

The eSGID Process: How to Improve Teaching and Learning in Online Graduate Courses

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Abstract

Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID) is a feedback process to collect midterm feedback from students. The process uses small focus group student interviews to identify strengths of the course, areas of concern, and suggestions to address concerns. The purpose of this paper is to share experiences using an online format of Small Group Instructional Design (eSGID) to improve the teaching and learning process in three graduate courses. The authors will share specific examples, including the format of the eSGID process.

Keywords: Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID), online teaching, course evaluation.

Jennie is a third-year assistant professor. She accepted a position teaching in an online graduate program. She has always enjoyed onsite teaching. However, she has found the shift from onsite to online teaching to be difficult. During her first year, she sought out help from an expert in online instruction. She spent considerable time updating her courses to include video lecture captures and live video chat sessions. This has increased student retention rates in all her courses; she now rarely has students drop her classes. Nonetheless, her summative student course evaluations continue to be a concern. Both the percentage of students completing the summative evaluations and the overall evaluation data remain too low for her to meet her unit's tenure and promotional review criteria in teaching. How can she improve the summative student evaluation response rates and overall scores? Can she meet the unit's student course evaluation criteria for tenure and promotion or should she give up on her dream of teaching in higher education?

Kelly is a 12th year associate professor who teaches in an online graduate program. She has transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching and has recently earned a teaching award. Her online courses integrate video lecture captures and live video chat sessions. Kelly enjoys the challenge of designing online learning activities that engage her students as well as enhance their understanding of the course content. While her summative course evaluations are often strong with a reasonably high student response rates, Kelly notes that she would like to see them consistently stronger with a higher student response rate.

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She wonders if it would be helpful to know what would help her students learn during the semester rather than after the semester has ended. As she says, “By the time I get my students’ feedback regarding the course, it is too late to revise the course to better help them learn.”

Marj is a 25th year full professor who teaches in an online graduate program. She has received three teaching awards across two different campuses while teaching online. She has enjoyed learning how to engage online learners. As a strong proponent of experiential learning, she has committed herself to designing effective online experiential learning activities. She has discovered that her online learners do establish a learning community as they complete the class; social learning does occur. Marj’s summative course evaluations are consistently very high with high student response rates. However, Marj often talks about the importance of mid-course student evaluations; how she relies upon them to teach effectively. She notes that there has been little research regarding the use of mid-course student evaluations in online courses. While many summative course evaluation instruments include a midcourse evaluation option, they rely on survey assessment. Marj feels strongly that the midcourse student evaluation is more effective when it utilizes a focus group assessment process. She also notes that when she has used a midcourse focus group student evaluation, e.g., Student Guided Instructional Diagnosis, it has increased both the student response rate and the overall course evaluation data on the summative student course evaluation.

The aforementioned concerns are not unique to these three faculty members (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). With the increased popularity and number of online university courses (Allen & Seaman, 2011), these concerns are sure to grow as the demand for accountability and quality in online courses increases (Peterson, 2016). However, faculty and administrators have found it difficult to discern what comprises quality online instruction (Peterson, 2016). “Faculty who teach online cannot apply the same instructional techniques [as those who teach] face-to-face classes” (Thiede, 2012, p. 137). In addition, institutions of higher education cannot use the same evaluation procedures for online courses as they do for onsite courses (Jones, 2012; Pina & Bohn, 2014). “The quality of online courses continues to be debated extensively in the literature, with little consensus on how to measure it, as well as how to assess teaching effectiveness of faculty teaching these courses” (Jones, 2012, p. 49).

