

**The Online Small Group Analysis (OSGA):
Adapting a Tested Formative Assessment Technique for Online Teaching**

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe a newly developed investigative technique for the formative assessment of online teaching efficacy – the recently-piloted, seven-step Online Small Group Analysis (OSGA). While the basic tenets of the time-proven Small Group Analysis in face-to-face settings remain, it has become necessary to add three additional components and adapt the original model to suit specific characteristics of the online learning environment. The aim of this article, therefore, is to share with practitioners in other institutions this formative model used for assessing the efficacy of online teaching and learning. To fulfill such an aim, this report provides the background and rationale supporting this method, a description of methodological procedures, quantitative and qualitative results from assessments recently undertaken, a discussion of lessons learned, and indications of where these lessons lead for implementation on an institutional scale.

Introduction

As educators worldwide are challenged with the transition to computer-networked instructional course delivery, the need for formative assessment of instructional efficacy has become broadly felt. Many veteran teachers, experienced in traditional delivery modes and reasonably confident about the effects of their work on students, are suddenly finding themselves in unfamiliar territory, where they must not only embrace new technologies, but also face new ways of thinking about course design, instructor and student roles, and perhaps even the very goals of instruction. Instructors are likely to feel unsure about what students are learning and about how course activities are perceived by students. Without the direct interactions afforded by the face-to-face classroom environment, instructors must make do without the clues offered by students' facial expressions and body language, as well as their direct, on-the-spot questions and comments—all of which serve, in essence, as forms of informal assessment of students' responses to instruction. Although we believe that formative assessment should be valued in *all* instructional settings, we suggest that it is particularly important with the advent of online course delivery, due to the relative infancy of the mode as well as the fact that the online environment does not afford as much natural ongoing feedback for the instructor.

The development and selection of effective methods for assessment of online learning is challenging, as has been noted (e.g., Hosie, Schibeci, & Backhaus, 2005). Within the already-rich body of literature on course assessment in higher education, an increasing number of researchers are focusing on e-learning environments, and various methods have been proposed. For example, Naidu and Järvelä (2006) discuss the use of student transcript analysis to assess student learning. Other authors (e.g., McGinty, Santos, LeBaron, and Crow, 2007) have suggested specific online adaptations of popular classroom-based assessment techniques such as those proposed by Angelo and Cross (1993). Formative assessment may also be conducted using a formal evaluation instrument that addresses specific features of course design and delivery, such as the Online Course Evaluation Tool (OCAT) recently developed at our institution (for a description, see McGinty et al., 2007).

In this paper, we describe a recently developed formative assessment technique, the seven-step Online Small Group Analysis (OSGA), piloted in 2007. Based on the Small Group Assessment (SGA) method that has long been used by faculty developers as an evaluative technique for enhancing

instruction in face-to-face course environments, the OSGA maintains the basic tenets of the SGA technique. Through this adaptation, the OSGA has become a seven-step formative assessment method useful for indicating the pedagogical/andragogical quality of online learning. The OSGA method places an Instructional Developer as an objective third-party interviewer in a virtual course setting. The interviewer conducts structured conversations with small student-groups regarding their perceptions of teaching and learning in the course. In addition, the facilitator assumes the position of a consultant who, based on experience and expertise with pedagogy, teaching, and learning, is able to suggest possible instructional changes for enhancing student learning. In the sections that follow, we provide (1) background and rationale behind this method, (2) a detailed description of the procedure as implemented at our institution, (3) a description of outcomes from the piloting of the procedure, and (4) a discussion of challenging issues associated with it, and how these challenges might be addressed.

Background and Rationale

Faculty often require richer feedback about their instruction than what standard end-of-course student evaluations, routinely used within academic departments or even whole institutions, provide. The sole use of such evaluations neither improves mid-stream instructional efficacy nor encourages instructors to gauge student views related to unique course intentions. Answering the call to construct deeper, more naturalistic methods for ascertaining course efficacy, Abma (2007) proposes disinterested third-party engagement with students in structured interview settings to ascertain perceptions related to instructor intentions and student concerns. Additional literature outlines methods for using structured interviews to assess learning in traditional classroom settings (Billings-Gagliardi, Barrett, & Mazor, 2004) as well as using expert neutral agents as conduits for student feedback (Lorenzetti, 2005).

The Online Small Group Assessment method is modeled on a similar assessment strategy routinely used in traditional, face-to-face courses. This method, the four-step Small Group Assessment (SGA) technique, was first used in 1980 and is described by Bain (2004). Another similar technique, known as Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID), has been used by the Air Force Academy to help instructors improve their teaching as well to guide curriculum revision (Millis, 1999). As with the OSGA, an instructional developer generally acts as the third-party facilitator of the procedure. The purpose for the

SGA is to help faculty members address the questions, “What are my strengths and challenges as an instructor?” and “How can I improve the teaching and learning environment for my students?”

