



Formative Classroom Observations for New Faculty

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Abstract

This paper reports on a classroom observation program for first-year engineering faculty members in the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We begin by describing the program's philosophical approach, which is based on principles of formative feedback and collegial support. We then explain the structure of the program and the observation sequence. One distinctive attribute of our approach is a two-observer arrangement – one member of the observation duo is an instructional development professional and the second is an engineering faculty member or a student. We have collected feedback on the program from both the new faculty members and the observers, and summarize the results in the paper. Based on our feedback and our experience, we also provide an analysis of areas for program improvement and future directions.

Background

Since 1998, first-year faculty members in the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois have participated in a program designed to help them succeed in their instructional responsibilities. These participants are designated as Collins Scholars (named after W. Leighton Collins, an Illinois alumnus who served as executive director of ASEE for many years). They attend weekly seminars on topics such as learning objectives, active learning, and grading. As part of this program, they also typically take part in a peer observation process to receive formative feedback on their classroom teaching. This paper describes our approach to this program, our successes, and our areas for further improvement.

Our philosophy for peer observations is based on the Latin word for assessment: *assidere*, which means, “to sit beside.” We consider these observations as an opportunity for coaching and working alongside a new faculty member in the spirit of support, not for summative evaluation. Our approach is grounded in principles and practices based on the work of Chism¹, Buskit, Ismail and Groccia², and Brinko³.

According to Chism, formative evaluation is intended for one's personal use and improvement, and is therefore private and confidential. It is also “rich in detail so that teachers can obtain clear insights into the nature of their teaching strengths and weaknesses” (p. 5). Chism also states that formative peer review is an essential part of an effective overall peer review process – i.e., formative reviews should complement other evaluations of an instructor's effectiveness, including formal, summative assessments.

The observation sequence is adapted from the model in Buskit et al.:

1. A pre-observation meeting with the Collins Scholar and two observers.
2. The observation itself, often videotaped.
3. Observer debriefing: The two observers discuss and write up a summary of their findings.
4. Self-reflection: The Collins Scholar is invited to watch the video, and writes a self-analysis of the class session.
5. A post-observation meeting to discuss the class observed, the participants' impressions,

and strategies for continued improvement.

The findings from Brinko's review of the literature on the effectiveness of peer feedback have framed and guided the way we train our observers. Her analysis indicates that feedback is more effective when:

1. The source of information is perceived as credible, knowledgeable, and well intentioned.
2. The consultant/peer is respectful, empathetic, supportive, non-judgmental, and knowledgeable.
3. It focuses on specific behaviors, rather than the person.
4. It is descriptive, rather than evaluative.
5. It relates to goals that are defined by the instructor.
6. It considers the instructor's experience and developmental stage.
7. It contains a moderate amount of positive feedback with a selective amount of negative feedback – and the latter is 'sandwiched' between positive information.
8. It is given as soon as possible after the performance.
9. It allows for response and dialog.

The observers and their training

Our peer observation process involves two observers for each class visit. One observer is an instructional development specialist with a background in education and/or communication. The second observer is either another engineering faculty member or an engineering student. In order to avoid a potential conflict of interest, and to increase everyone's comfort level, this second observer is always from a department other than the Collins Scholar's home department. The two observers bring different types of expertise: pedagogical knowledge and – to some extent – content knowledge and direct experience in a similar engineering classroom. Having more than one perspective therefore allows for a richer interpretation of the class dynamics.

Faculty members volunteer their time to observe one or two new faculty per semester. We have personally solicited volunteers from among previous Collins Scholars cohorts, and more recently have asked department heads for suggestions. We look for faculty who have been successful in the classroom and who have the skills and sensibilities that would allow them to communicate with the Collins Scholars in a supportive manner.

The student observers are part of a college-wide organization called SCOTs: Student Consultants on Teaching. SCOTs can be undergraduate or graduate students within the college of engineering. They are recruited using select email lists within the college (ASEE student chapter, dean's student advisory group, etc.). Once interested students respond, they are individually interviewed to determine their interest and commitment level. Their primary duty is to assist with classroom observations, but they are occasionally invited to topical focus groups on teaching related issues. As with the faculty volunteers, the students are non-paid assistants expected to participate in two to three classroom observations each year. At the end of the year, they are awarded a "SCOT certificate."