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are a common method of assessing teachers and courses (Peterson, 2016). Students complete these course evaluations at the end of the semester. They provide the instructor with information regarding the course format and the teaching methods used. These summative course evaluation SETs are often used for promotion and tenure, making them a “high stakes” evaluation process for untenured faculty members. This creates an environment where untenured faculty focus on increasing student response rates and overall evaluation scores to meet tenure and promotional review criteria rather than on using summative student course evaluation feedback to improve the course format and teaching methods (Crews & Curtis, 2011; Dangel & Lindsay, 2014; Fink, 2008; Penny & Coe, 2004; Pina & Bohn, 2014). Further, when faculty use the summative SETs for course improvement, the course improvements do not bene-

fit the students who completed the SET; rather, the SETs benefit future students (Winchester & Winchester, 2012). Consequently, there is little motivation for current students to complete the SETs (Peterson, 2016) thereby promoting lowered student SET response rates. This problem is further compounded in some cases by evaluation formats, i.e., course evaluation surveys that “do not use valid questions or do not have consistent rating approaches” (Bubb et al., 2013, p. 8). Moreover, “all too often, summative [SET] evaluation . . . tells us little more than how popular we are as faculty” (Walker, 2005, p. 7). With these confounding issues, college and university faculty members are looking for more effective ways to evaluation online teaching. Formative, mid-course, SET evaluations are an option many faculty are trying to address these issues.

Formative, mid-course SETs provide faculty insight into what is working for their students as well as what the instructors can do to help their students learn more effectively (Peterson, 2016). Formative, mid-course SETs identify the students’ feelings and perceptions on both the course design and instructional strategies. This helps “online instructors . . . adjust strategies and methods to better meet the needs of current students” (Berridge, Penney, & Wells, 2012, p. 120) thus promoting continuous improvement and quality improvement in online courses (Aggarwal & Lynn, 2012). “As assessment progresses, the learning process is continually monitored and incrementally improved” (Aggarwal & Lynn, 2012, p. 29). Bubb, et al (2013) noted that formative evaluation could also increase student participation and promote student self-evaluation thereby improving student learning. Moreover, faculty who have used formative evaluations have seen students present higher levels of “motivation to complete [SETs]” (Winchester & Winchester, 2012, p. 674) thereby increasing their participation in summative SETs and “higher summative course evaluation scores” (Bubb, et al, 2013, p. 12). Thus, formative evaluations can positively influence summative SETs. In addition, as Peterson (2016) notes, faculty can use formative evaluations in annual evaluations to validate the course improvements they have implemented.

Faculty can use traditional paper or online surveys to gather mid-course, formative evaluation data; however, this evaluation approach does not promote the rich informed dialogue with students that faculty find particularly helpful (Hurney, Harris, Prins, & Kruck, 2014). Thus, it is no surprise that the small group instructional diagnosis (SGID), an interactive midcourse evaluation process, is a formative evaluation provided by many centers for teaching and learning in institutions of higher education throughout the nation. Clark (1982) developed this process, originally called the Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) to obtain formative (or midcourse) feedback from students to help improve course quality and teacher effectiveness. The SGIF instrument used a focus group assessment process to gather midcourse student feedback. During the same semester, the instructor responded to the feedback by addressing areas cited in the report (Clark & Redmond, 1982; Redmond, 1982).

To conduct an SGID, a facilitator meets with the class. (The instructor is not present.) The facilitator puts the class into small focus groups. Each focus group discusses a series of 4 to 5 open-ended questions regarding what is working well for them, what would help them to learn more effectively, and what they can do to improve their learning in the

course. Each group shares their responses with the class. The facilitator leads a discussion of each question resulting in the identification of the top three responses to each question. The SGID facilitator creates a final written report and shares it with the course instructor. The instructor then acts upon the information provided to make the course more effective for the students (Walker, 2005).

Overall, researchers have supported the use of SGID as a formative course evaluation. Early research on the SGID focused on student and staff perceptions and reactions to it. Clark and Redmond (1982) found students enthusiastic about this process, and that it had a positive impact on their motivation in the classes for which it was conducted. Diamond (2004) cited several studies that indicated instructors were more likely use the information provided as a result of the SGID than the typical end-of-semester evaluation. More recent studies, Dangle and Lindsey (2014), Diamond (2004), and Hurney et al. (2014), further support the benefits of SGID as a formative, midcourse SET.

While the SGID is a valued midcourse, formative evaluation procedure used commonly for onsite courses on college and university campuses throughout the nation, but can it be used as a formative evaluation process for online courses? Herman and Langridge (2012) suggest that it has applicability for online courses. However, they note that there is not a standard process online faculty can use to implement SGIDs in their classes. Herman and Langridge (2012) further note that college and university centers for instruction and development are not providing SGID facilitators for online courses and their instructors. The purpose of this paper is to describe a process developed to facilitate eSGID's in three online graduate courses. The paper includes the procedures used to conduct eSGID's as well as the faculty members' thoughts regarding the impact the eSGID had in their courses.

