



DIALOGUE



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TAKING THE FEAR AND LOATHING OUT OF EVALUATIONS IN 10 EASY STEPS

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As instructors in our disciplines we deal with students every day who fear and loath being evaluated, and yet we calmly explain to our students that this is a necessary part of college, and well, Life. Isn't it ironic then, that when each of us is up for peer evaluation we have the same reaction? Fear, mistrust, self-doubt, and, yes, downright resistance to the entire process. These reactions may indicate that it is human nature to resist being judged, and that's exactly what it all comes down to—the fear of judgment. But Zen Buddhists have long lived by the principle that when your attitude toward something changes, *the thing itself changes*. I would like nothing more than to change our attitudes toward the evaluation process if that's at all possible. I would like to think that by treating our colleagues as professionals that we can use the evaluation process as not only a way to begin a dialogue about teaching but also a way to improve our programs. All of this for the good of our students.

STEP 1: RESPECT THE PROFESSION

Peer evaluation is an intrinsic part of maintaining the quality of our programs. As professionals we are obligated to take the process seriously because it goes to the heart of what we value in the institution—students and student success. We are all busy with our own lives and our own students, but the time we spend evaluating our peers can be the best way to see what is working or not in our course sequences and our programs. It's an opportunity to watch and learn from our colleagues, to experience new approaches to course and

discipline materials. And, it's fun to see how different students react to different people and environments. The evaluation process might not be only about judgement, it could be about how individual instructors see themselves in relation to the course sequence and the institution as a whole. To that end, the rest of this piece is some advice about how to structure the dialogue with careful attention to how we treat our colleagues.

STEP 2: BE SENSITIVE

Even the most competent instructors fear being evaluated. That's just human nature, and it's also ironic since as instructors we spend a large part of our time evaluating our students. You would think from that perspective that we'd simply accept that being evaluated is part of life in academia, but often our colleagues worry excessively, and it's our jobs as evaluators to calm them down. Be sensitive to the fact that many of us are concerned that a colleague will find fault with our methods and materials. When you contact the evaluatee to set up the timing for the observation, be as open and helpful as you can be. Here are some guidelines for working successfully with colleagues:

- Ask the evaluatee how the class is going. Try to get a sense of how the course is organized before you arrive at the class.
- Ask the evaluatee what s/he would like you to look for as you observe the lesson(s). This will assure the evaluatee that you care about her feelings as a professional.
- Ask for copies of as much of the course materials as

possible. Again, this will give the evaluatee a chance to show you a wide range of pedagogical tools he has developed and is mostly likely very proud of.

STEP 3: DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Read the syllabus and course material prior to going into the classroom. Also, carefully read the current Course Outline of Record (some people still erroneously call it the Title V Outline). If the COR has not been reviewed in the last six years, you should check with the department chair before evaluating the instructor in this particular area. Even though the department may not have updated the curriculum, the evaluatee may have done her job as a professional in keeping current with new developments in the discipline.

STEP 4: BE ORGANIZED

It may sound silly and obvious, but keep a separate folder for each person you evaluate and put ALL pertinent materials in that folder—evaluation forms, syllabi, hand-outs, notes, e-mails, and the current Course Outline of Record for the course(s) you are observing. Since we are asked to evaluate whether or not the instructor is following the outline, this is very important. Not only does this prepare you to evaluate the overall organization of the course, it may refresh your memory about the course content and the sequence of topics.

STEP 5: DOCUMENT THE EXPERIENCE

When you come into the classroom, be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible.

(cont. on page 2)

Students may or may not be aware of the evaluation process, but your job is to simply observe and take lots of notes. Some important elements you might note are:

- Date, time, course, section
- Number of students
- Student Diversity
- Use of technology
- Student/Teacher interaction
- Instructor checking in with students to ascertain learning
- Students on task or not
- Level of Student engagement
- Classroom atmosphere
- Pacing and sequencing of material
- Use of the pedagogical practice of: Bridge-In, Stated Objective, Pre-test, Participatory Learning Experience, Post-test, Summary/Closure

At the end of the observation when you are asking the students to fill out the Student Feedback Form, read the prompt supplied to you. Remember that you need to remain as neutral as possible, so don't engage the students in conversation about the course or the instructor. If students want to discuss the instructor, refer them to the Department Chair.

STEP 6: BE REASSURING

If all has gone well, let the instructor know as soon as possible what you thought of the classroom experience. Your colleague will appreciate this kind of immediate verbal feedback and will go home to a good night's sleep. If there are areas where you believe that you will be making negative comments or recommendations, respectfully explain that you will be getting together very soon to talk about what you observed. Remind the evaluatee that it takes time to assemble all the data from the student feedback and to write up your report, but try to give him some idea as to when you will be contacting him.

STEP 7: BE HONEST

This is the hardest advice to follow if you believe that your colleague needs to make some changes. We often worry that if we are honest in our evaluations

that we will suffer some kind of retribution in the future. That is always possible; however, we owe it to our students to make certain they are receiving a quality education. If we pretend that someone is excellent, it's the same as giving a "gift grade." If we cannot be honest with our colleagues, then we are letting our students down. It is also possible to be honest and helpful at the same time. Clear recommendations can help an instructor to improve his teaching. It may sound harsh, but a colleague who cannot accept constructive criticism, is probably not the best instructor for our students.

STEP 8: BE TIMELY

Immediately give the student feedback forms to the appropriate person for transcription and calculation. As soon as you receive that documentation, write up the observation report along with your evaluation comments and recommendations, and contact the faculty member with the results. It is very important that you take the time to meet with your colleague to discuss what you saw and what you thought. Sometimes you may have to have the conversation on the phone, but that's acceptable. This discussion goes to the very heart of what we do as instructors in the California Community College System, and we can only learn to serve our students better if we share ideas and perceptions about what does and doesn't work in and out of the classroom. The face-to-face meeting can also clear up concerns or confusion about what you observed. Giving your colleague a chance to explain will help greatly to finish the process successfully.

STEP 9: MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

As in all personnel matters, the evaluation process is confidential. Do not discuss the evaluation or observation with anyone other than the co-chairs of the District Tenure Review and Evaluation Committee, the department chair, or any supervising administrators.

STEP 10: FOLLOW THE CONTRACT

The AFA Contract has been written and modified over the years to insure that all faculty are treated equitably in the process. Since evaluations are not always entirely positive, it is absolutely necessary to follow the process outlined in Articles 14 and 30. If you have any concerns about the process contact the Department Chair or Supervising Administrator. If they are uncertain about any part of the process they will contact the District Tenure Review and Evaluation Committee (DTREC) for clarification and advice. This group is tasked with clarifying the Contract and making decisions regarding exceptions to the process. The members of the committee maintain the strictest confidentiality and do not even know or use the names of parties under discussion. It is best to use this group to avoid difficulties or potential grievances. The current co-chairs of DTREC are Janet McCulloch, English Faculty and AFA Chief Negotiator (ext. 4494) and Abe Farkas, Dean, Curriculum and Educational Support Services (ext. 1508).

CONCLUSION

From a personal perspective, I would say that my experiences with evaluations have been tremendously positive. I have had the opportunity to watch inspiring teachers working with wonderful students in a way that made me proud to teach at SRJC. I have always learned something new, and the conversations afterwards were helpful and affirming. When I have had to make recommendations, they have led to better experiences for our students. This all leads me to believe that it doesn't have to be a terrible ordeal as long as we maintain the attitude that evaluation leads to improvement of instruction AND we treat each other with sensitivity and respect. After all, nobody likes being judged, assessed, evaluated, but it's part of our jobs as educational professionals, and it's part of Life.