All first-time observers participate in a one-hour training session; experienced observers also

often attend to review and refresh. The session begins with an overview of the purpose and philosophy of observations. We then explain the logistics of the observation sequence (see below), and introduce the accompanying observation materials (see Appendix A). The majority of the training session is spent on strategies for taking notes during the observation, writing up the summary, and debriefing afterwards.

We encourage observers to focus on observable behaviors, not their impressions or inferences about the instructor's effectiveness. A five-minute practice observation, usually an introductory engineering class found on YouTube, predictably reveals the effort it takes to take notes that are descriptive enough to glean meaningful conclusions from. We suggest the following strategies for note-taking (our semi-structured observation form is described in detail below):

- Keep track of the main flow and content of the lecture or discussion, and note the time at each transition to something new.
- Record question-and-answer exchanges.
- Note points in the class session where you (as the observer) are confused, surprised, etc.
- Note student behavior during the class.

The training session also addresses strategies for writing up the summary. The observers are to do the write-up together. We provide sample write-ups for observers to get an idea of content, length, format, and tone. We encourage the observers to include all positive aspects of the lesson, and to be judicious in their identification of areas for improvement. We discourage laundry-listing because it can be demoralizing and even paralyzing for a novice faculty member. Ideally, observers prioritize and limit their recommendations for improvement to two or three areas. We suggest including a behavior that is easily remedied (e.g., repeating students' answers so the rest of the class can hear) and something that is more demanding (e.g., developing productive group-work activities). This balanced approach gives the Collins Scholars both a simple way to make an immediate improvement, and a deeper challenge that reflects high standards for teaching.

Helping new observers understand and prepare for the observation debriefing is also critical. Because of our "assidere" approach, the debriefing is meant to be a collegial, supportive conversation. Inexperienced observers are often unclear about how to manage this discussion, in particular with respect to providing feedback on any problematic aspects of the class. We encourage the observers to:

- Begin by asking the Collins Scholar a question such as, "Was this a typical class session?" or by inviting him or her to share some points gleaned from the video or their post-observation self-reflection.
- Emphasize the positive aspects of the class before the negative ones.
- Approach areas of concern with tact, and from an objective ("You answered your question about the ratio yourself.") or personal ("I wasn't sure I understood your question about the ratio.") point of view. Questions are also helpful: "Why did you answer that question yourself?"

Observation process

A pre-observation meeting “establishes a collegial tone for the entire process and is useful for gathering strategic information about the teacher’s pedagogical habits and practices along with any problematic issues or areas of concerns that he or she is experiencing in the classroom” (Buskit et al., p. 35). It also allows the observers to find out what the instructor’s plans are for the class to be observed. During this meeting, the observers explain the observation sequence, reassure the Collins Scholar of confidentiality, and provide him or her with the self-reflection instrument.

During the class visit, the observers sit toward the back of the room and videotape the class. They take field notes guided by a set of pedagogical concepts (organization, delivery, interaction, etc.). Because our observations are for formative feedback, we resist a checklist-type rating form with a set of pre-determined criteria. At the same time, a list of elements of effective teaching is useful, especially for novice observers, as a guide to focus on specific and relevant behaviors and instructional strategies. Therefore, we have developed a hybrid form that leaves space for field notes, and includes a list of suggested areas of focus to the side of the page. (See Chism for an overview of a variety of observation instrument types and examples.)

After the observation, the Collins Scholar writes a brief self-reflection about how the class session went and how it might be improved. Harvey and Solomonides⁴ argue that critical self-reflection, in combination with peer review, enables faculty to connect theory with practice, improve their classroom practices, and deepen their understanding of their work.

Meanwhile, the observers confer and write up their comments, often with the more experienced observer taking the lead. While this practice is intended to result in balanced feedback, it is also intended to benefit the observers: They are required to consider and articulate what they value in effective teaching.

The post-observation meeting ideally occurs as soon as possible after the observation. As noted above, it is intended to be a dialog, in the spirit of support and collegiality. Buskit et al. emphasize the importance of observers listening carefully, reflectively, and non-judgmentally during this meeting.