The eSGID Evaluation Process

The eSGID process is meant to parallel that originally developed by Clark (1982). The course instructor requests an eSGID. The students are divided into small focus groups of 6-8 people. Each group selects a recorder who will take notes during the discussion. The eSGID facilitator will work with each group via a live video conferencing program. After each group has met and completed the eSGID, the group facilitators and the eSGID facilitator meet to create the eSGID report (Appendix B). The eSGID Evaluation Process is described in Figures 1-6 (Appendix A). The facilitator will use the script (i.e., the italicized words) and completed the specified actions when administering the eSGID (Appendix A).

eSGID Experiences in Three Graduate Courses

CD 832 Observation, Assessment, and Screening in Early Childhood

The graduate program in Early Childhood Unified is designed to prepare teachers to work effectively with young children with and without special needs in which there are three faculty members. CD 832: Observation, Assessment, and Screening in Early Childhood is

the second course in the program series. The purpose of CD 832 is to provide an overview of measurement and evaluation concepts, strategies, and techniques that are appropriate for infants and young children. The course includes both theory and practice of individual observation, evaluation, and assessment.

Most candidates in the program do not have experience with the evaluation process to determine eligibility for special education. This has historically resulted in frustration and confusion on specific course requirements, which have been noted in the end of the semester course evaluations. The eSGID process was chosen to help determine earlier the challenges candidates felt they were having.

As a result of the eSGID, there were three items provided on how the instructor could improve the course. First, it was recommended that examples of completed scoring protocols be provided for each of the assessments. Second, candidates felt it would be helpful to have further information on using the obtained information from assessments within the classroom. The third recommendation included providing information on the specific assessments including what the environment should look like when completing the assessments and more specific information clarifying specific steps on completing the assessment.

Upon receiving eSGID feedback, a discussion was held on where to access examples of completed protocols including websites and the examiner manuals. Video conferencing sessions were offered through the rest of the semester to provide further detailed information on specific assessments including how to set up the classroom, discussing the required assessments, and how to further utilize the information from the completed evaluations.

SD802 Behavior Management

SD802: Behavior Management is part of the endorsement courses for High Incidence Special Education. The purpose of SD802 is to provide information regarding the ethical, effective, and efficient management of behavior of students with disabilities. The course focuses on the principles of behavior management and their application in the educational programs, as well as in the home. In this course, I use case studies and discussions to help students understand different factors that are involved in behavior management. I have been exploring different ways to facilitate discussions, using both the discussion board and live audio-conferencing sessions.

Specific feedback during the eSGID noted that I could improve the course with regards to discussions. First, students noted that discussion boards could be broken into smaller groups, so the discussions would be easier to follow. Second, students stated that using a mandatory audio-conferencing session would help students to see how easy it is to participate in the sessions. Also, more times to join the sessions. Third, students wanted more information from outside resources (i.e. online links, books, etc. that might further understanding of a topic).

Upon receiving eSGID feedback, discussion boards were broken up into smaller sessions. I did not require participation in an audio-conferencing session; however, I offered more times for students to participate. The use of more times to sign up for audio-conferencing increased participation in the sessions. I also created an online portfolio with additional resources.

SD820 Assessment in Schools

The graduate program in High Incidence Special Education is designed to prepare teachers to work with children (i.e., either K-6 or 6-12) mild, high incidence disabilities in inclusive classroom or special education resource classrooms. SD 820 Assessment in Schools is a graduate level course in special education offered via distance education. This course is a survey of large group and individual assessments used in elementary and secondary schools. The focus is on the nature, use, and interpretation of various evaluation methods used by schools to measure aptitude, achievement, interest, personality, and intelligence of students, i.e., both groups of students and individual students. Data analysis, test interpretation, and data-based decision-making in K-12 schools are the major emphases of the course.

