two examples demonstrate the flexibility of the SGID program. The study does raise a number of issues, however, that merit further consideration.

How do we deal with power inequities? Peer review and small group work are not always entirely democratic. Two areas require some attention here. The first relates to power inequities between facilitator and instructor, where one party, usually by virtue of additional experience or force of personality, is in a position to wield control or make things difficult for the junior partner. Although the program has been set up to try to ensure that the facilitator is primarily a data collector, some attention and sensitivity need to be paid to the pairing ; however, it helps, if the information gathered is restricted to those directly involved—facilitator, instructor, and students.

The dynamics between facilitator and instructor are different at DePaul and Western. Adjuncts tend to have more teaching experience as well as life experience and enter into this assessment more confident about their abilities. They are often eager to solve problems, and they find collaboration with other instructors less threatening. That said, because of logistical problems in scheduling, it is much more difficult to monitor the process and to ensure that the facilitator and instructor are a reasonably good match. The insecu-

rities of graduate instructors may mean they feel any criticism—intended or not—more acutely, and although I did not observe this in my study, the process may result in increased antagonism between graduate students themselves.

The other potential power problem relates to the students. Although the program has been designed to give voice to dissenting opinions (for example, small groups tend to encourage more democratic discussion than large groups), there has been some concern that in working toward consensus we may interdict those who do not agree. This is why adequate training for facilitators is so important. First, the facilitator must convey to the students that the process is designed to be anonymous. Second, the facilitator needs to reassure students that the instructor wants to hear dissenting opinions as well as majority opinions, so every student can be heard, not just the vocal or enthusiastic ones. Facilitators also must work to prevent one group from dominating the others by soliciting comments from as many people as possible, by getting comments in writing as well as through discussion (and documenting both), and by noting verbal as well as nonverbal cues, such as laughter, shaking heads, "thumbs down," quietness, and disgruntled stares. Again, these should be reported with care not to reveal the identity of the students involved.

It may be nearly impossible to ensure that every student is adequately heard or that relationships between facilitator and instructor result in equal partnerships. Even so, I would argue that the benefits—as least what I have been able to determine from this study—outweigh the drawbacks at the student and instructor levels.

Do facilitators need to be other instructors from the program? Given the success of SGID programs at other universities, where facilitators are often pulled from different disciplines and can even be staff members, I would say no. However, having peers step into each other's classes offers great advantages. The problem-solving exchange of ideas between instructors—especially in writing classes where pedagogies can vary widely but where goals often remain similar—seems extremely valuable. Furthermore, peer instructors, especially those who are experienced, know the writing program, the students, and a good bit about teaching writing. In general SDIG may promote program cohesion through collaboration rather than (or in addition to) top-down monitoring by administrative staff.

Do the instructors have to implement every suggestion the students make? The purpose of this diagnosis is to generate information about what students feel is working well in the classroom. In so doing, it is useful to know what kinds

of activities, assignments and approaches are working for the students. Students may not like a particular activity because it is too much work. They may not like something else because they do not see its value. Sometimes these complaints can be addressed simply by more explanation from the teacher; sometimes activities and assignments can be adjusted; and sometimes things should be changed completely. In one of my classes, a SGID facilitator shared with me that a majority of my students hated the weekly reading journal I had them write; they said it felt like busy work. I found the journal extremely valuable for what it taught me about how they were reading and understanding. After discussing this with my facilitator, I decided to argue for the journal with my students, explaining why I valued it, what I did with it, and where I hoped it was headed. I did reduce the number of entries I required.

Occasionally, it is useful to give students an opportunity for a "gripe session," and there this may have a place in the SGID facilitator-student discussions. As a general rule, students are accustomed to participating in summative evaluations, not formative ones; they may find it difficult to discuss strengths and suggestions for improvement in formative ways. The facilitator must carefully steer toward discussion that is constructive, with specific, reasoned, and reasonable suggestions for change.

Sometimes there are problems that nobody can do much about short of canceling the class. On one occasion when I was the instructor in a SGID procedure, my facilitator mentioned that my students wanted a classroom that was warmer in the summer and cooler in the winter. I could only empathize; the classroom cooling and heating systems at Western were beyond my control (and evidently everyone's). At another time, students wanted to scrap the in-class writing assignment, which was a requirement of the program. I explained why this was a feature of this particular first-year writing class, agreeing that it was a difficult assignment. This is why it helps to have the facilitator be a writing instructor as well, in a position to explain what is within the instructor's control and what is not.

Should the write-ups of the SGID facilitations go into an instructor's file? The proper answer to this question is no. The underlying tenet of this program is that it should be formative, not summative. The information should not be used to judge or evaluate; consequently administrators should not, ideally, be involved in the SGID exchanges. Instructors, thrilled with the results of their SGID, have asked if it is okay to request that their SGID go into their file. I usually consent, but there is a potential problem here. Those who have

"good" SGIDs might be more inclined to submit them than those with "poor" SGIDs, thereby raising the possibility that those who teach poorly will not submit their reports.

What about the added work load to participants? We are already asking writing faculty, many of whom are graduate students and adjuncts, to do a considerable amount of important work for low pay and relatively few benefits. How can we ask fellow instructors to take on more work? The obvious answer is to provide extra pay for extra work, particularly for facilitators. One possible source is the emergence of programs that deal with "quality of instruction" or "teaching and learning." As a carefully orchestrated assessment process that functions at a variety of universities, the SGID is well suited to attract funding from these sources. When possible, facilitators who participate in this program could receive reduced loads, depending upon the scope of their duties. Most of the instructors I interviewed who have served as facilitators were enthusiastic about the work—they learned a lot about their own teaching and they enjoyed the increased collegiality. Even so, asking them to add SGID responsibilities to their current workload is to ask them to engage in program maintenance and professional development without the remuneration or rewards given to tenure-track faculty.