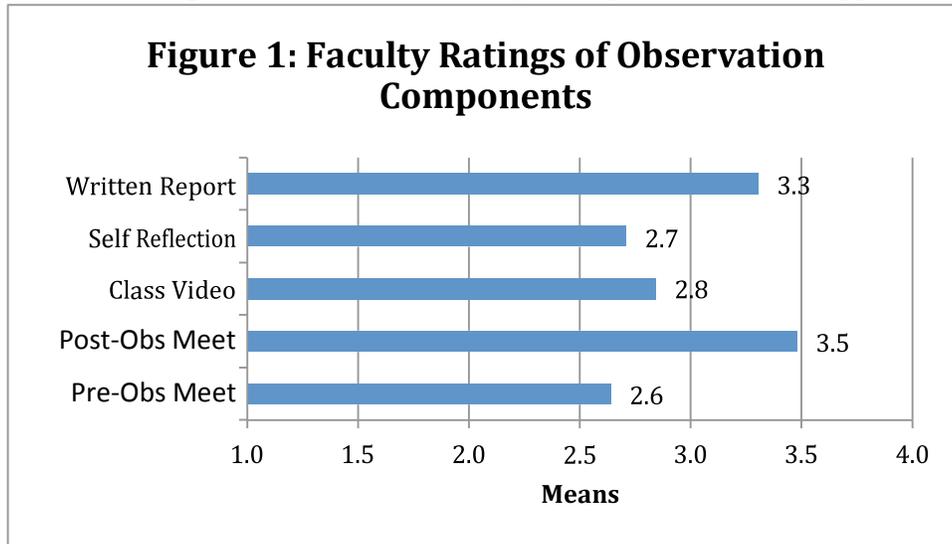
Brinko and Amber et al.⁵ note that the place where discussions of teaching take place matters. Places that are private, neutral, and psychologically safe can help new faculty feel at ease during conversations. Therefore, we ask observers to have the pre-observation and post-observation meetings at the Collins Scholar’s office – or, if all agree, at a quiet coffee shop.

Feedback on the program

To obtain feedback about the quality and impact of the observation program, we collected data via an online survey that was administered to both the new Collins Scholars and the co-observers. The descriptive statistics from the rated items and themes from the open-ended comments are presented here with our interpretations.

Perspectives of the Collins Scholars.

In an effort to gather feedback about the observation program for the new faculty, we sent an online survey to the 40 Collins Scholars who participated in the new faculty program over the past two years. Of these 40 faculty members, 25 responded to the survey. We are comfortable with this 63% response rate, especially considering how busy they are. The results of the survey are presented below with both ratings and open-ended comments summarizing their thoughts regarding the observation process. The online faculty survey is available in Appendix B.



As seen in Figure 1, results indicate that the written summary report and the post-observation discussion were the most meaningful and useful parts of the process. This makes sense since they, in a complementary, practical, and focused way, delve into the specifics of what worked well and what needs to be improved in the faculty member’s teaching. Essentially, the written report anchors the post-observation discussion and provides an impetus for dialog. The open-ended comments from the survey reinforce these two components as being the most useful aspects of the process. The usefulness of feedback and suggestions in the report and post-observation discussion was frequently highlighted in the comments section of the survey. These representative responses that convey the value placed on the debriefing and the perspectives of the observers:

“Holding an active discussion with the staff afterwards to figure out the nuances of my teaching style that are/are not beneficial.”

“It was good to be able to hear feedback from non-student professionals familiar with academic instruction.”

“The feedback on the presentation and interaction with students, as well as the suggestions for how to improve these.”

The usefulness of the instructor’s self-reflection was rated much lower. We postulate that the Collins Scholars were not adequately trained to reflect on their own teaching and thus were aimless in their self-reflection. In our experience, many of the self-reflections we have reviewed have in fact lacked depth. Similarly, watching the classroom video on their own, if

they even did so, may have been too overwhelming without explicit guidance. In the open-ended comments, when asked about most useful components of the observation process, not a single instructor mentioned the self-reflection worksheet. Yet, many did cite the classroom video as a useful learning tool:

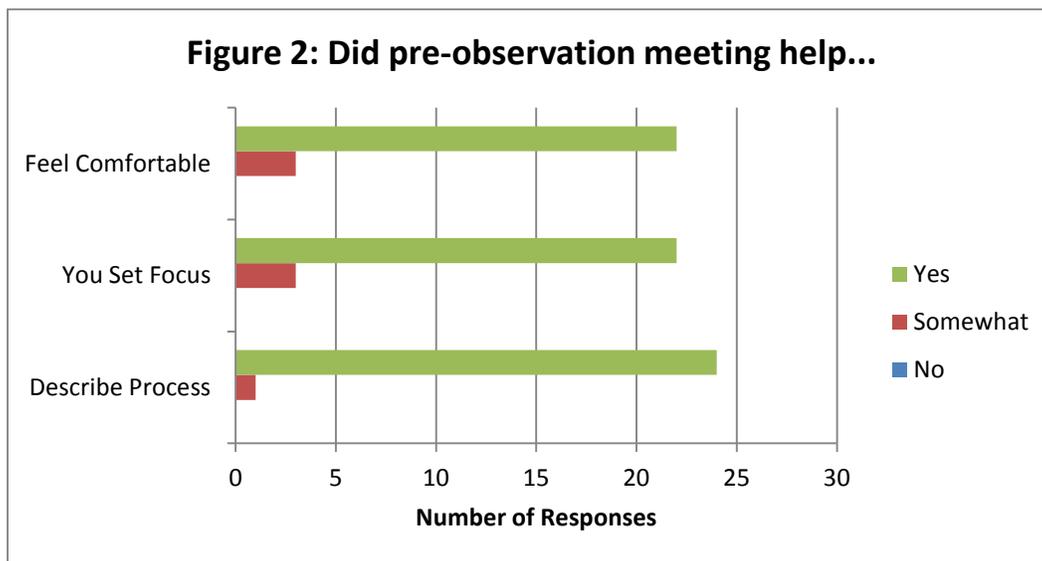
“Putting into practice some of the skills learned thus far, watching myself on video - it wasn't as horrible as it felt and therefore gave me more confidence.”

“The video and the graduate student feedback (not that the staff feedback wasn't useful, but it was really nice hearing if from a student). Overall it was also a great confidence booster!”

“Watch myself and get 'free' feedback from the visitors.”

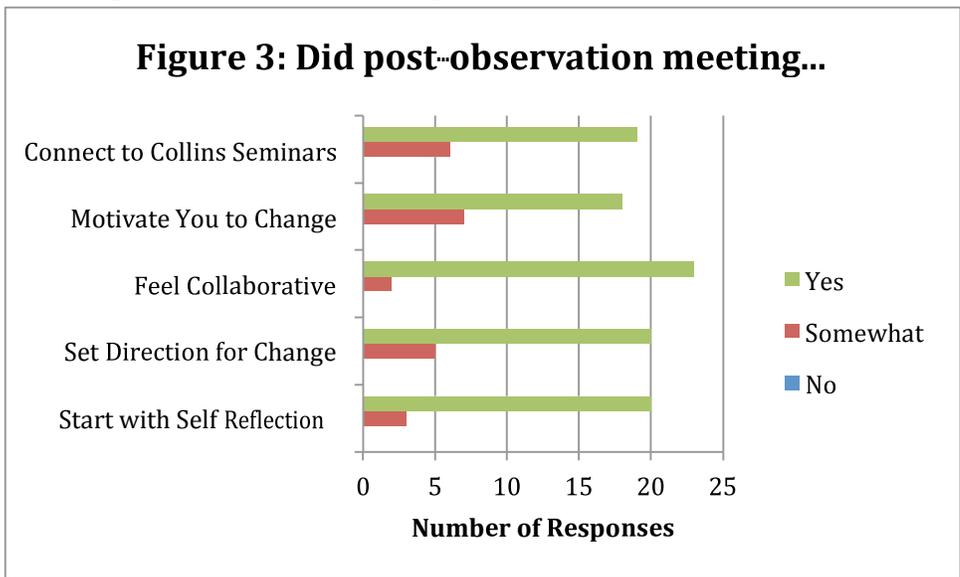
This feedback indicates that we may need to provide more guidance for reviewing the video and completing the self-reflection worksheet—including a checklist and model of what we expect. Completing these activities is important because they invoke participants' internal motivation to improve. Additionally, we realize that the post-observation discussion needs to connect to both of those tasks in a meaningful manner.

The pre-observation was the lowest rated aspect of the full process. This result was not a surprise, since this meeting is more of a logistical task rather than a truly reflective experience. Still, there is room for improvement in how it is introduced and conducted. We could provide a short checklist of items that we'll cover, indicating which ones the instructor needs to reflect upon before the actual meeting.