This course is one of the final courses in the high incidence endorsement program. It draws students from three graduate programs, i.e., high incidence special education, school counseling, and gifted special education. Some of these students bring extensive knowledge about assessment to the class while others have little knowledge about assessment. One of the programs includes students who have never taught and so have no working knowledge of or actual experience administering and interpreting educational assessments. Consequently, the course includes small group activities that integrate students from each graduate program. These small groups function as “multi-disciplinary” teams to analyze a series of case studies. In addition, students watch lectures and related you tube videos throughout the course. They also participate in live video conferencing sessions where they practice interpreting assessment data, placement recommendations, and designing educational activities aligned with the assessment results. Moreover, students complete a series of study guides throughout the semester. These are completed independently. The instructor provides individual scaffolding as needed for the students as they complete the study guides.

This course has led to an increase in student performance on the assessment subsection of the Praxis exam; however, it remains a relatively high stress course for many of the students. That issue along with the challenge the instructor encounters designing a course for such a wide range of students lead the instructor to target this course for an eSGID. A major issue that had arisen in the course prior to the eSGID related to problems using the Discussion Board section of the course web site. As anticipated, this issue surfaces as one of the things the students liked least about the course. Related to this issue, the students noted that it would be helpful to know who was actually in their case study team for each of the Discussion Board assignments. The other issue some students thought would be of help them would be the use of a formal textbook for the class; however, not all students in the class agreed with this comment. As a result of the eSGID the students made the

following three suggestions: (a) Post all modules at the beginning of the semester, (b) provide additional practice with data interpretation during live video conference sessions, and (c) put the same people in both the case study teams and the live video conference sessions.

After receiving the eSGID midcourse student evaluation feedback, the course instructor responded to the student comments by increasing the amount of time spent with data interpretation during the live video conference sessions and assigning students to the same case study teams and live video conference sessions. The instructor also noted that all modules except the final course module had been available all semester.

Implications for Other Disciplines

Research has shown that midterm evaluation has led to significant improvement of specific teaching behaviors across all disciplines in higher education (Hurney et al., 2014; Herman & Langridge, 2012). In fact, midcourse evaluations have proven to be so effective that many university campuses use SGID to evaluate undergraduate and graduate courses in education, arts and sciences, nursing, medicine, aerospace, and other disciplines throughout campus (Hurney et al., 2014). The eSGID process described in this article extends this midcourse evaluation to online courses. Similar to the SGID, the eSGID is appropriate for use with any undergraduate or graduate online course from any discipline.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors regardless of higher education teaching experience have found that eSGID has been very beneficial in improving the teaching and learning process. Students provided constructive suggestions related to strengths and concerns to improve the course. Instructors used the information to make changes during the course. As student evaluation of teaching (SET) continues to be common in higher education, instructors need to focus on how they use the feedback to improve courses. Participating in an eSGID is a way for instructors to improve their teaching and allow students to have control over their learning.

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Appendix A

The Online Student Guided Instructional Diagnosis (eSGID) Process

Department of Elementary Education/Early Childhood/Special Education
The Teacher’s College
Emporia State University

Purpose: To solicit formative student course evaluation data (i.e., during the first 6 weeks of the semester).

Process: The eSGID process includes three phases: (a) Pre-eSGID activities, (b) eSGID administration activities, and (c) post-eSGID activities.

Pre-eSGID Activities	eSGID Administration Activities	Post-eSGID Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan eSGID • Request eSGID • eSGID Pre-Conference • Schedule eSGID 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select eSGID Student Recorder • Facilitate eSGID Sessions • Create eSGID Report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eSGID Post-Conference • File eSGID with SGID Coordinator

Pre-Conference Activities

1. **Plan eSGID** Put a description of the eSGID in your course syllabus and on your course calendar. (You may wish to consider giving bonus points for student participation in the eSGID.)
2. **Request eSGID** Contact the department eSGID Coordinator to request an eSGID. Specify the week you would like to complete the eSGID. (eSGID’s should occur during the 6th, 7th, or 8th week of the semester.)
3. **eSGID Pre-Conference** The eSGID facilitator will contact the faculty member to request a copy of the course syllabus and set up a 30-minute eSGID pre-conference meeting.