Should we call this program a "diagnosis"? For years, we in composition have been trying to move away from medical metaphors that imposed a doctor-patient and illness-health dichotomy on what we do in writing classes. There is, most likely, a better word than diagnosis.

Final Comments

Most of these issues demonstrate that facilitators should be carefully selected (with input from both instructors and administrators) and even more carefully trained. At DePaul and Western, facilitators spent several hours looking through materials and discussing the process. Follow-up meetings are strongly suggested as well.

Finally, I would argue that if we continue to employ graduate students and adjuncts to teach first-year composition courses, a SGID program (or something similar) may be the best way to help the instructor teach and students learn. When a peer visits their classes, instructors usually feel less under the evaluation lens and more like they are actually getting significant feedback that they can use—from their students and an interested peer, not from a supervisor. It is true that this program leaves out the person who is ultimately responsible for the quality of first-year writing courses; the program does not necessarily obviate the need for formal observations. At

Western, formal observations take place later in the year, after the SGID has occurred. In fact, some graduate instructors agreed that doing a SGID as a preliminary assessment tool helped them feel more comfortable when being formally observed. And they clearly saw the different functions of the SGID and administrative observations.

Overall, this program has worked well at several institutions for a range of courses. But because the writing classroom focuses on personalities and processes, rhetorical action and presentation, and constructive response and ongoing conversation, it seems ideally suited for an assessment program that works on the process of learning and teaching. It would seem fitting that we ourselves should benefit from the collaborative processes and tools similar to those that we employ with our students.

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DePaul University Writing Program
Appendix 1
Small Group Instructional Diagnosis

This appendix contains training and explanatory materials. Note: The worksheets are developed from materials produced and used at the University of Southern California and the University of Washington.

Initial Interview Work Sheet

(For facilitators in their interviews with instructors)

1. Information to obtain from the instructor in the initial interview

   - What are the course goals? What would the instructor like the students to do? Know?
   - What are the size, condition, and atmosphere of the class?
   - What types of students are in the class? Factions? Problems?
   - How is time spent in a typical class?
   - What are the evaluation (or testing) procedures?
   - What might the students suggest as improvements?
   - What are the specialized terms or practices used with the class?
   - Does the instructor have any particular questions he wants to ask?

2. Other useful questions for the instructor

   - What does she think her strengths are?
   - What are the strengths of the course?
   - What would he or she like to change?
   - What would the students like to change?
   - What do students like best about the course?

3. Information to give the instructor during the initial interview

   - What the facilitator will say to the students
   - What the instructor will be expected to say after the facilitator talks to the students
   - That the information between facilitator, instructor, and students is confidential
   - Reassurances about typical experiences with SGID
   - The facilitator will be gathering information, not taking sides
   - All discussion will be balanced against what facilitator and instructor know about teaching

4. Information the facilitator and the instructor need to determine during the initial interview

   - Time and place for classroom visit
   - Follow-up meeting
   - Form of address students uses for teacher

USEFUL MATERIALS TO REVIEW

1. Syllabus: Clear? Appropriate? Tone? Consistent with classroom practice? (that is, are there differences between real and stated policies on late papers, etc. ?) Course outline or schedule (if appropriate): Clear? Reasonable? Do students know due dates and deadlines in advance?
2. Assignments, assignment sheets, handouts: Clear? Focused? Appropriate? Is there a logical sequence?
3. Representative drafts or essays with comments: Comments are intelligible and useful? Commensurate with grading? Enough? Too many? Does instructor use key terms that the students understand?
4. Grade distribution (if appropriate)

DePaul University Writing Program
Appendix 2
SGID Feedback Form (for student groups)
Number in group_____
A. List the major strengths of the course. What is the instructor now doing that is helping you improve your writing and l earning? Explain briefly or give an example of each strength.

	Strengths	Explanation/Example
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

B. List changes that could be made in the course to assist you in improving your writing and learning. (Please explain how suggested changes could be made.)

	Changes	Ways to Make Changes
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

C. Other comments

DePaul University Writing Program
Appendix 3
Facilitator's Introduction to Students

My name is _____, and I am also an instructor in the DePaul Writing Program. Our goal is to assist in improving writing courses, and one way we can do this is by visiting classes like this one and facilitating the communication between instructor and student that the program feels is so essential to the writing process.

This procedure, which we call the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (and which I will describe in greater detail in a moment) is a voluntary but regular part of our program. It is anonymous, which means that none of your comments here today will be identified by name. Finally, it is confidential, which means that the instructor,_____, and I are the only ones who will see the results.

What I am going to do today is to break you into small groups of three to five people each and ask you to discuss the questions on the "Feedback Form" that I am now handing out to one (randomly chosen) member of each group. The questions are [write them on the board]:

1. What is the instructor now doing that is helping you to improve your writing?

2. What changes could be made in the course to assist you in improving your writing?

I would like you, as a group, to generate at least three (hopefully four) responses to each of these questions. You will only have about ten minutes total to discuss these questions, so please try to work quickly. After ten minutes, we will reassemble as a class and discuss the results.

I would like you to try to work toward consensus in attempting to answer each question. It is important for me to have some idea about how many people in the class agree with each of the issues you raise. On the other hand, I also need to know when people in the class disagree, so if someone suggests something that you feel is not true for you, be sure to let me know. Communication is the object here; while your instructor and I are interested in the majority opinion, we are also listening for the dissenting voice(s).

I would like you to form small groups now. Please choose one person to be a recorder for your group and I will hand that person the "Feedback Form."

Suggested Reading

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