While the pre-observation meeting was rated lower than all other observations components, as seen in Figure 2, it seemed to serve its purpose. All Collins Scholars reported that it made them more comfortable with the process and allowed them to set the focus for the upcoming observation.

Since the pre-observation meeting is where we thoroughly describe the full observation sequence and expectations, it's a somewhat didactic activity: useful, but not necessarily enlightening. In the future, we could encourage a deeper conversation during these meetings—for example asking the faculty to be reflective about past teaching experiences how they (or a lack thereof) impact their current teaching.



The post-observation discussion was, as we expected, the highest rated part of the process. We were pleased that no faculty responded “No” to the questions in Figure 3. The Collins Scholars felt that the discussions were collaborative, and that they motivated change in specific aspects of their teaching. They also agreed that the discussions generally began with their thoughts and self-reflection, and connected back to the content of our weekly seminars. While still relatively highly rated, the lower ratings of “connection to the weekly seminars” and “motivation to change” merit further consideration. We can easily ask observers to help the Collins Scholars make more explicit connections back to the weekly seminars and topics previously covered. The motivation to change is more challenging to address. If we could more emphatically emphasize future accountability—student ratings of instruction, second classroom observation, or teaching awards—perhaps the desire to improve would be greater.

When specifically asked, “What significant changes did you make to your teaching as a result of this program?” the Collins Scholars’ responses centered on two main areas. First, faculty reported becoming more interactive and engaging, as these comments represent:

“Promote active participation of students during the class; use of various tools (board, projector, demonstrations...); we have to give our best in each lecture.”

“I have made my presentations more interactive.”

The second common area of improvement is slowing down:

“Slowed down, focus on good writing, ask more questions and wait longer after

questions.”

“I definitely made conscious efforts to speak more slowly and repeat student questions.”

It is interesting that these two changes are related. Adding more active learning strategies, questioning, and discussions into our lectures naturally slows the pace of the lecture material. We cover less content, but more thoroughly.

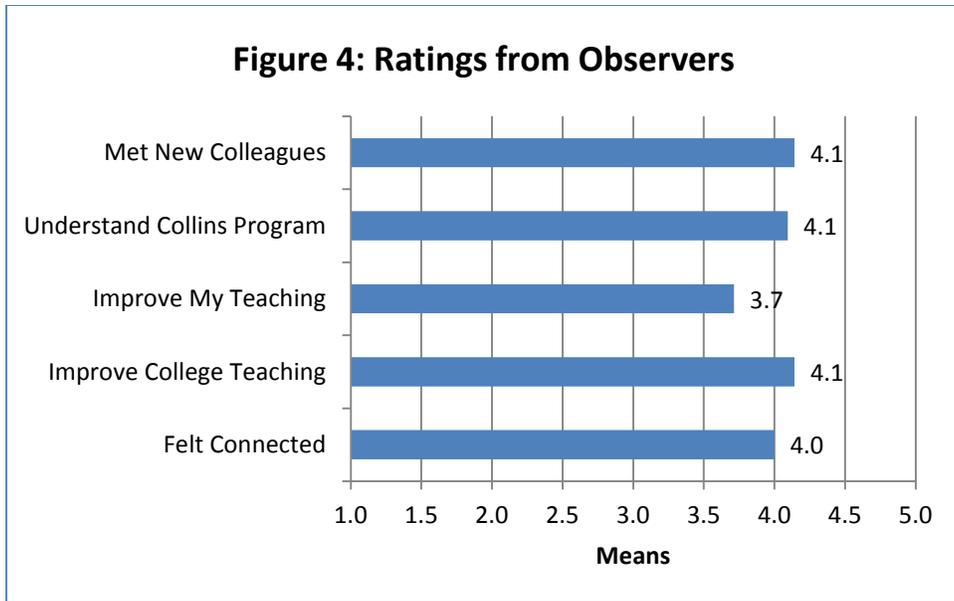
In addition to citing what improvements they made in their teaching, several Collins Scholars said there were not many changes needed. The feedback they received was confirmation that they were on the right track. As one participant remarked, “Actually, not a lot were recommended. The observation served more to give me more confidence in my own teaching.”