During the pre-conference, the faculty member will describe the class to the eSGID facilitator. The faculty member will also discuss any issues happening in the class that may surface during the eSGID, e.g., the students seem to be having trouble posting in the Discussion Board section of the course web site.

The facilitator will describe the eSGID process. The facilitator will also ask the faculty member to identify any additional focus group questions he or she would like the facilitator to include in the evaluation.

The eSGID will include the following 4 questions:

- What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?
- What do you LIKE LEAST about this course so far?
- What suggestions do you have for your INSTRUCTOR to improve your learning experiences in this course?
- What might YOU do to improve your own learning experiences and those of other students in this course?

Faculty may also wish to add one or more of the following 3 questions to the eSGID:

- What could YOU be doing to improve your learning in this course?
- What are YOU doing to hinder your learning in this course?

- 4. Schedule eSGID:** At the end of the Pre-Conference, the facilitator and faculty member will schedule the eSGID.

- Facilitated via live video conference program, e.g., Zoom
- 6-8 student participants per group
- Each session is 15 minutes in length

eSGID Administration Activities

- 1. Select eSGID Student Recorder** This may be done prior to or at the beginning of each eSGID session. The recorders should either be volunteers or selected by their peers. The recorders will take notes during the eSGID session. They will also attend a final online session with the facilitator to write the eSGID report. (You may find it helpful to give the recorders additional bonus points.)
- 2. Facilitate eSGID Sessions** Using the script provided below, facilitate each eSGID session.

Good morning (afternoon or evening)! My name is _____. I'm a faculty member in the Department _____. I'm here to facilitate an eSmall Group Instructional Diagnosis or eSGID. Your instructor asked me to come to your class today to get your honest feedback about your experiences in this course so far. My role will be to collect your ideas and to summarize those ideas for your instructor. What we do here today is anonymous, and will not affect your grade in any way. It's simply to get your feedback about how the class is going for you.

The process we will follow today happens in three parts:

- 1. You will select a recorder to keep a record of your discussion. (Omit this statement if the recorder is already selected.)*
- 2. You will reflect individually*
- 3. You will reflect in a small group.*

Your recorder will attend a final eSGID session with the recorders from all eSGID sessions on _____. (Fill-in-the-blank with the appropriate day.) The recorder's role at that session is to represent your group's comments as well as create one eSGID report for the

class. I will then share that report with your course instructor.

Today you will be asked to give your feedback on four questions:

- 1. What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?*
- 2. What do you LIKE LEAST about this course so far?*
- 3. What suggestions do you have for your INSTRUCTOR to improve your learning experiences in this course?*
- 4. What might YOU do to improve your own learning experiences and those of other students in this course?*

[Post the four questions so the students can see them.]

Please take 1-2 minutes to respond to these questions. You may find it helpful to take a few notes. You can then refer to your notes during the group discussion.

[Monitor the time. Tell the students when they have one-minute left. Tell them when they have 30 seconds left. Alternatively, you may have students send you a private message via the message board when they are ready for the group discussion.]

Now you will have the opportunity to share your thoughts with the group. As a group you must:

- 1. Put one answer down as a response to each question.*
- 2. Everyone in the group must agree with all responses recorded.*
- 3. You must clarify each response as you are recording it.*

Does everyone understand the process? Good! You will have 3 minutes for question 1, “What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?”

[After 3 minutes, direct students to the next question. Continue this process until students have addressed all four questions.]

_____, *please read the final responses for each question to us.*

[Seek clarifications as needed to be sure everyone understands each response. Be sure the recorder has documented the students in attendance if they will receive bonus points for participation. Ask the recorder to send you her or his notes via email. You will use this to draft the eSGID report prior to the reporters eSGID meeting.]

Thank you for participating in this eSGID!

3. Create eSGID Report

[Prior to the meeting, collapse all the eSGID recorders’ notes into one draft eSGID report. This draft report should include **all** comments from each group. They can be put in random order for this draft report. Follow the template provided at the end of this document.]

Thank you for coming to this final eSGID session. Each one of you will share your group’s responses to the eSGID questions. After each recorder shares the response for a question, you will reach a consensus regarding the top 3 responses for each question. Does everyone understand the process? Good!

