Mid-Course Adjustments:
Using Small Group Instructional Diagnoses
To Improve Teaching and Learning

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The Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) is a structured interview process offered midway through a term to ask groups of students in a given course what helps them learn in that course and how improvements could be made.

As a college instructor and an instructional development consultant, I have learned that any source of information for assessing teaching and learning offers important but limited insights. Only the instructor can explain the reasons for instructional decisions. Faculty peers can appraise instructional objectives and the currency of subject matter. But it is really students who are in a better position to comment on classroom teaching skills, course difficulty, and instructor/student interaction.

Obviously, the clearest picture of a teaching situation emerges when all perspectives are solicited. However, if one is interested in student perceptions, a good place to start is with the small group instructional diagnosis (SGID). SGIDs are an alternative technique for classroom assessment and usually take place about mid-way through the quarter or semester. They are structured interviews that ask groups of students in a given course what helps them learn and how improvements can be made.

Pioneered at the University of Washington by D. Joseph Clark more than 200 SGIDs are conducted annually (by staff at the Center for Instructional Development and Research) at the UW in all schools and colleges with undergraduate students.

The process takes approximately 25 minutes of class time and requires a trained facilitator like myself to obtain information directly from students. On a prearranged day, in the absence of the instructor, I come to the classroom and ask students to form small groups of four to six people. Small groups are a defining feature of the SGID because they place extreme student opinions within the context of group consensus, increase validity, and better reflect the complexity of the dynamic learning environment. Groups then select a recorder and come to consensus on two main questions:

1. What helps you learn in this course?
2. What improvements would you like, and how would you suggest they be made?

Following ten minutes of discussion, I have the groups report two to three ideas on each question to the entire class. A student volunteer records the comments. I summarize the groups' ideas on the board, paraphrasing, questioning and clarifying until students reach consensus and I demonstrate a clear understanding of their viewpoint.

The SGID Class Interview

On the day of the SGID, I usually arrive for the first or last 30 minutes of class. Having already discussed the process with the students, the instructor introduces me and leaves. I review the procedure, and explain that the process is voluntary, anonymous and confidential for the instructor. By emphasizing that the SGID is not an evaluation, but a method for collecting information, I encourage a safe environment for student feedback.

While students form their groups, I write the first question on the board. After five minutes, I ask the second question and stress the importance of how improvements should be made. After another five minutes, the groups report their responses.

I write each comment verbatim on the board so that all students see it, and know that I am writing down their observations, not my interpretations of them. If student comments are too long winded or fuzzy, I attempt to paraphrase their ideas and get their agreement. I often ask, "Is this what you mean?" or "How can I change what I've written to better reflect your idea?" Seeking consensus is an important part of the SGID. On the other hand, I also look for verbal and nonverbal signs of disagreement. Often, students see the course and instructor from very different perspectives. Some may say that the reading load for the course is too great, while others counter that it isn't. In another coordinated studies program where I did a SGID, students differed radically about both the structure and freedom of the program. These kinds of discussions are useful for both the students and the instructor because they contextualize individual student
perceptions and insights about the course and test them in a public forum. When a statement is not agreed upon by everyone, I take a vote and record the breakdown. This allows the instructor to better judge the statements' significance.

At the end of the SGID, I thank the students and describe how the instructor will use the first five to ten minutes of an upcoming class to outline possible changes or adaptations.

The Post - SGID Discussion

Soon after the SGID, I meet with the instructor and summarize the information, answering questions, explaining comments, and offering alternative interpretations of apparent contradictions. During this phase, the task is to acknowledge student perspectives. Though my intent is not to persuade the faculty member to agree with the students, I do want to highlight themes and explanations that integrate the students' and instructor's perceptions.

Consequently, maintaining SGIDs as a formative process-voluntary, anonymous and confidential-helps to encourage open communication and meaningful student feedback.

Conclusion

When combined with other sources of information, the SGID procedure can make an effective contribution to instructional assessment. As a practical, personal and positive process for collecting information on teaching and learning, the SGID can be a trusted form of data and a catalyst for change in a variety of educational settings, including learning communities and other collaborative approaches.