When the Collins Scholars were asked “How can we improve the observation program to make it even better?” we received a variety of responses, which fell into three broad categories: (1) The program is already excellent, no changes needed, (2) Repeat the observations for continued feedback and to assess improvement, and (3) Have all faculty go through this process (not just new instructors). One extreme response was “Make it mandatory for every faculty on campus every semester and publish the videos so students can see the teaching styles.” While this might not be feasible, nor endorsed by other faculty, it is a thought-provoking suggestion.

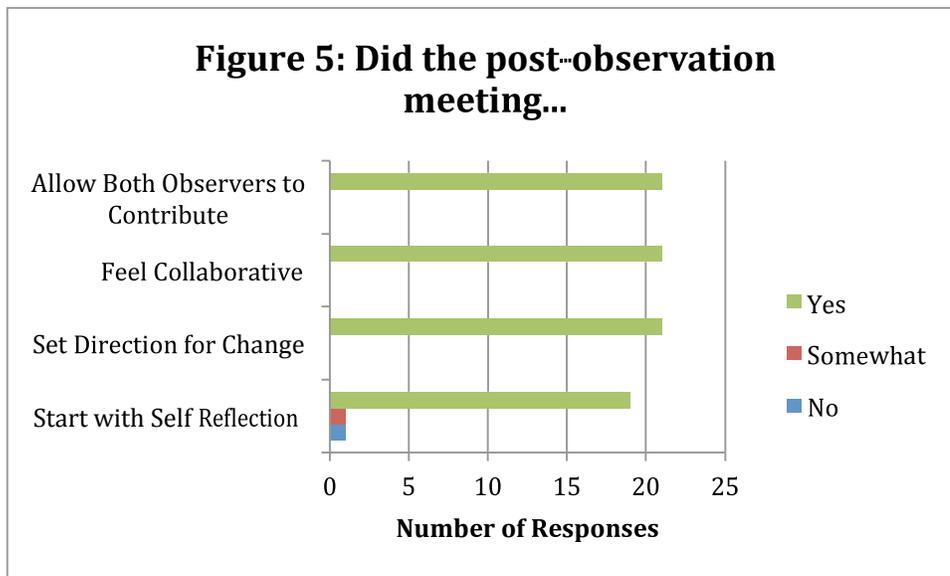
Overall, the Collins Scholars are enthusiastic about the observation program. In the final survey question, “Would you recommend this classroom observation process to your colleagues in engineering?” there was a unanimous “Yes” reply (25 of 25 responses). While there are some aspects of the full observation sequence that can be improved, it is clear that the Collins Scholars perceive the observation process to be an important part of their professional development as instructors.

Perspectives of the co-observers.

In addition to gathering feedback from the Collins Scholars, we wanted to determine if the co-observers gained anything from participating in the observation program. We sent an online survey to the 24 co-observers who had helped us over the past two years. Of those 24 observers, 21 completed an online survey (88% response rate). The responses from these co-observers are summarized below. The observer online survey questions are in Appendix C.



The response rate of 88% from busy faculty and students seems to indicate a strong commitment to the program. Of the five potential impacts we asked them to rate, it is encouraging that four of them were highly rated (4.0 or above on the 5-point scale). As seen in Figure 4, the observation program enabled participants to feel more connected to the college, meet new colleagues, better understand our program, and believe they have improved the quality of teaching within the college. There was some agreement that the observation process improves the observers’ teaching. One explanation for the slightly lower rating on this item could be that we recruit and train experienced and highly rated faculty to assist us—they already are solid teachers. Another possible explanation is that some of our student co-observers have not taught, and were unable to respond to that item meaningfully.



The results depicted in Figure 5 suggest that the co-observers (like the Collins Scholars) perceived that the post-observation discussion was collaborative, set a direction for change,

and allowed both observers (primary program staff and the co-observer volunteer) to contribute ideas. The meeting did not always begin with the instructor's self-reflection, but in most cases, it did flow from the self-reflection worksheet. We are pleased that 100% of the co-observers felt the meeting was collaborative and inclusive. In our experience, there is always a risk that program staff will take too much of a lead in directing the conversation; however it appears our post-observation meetings typically maintain a collaborative and collegial feel. We are deliberate about promoting this atmosphere throughout the year-long program, not just in the observation process, so it is gratifying to see confirmation in the survey responses. It is interesting that the co-observers unanimously felt a "direction for change" was set in the post-observation meeting, but the Collins Scholars were not as unanimous in their views on this issue. A possible remedy is to be more explicit in outlining an improvement plan and to establish future check-ins for greater accountability and motivation to change.

