Categories: Student Evaluation of Teaching, Midterm Feedback, Instructional Improvement, Institutional Reform

Summary

This rather lengthy article presents an overview of the various uses of Small Group Instructional Diagnosis midterm feedback evaluations employed at the University of Michigan. The article begins with a detailed description of the process used to conduct SGIDs. The five step process, which is fully described in another summary in our database (Payette and Brown, “Gathering Mid-Semester Feedback: Three Variations to Improve Instruction”), makes use of instructional consultants working with classroom instructors to gather, analyze, and act upon feedback taken from students at the midpoint of the semester.

After laying out the steps in the GSID process, Black turns to a discussion of the training process implemented at the University of Michigan to ensure that the consultants employed in these evaluations are capable of both conducting the feedback sessions and analyzing the data accrued therein. In part, the need to develop the training program stemmed from the size of the University of Michigan and the number of requests that the Center for Learning and Teaching receives for assistance in conducting these evaluations. As a result, the training involves a multistep process that Black discusses in detail. The training breaks down into two sessions which focus predominantly on ensuring that potential consultants are capable of effectively conducting a feedback session.

The bulk of Black’s article concentrates on the multiplicity of uses of the SGID evaluation process at the University of Michigan. The first of these, which is the most common and standard, is the individual consultation, in which consultants help faculty to conduct midterm evaluations of their respective courses. In this application, the evaluations have, according to the author, been particularly useful for first time instructors, or when experienced faculty members teach new courses. Black also notes that some departments have mandated SGIDs for all new faculty members. The SGID has also been used by some departments as part of their instructional development programs. In some ways this application mirrors the aforementioned individual consultation in that it is employed in cases of new faculty and teaching assistants. Yet, the departmental development application can also be utilized to evaluate overall instruction across a department, or to measure the effectiveness of newly employed curriculum or course changes. Similarly, Black mentions the employment of the SGID process by groups of professors within a particular field or department who wish to evaluate their instruction on an individual basis but for comparative purposes. This usage not only bolsters instruction within a particular field, but also has the added benefit of improving teaching collegiality. Indeed, it serves effectively as a means of creating teaching communities.

Black concludes the article with a discussion of the potential pitfalls of the SGID method. Black does so because while the benefits of the process are numerous and highly impactful, she states a failure to
mention the challenges of SGID only increase the chances that the system will be used in an ineffective manner. As such, she emphasizes five disadvantages or potential problems. First, proper use of SGID requires an investment of an extensive amount of time and effort on the part of both the consultant and the instructor. A properly conducted evaluation, notes Black, on average takes upwards of four hours. Second, applying the SGID requires a greater expenditure of class time than many instructors want to give up. Third, effective training of consultants is requires extensive amounts of time, and consultant trainees don’t always work out. Fourth, because student groups are asked, as a central aspect of the evaluation process to come to a consensus, individual concerns or views are almost inevitably lost.

Perhaps most importantly, from the standpoint of the evaluations’ ultimate purpose, the process can backfire and have a negative impact on the class. This result can stem from several sources. The evaluation process can and does occasionally create unrealistic expectations among the students as to the likelihood or number of changes that the process might create. Further, if the instructor fails to discuss the feedback offered by the students, or does so in a less than effective manner, the process can create hostility and/or a lack of trust between the class members and the instructor. Finally, in the case of a class where real and substantial problems exist the evaluation process can have a “snowball” effect in which students view the exercise as little more than opportunity to air their grievances.

Applications

At the beginning of this summary I noted that this article was rather long and detailed. Given that, it might seem somewhat surprising that the summative content herein is comparatively brief and generalized. This contradiction reflects the fact that much of the article has little application at U.D.C., as a considerable amount of its coverage deals with large lecture classes, courses with a large number of discussion sections, and material specific to the training of teaching assistants and graduate student instructors as consultants. In contrast to these elements that have little applicability, the article does offer a variety of suggestions about the potential uses of GSID midterm feedback evaluations. Of particular interest is the potential to use these evaluations on a systemic basis. While such an application might be limited by the position and perspective of individual faculty, the opportunity remains for employing these evaluations on a broad basis to conduct departmental or even institutional wide assessments of instruction. This article also offers insight into the means by which UDC could develop its own instructional consultants, should it so desire.

Citations of Interest