So, _____, *give me your group’s response to question #1: What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?* [You will continue this process until each recorder has shared his or her group’s response to the question.]

What do you each see as the top 3 responses for this question?

[Continue this process for each question in the eSGID.]

You may ask questions to clarify what a group means by their response. But your question should not be disguised as a debate, as something that you are contesting; it should only be for clarification.

After the Group Response is complete, put the template SGID report on your screen. Ask the recorders to help you edit the report for accuracy.

1. Check that all group statements are recorded accurately.
2. Decide if all statements should be included. (For smaller classes, there may be only 1-2 rather than 3 statements per question.)
3. Decide which statements are most critical for each question.
4. Reorder statements in the report so that those considered most important are listed first under each question.]

I am meeting with your instructor on _____ to share this report. Thank you so much for participating in this eSGID process. It will help your instructor have a better idea of how the class is going.

Post-Conference Activities

1. **eSGID Post-Conference** During this conference the facilitator will share the report with the course instructor. The facilitator should encourage the instructor to thank the students for participating in the eSGID and tell the students what changes, if any, she or he will make in the course in response to their feedback.
2. **File eSGID with eSGID Coordinator** The facilitator will send the report to the department SGID coordinator.

Appendix B

SAMPLE eSGID REPORT TEMPLATE

Date: March 4, 2016
To: Marj Bock
From: Jennie Long, eSGID Facilitator
RE: eSGID Report

The purpose of this report is to share information resulting from an SGID completed in SD 820 Assessment in Schools. The SGID occurred across three 20-minute zoom sessions hosted during the first week of March, 2016.

SD 820 Assessment in Schools is a graduate level course in special education offered via distance education. This course is a survey of large group and individual assessments used in elementary and secondary schools. The focus is on the nature, use, and interpretation of various evaluation methods used by schools to measure aptitude, achievement, interest, personality, and intelligence of students, i.e., both groups of students and individual students. Data analysis,

test interpretation, and data-based decision-making in K-12 schools are the major emphases of the course. (Prerequisite, graduate students.)

There are currently 25 students enrolled in the course, 24 of these students participated in the SGID process. Each participated in a 20-minute zoom session with up to 9 peers. One student served as a recorder/reporter for each group. The recorder/reporter took notes regarding the group's responses for each of the following questions:

1. What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?
2. What do you LIKE LEAST about this course so far?
3. What suggestions do you have for your INSTRUCTOR to improve your learning experiences in this course?
4. What might YOU do to improve your own learning experiences and those of other students in this course?

The recorders/reporters then were provided a copy of the final report with the top response to each of the four questions for all three sessions where they voted on each statement and facilitator helped create the final report.

The SGID process identified the following statements in response to each question:

1. What do you LIKE MOST about this course so far?
 - a. Variety of modes- lectures, you tube videos, and readings.
 - b. The course content and material are relatable to my job.
 - c. Pacing of the course – not too fast; not over whelming.
2. What do you LIKE LEAST about this course so far?
 - a. Discussion board groups are too big. There are too many posts/overwhelming. We had over 300 posts the last time round.
 - b. A textbook may be helpful, but has pros and cons. The online chat is sometimes difficult to participate in, with so many people wanting to share opinions and the time constraints.
 - c. Directions on the case study need to be clearer. Contact information on individuals in the group. It would be helpful if our case study group uses chat group. So much easier to contact. Directions on the case study are a bit unclear on response to team (assignments all overlapped and didn't have time to correct).
3. What suggestions do you have for your INSTRUCTOR to improve your learning experiences in this course?
 - a. Would like all of the modules posted at the beginning of the course.
 - b. More practice data interpretation during zoom sessions.
 - c. Create case study group with zoom session; at times, some of the case study directions are a little unclear; feel like always emailing the instructor.
4. What might YOU do to improve your own learning experiences and those of other students in this course?
 - a. Be more open to other people's ideas when reading discussion board – remember that I can learn from everyone else; and don't take anything personally.
 - b. Contact the instructor when I have questions.
 - c. Consulting outside resources; going outside of bare minimum requirements.