Because the co-observers are all student or faculty volunteers, we wanted to collect information on why they participated and what they were getting out of the program. We asked them how it aided their own professional development and what the best aspects of the program were from their perspective. Two related themes emerged from the data: meeting new colleagues and learning from them and the observation itself. Here are representative comments from the survey on this topic:

"It has aided me by giving me opportunities to observe classrooms (always beneficial), and to discuss with, and learn from, the new faculty about their teaching philosophy and ideas."

"The best part of the program is getting the chance to meet teachable, energetic, young colleagues. I think that this program provides the most tangible communication to new faculty that teaching is important and that there are resources to help them succeed."

"Speaking to the lecturers after the observation was the best part because the professor was very open and we engaged in deep discussion that I feel helped the professor understand his teaching and me to understand professors."

"Observing other teachers always provides new ideas for my own teaching. I expect that continued involvement in the observations will expand my network of colleagues as well."

"It has made me understand my position in a classroom and how I can benefit myself from a professor's lecture. Also critiquing assists in a self-realization when teaching too. As a student learning assistant I have learned how to grab my class's attention and make the classroom a more rich experience."

"Meeting new colleagues in the College and providing them with my perspective of teaching and other facets for achieving success. I also always learned something new from the experiences."

These responses indicate that it is common for faculty to feel isolated from each other,

especially from each other's classrooms. This program offers a chance to break down those barriers and meet aspiring new professors from different departments across the college. For students, they rarely get a chance to interact with faculty in a more personal and collegial setting. The observation program treats students as junior colleagues and values their input. From the pre-observation meeting through the post-observation discussion, the co-observers are provided an opportunity to help others, as well as learn from colleagues' different teaching approaches.

It is encouraging to see the co-observers were learning from the observation process itself and truly enjoyed, and learned from, meeting and discussing teaching issues with the Collins Scholars. We are confident these interactions support a continued atmosphere of collaboration within the college and set a positive tone for the new faculty.

The last question we asked the observers was, "What changes do you suggest to improve the observation program?" To our delight, the most frequent response was along the lines of "Nothing, it is fine as it currently exists." The other common response was to expand the observations and repeat them. The observers wanted to participate in even more classroom observations and felt this would help the faculty become better teachers and motivate them to change. We would likewise be able to assess change from one observation to another. Here are salient comments from the observers:

"More observations! Observations are exciting, but I have felt like they are open-ended. I do not know if the observee ever actually follows through on the suggestions. Observations also seem to occur either after the midterm or during the last part of a class. It would be better if there were two observations to see any changes over time for a given class."

"It would have been nice if I could have scheduled more observations or engage in more student panels. Unfortunately, the reason why I could not observe as much as I would have liked is because my class schedule was too chaotic."

"Expand coverage around the college."

As with any program, we have limited resources, but it's clear that the faculty and the co-observers recommend increasing the number of classroom observations. They also seem to be pushing us to expand the program beyond new faculty. These are lofty goals and we'll need to consider their feasibility. There appears to be a strong cadre of volunteer observers that we can tap into, but if we are to expand, we'll need to streamline the administrative side to make the whole process more efficient.

In addition to the suggestions to increase the number of observations, we had one insightful response that might increase the impact of the observations and provide extra accountability from the new faculty:

"It may be useful to ask the observed faculty to write a short statement at the end of the semester to reflect on the longer term impact of the AE3 observation on their course. It is likely that the faculty have to write a course-wide self-reflection statement, so hopefully it would not represent too much additional work for the faculty."

We never want to indiscriminately increase the workload on our new faculty, but this final suggestion could help tie the full program together and document impact and change.

Conclusions

Based on our experience and the feedback we received about the peer observation program, we consider it to be successful in accomplishing our goals of helping new faculty in practical ways, and of creating a climate of openness toward teaching in the College. In this regard, the program contributes to the growth of a community of practice⁶: practitioners who share experiences, questions, and resources in order to develop competence in some common endeavor.

In addition to the direct impact on the Collins Scholars and the observers, two other outcomes have emerged from the program. First, some of the trained observers have begun implementing similar, smaller-scale peer observations in other contexts: with colleagues teaching in the same course sequence, and among instructional (non-tenure-track) staff. The success of this program for formative assessment also led to a workshop for college administrators on the viability of establishing more systematic and rigorous observation programs for summative assessment (tenure and promotion processes).

It seems clear that the following components are necessary for the observation process to be successful:

- Trained observers that understand the formative purpose of the observation feedback and the collegial nature of the discussions,
- Structured observation process that emphasizes the new faculty members specific needs and desires for change, and
- A combination of written summary reports and open dialog between observers and instructor that synthesize the self-reflection, classroom video, and the observers' insights.

While successful, there are still areas that could be improved and we plan to implement the following changes to enhance the Collins Scholar observation program:

- Provide extra guidance to the new faculty on how to complete the self-reflection worksheet and analyze the classroom video,
- Strongly encourage a second observation to motivate change and assess instructional improvement, and
- Further connect the weekly Collins Scholar seminar topics to the observational process and ensure that the pre-observation discussion reinforces the purpose of the observations and expectations for change.

Bibliography

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⁶ Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX A

OBSERVER NOTES

Participant:

Observer:

Course title & location:

Date:

Approximate number of students:

Organization

Effective introduction

Objectives stated

Appropriate preview &
review

Clear transitions

Presentation

Technology/visuals

Writing on board

Voice volume & clarity

Enthusiasm

Eye contact

Interaction

Question-asking
strategies

Answering student
questions

Activity design

Activity facilitation

Content

Clarity of explanation

Use of examples

Showing relevance

Connecting to previous
material

POST-OBSERVATION COMMENTARY

Participant:

Observers:

Course title & location:

Date:

Approximate number of students:

Major strengths demonstrated by the participant:

Areas and suggestions for improvement:

Additional comments:

SELF-REFLECTION

Name:

Date:

Please complete as soon as possible after your observation.

Major strengths demonstrated during the observation:

Areas for improvement:

Additional comments:

Your plan of action (completed in conjunction with observers):

APPENDIX B

NEW FACULTY SURVEY

As an instructor who went through our Collins Scholar classroom observation program, we'd like to know how it impacted your teaching and what elements of the observation sequence were most useful. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. Thank you for your time and information. Feel free to skip items that do not apply to you.

Academic Year you participated in Collins Scholar program: 2013-2014 or 2014-2015

Please rate the usefulness of the following activities in terms of how they helped improve your teaching: (1) Not Useful-Somewhat Useful-Very Useful-Extremely Useful (4)

- Pre-observation Meeting
- Post-observation Meeting
- Classroom Video
- Self-Reflection Worksheet
- Written Summary Report

Did the pre-observation meeting... No--Somewhat--Yes

- Describe the observation process well?
- Allow you to set the focus of the observation?
- Make you feel comfortable about the process?

Did the post-observation discussion... No--Somewhat--Yes

- Start with your self-reflections?
- Help you set a direction for change/improvement?
- Feel like a collaborative effort?
- Motivate you to change?
- Connect back to Collins Scholar seminar topics?

Would you recommend this classroom observation process to your colleagues in engineering?
Yes/No

What aspects of the observation process were most useful for you as an instructor?

What significant changes did you make to your teaching as a result of this program?

How can we improve the observation program to make it even better?

APPENDIX C

OBSERVER SURVEY

This survey is intended to help us improve the first-year faculty observation program and also collect research data to share with others that might be interested in developing a similar program. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Thank you for your time and information.

Were you a SCOT or Faculty Affiliate? How

many observations did you do?

By being involved with this observation program, I...

(1) Strongly Disagree-Disagree-Neutral-Agree-Strongly Agree (5)

- Felt more connected to the College
- Helped improve the teaching within the College
- Improved my own teaching
- Better understand the AE3 Collins Scholar program
- Met new colleagues within the College

Did the post-observation discussion...

No--Somewhat--Yes

- Start with the faculty's self-reflections?
- Help set a direction for change/improvement?
- Feel like a collaborative effort (observed and observers together)?
- Allow both you and your co-observer to contribute ideas?

What was the best part of this experience?

How has it aided your own professional development?

What changes do you suggest to improve the observation program?