The original four-step Small Group Assessment model begins with scheduling an evaluation date. Next, the facilitator conducts the evaluation with groups of students without the instructor present in the classroom. The third step involves meeting with the course instructor. During this meeting, the instructor is given a written report containing a summary of the findings, as well as suggestions and recommendations for instructional improvement based on the students’ feedback. Finally, the fourth step is to encourage the faculty member to analyze and probe the responses, discuss these suggestions with the students, and make reasonable changes.

In 2007, this assessment process was piloted in an online course environment for the first time. The OSGA model grew out of the collaboration between Faculty Fellows for eLearning and an Instructional Developer – all of whom operate under the larger umbrella of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Western Carolina University. Today, although the basic features of the original SGA remain, the technique is being applied to the online learning environment, and through adaptation, has become a seven-step formative assessment procedure useful for indicating the pedagogical/andragogical quality of online learning. The OSGA can be conceptualized as a formative, qualitative measure for enhancing learning, due in large part to the assumption that if faculty members are provided with student suggestions and recommendations for course improvement, then students will benefit.

The OSGA differs from other student and course evaluations in several ways. First, the assessment is performed midway through the semester, rather than at the end. This time frame gives the faculty member time to implement suggestions and recommendations arising from administration of the technique. Second, the procedure is nondirective; there are no predetermined items to “rate,” in Likert-fashion, the instructor. A third and major difference in this type of evaluation compared to other student evaluation methods is the oral component. Students verbalize their responses in a live online setting, which results in group dialogue. Finally, a major feature setting OSGA apart from other evaluation techniques is the involvement of an instructional developer, whose role is not only to conduct and

transcribe the interview(s), but also to offer to the instructor suggestions and recommendations for course improvement based on the student feedback obtained.

Aligned with the assertion that robust faculty-student interaction results in improved levels of student satisfaction (Tello, 2004), this assessment procedure falls within the parameters of the “context-bound” approach described by Hosie, et al. (2005). Context-bound assessment includes ascertaining the strengths and weaknesses of pedagogy/andragogy, resources, and delivery strategies. Also known as interpretive evaluation, it is administered in context and is directly related to the experience of the student. As such, it is consistent with Abma’s (2007) assertion that evaluation necessarily be tied to practice in a way that is more concrete, interactive, relational, and action-oriented. The OSGA is grounded in this context-bound framework; it provides both concrete and timely feedback to the instructor, who interacts with the instructional designer to generate specific suggestions that can be acted upon to improve teaching and learning in the course.

Online Small Group Analysis is thus a promising assessment strategy through which naturalistic yet critical analysis can be achieved. It provides a feedback mechanism for assessing the efficacy of course design and delivery, as well as for providing data that practitioners may use to enrich the quality and depth of their online courses.

Online Small Group Assessment: The Procedure

The seven-stage process of the OSGA ideally begins before the midpoint of the semester at the behest of the faculty member (Appendix A). The timing of the procedure is supported by Seldin’s (1993) recommendation that “if course evaluations are to be used to improve teaching, they should be given within a semester so that instructors have a chance to adjust their teaching” (p. 2) [see Figure 1].

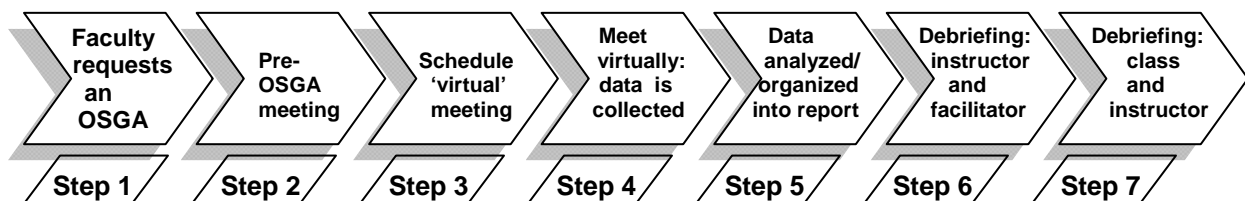


Figure 1. Seven-stage model for the Online Small Group Analysis (OSGA)

Step 1. First, the faculty member initiates an OSGA request. It should be emphasized that the faculty member participates voluntarily, with no pressure from his/her respective department or dean.

Administration of this technique is undertaken only with the explicit, unsolicited invitation of the faculty member. The OSGA procedure is promoted as a faculty development service, offered to faculty by the Coulter Faculty Center. One of the key features of the procedure is that confidentiality and anonymity are assured.

Step 2. Once contact has been made, a meeting is convened between the faculty member and the Instructional Developer (also called the “facilitator” in this paper). During this meeting, a brief overview of the process is presented to help express and clarify expectations. This initial meeting takes approximately one hour. This meeting can occur online, in person, or via the telephone.

Step 3. The next step is for the faculty member to inform his/her students that the Online Small Group Assessment will take place and that they should expect to be hearing from an instructional designer who will schedule appropriate and convenient times for the students to meet online. The logistical issues are normally worked out via email correspondence. The scheduling component [Figure 2] is complex. In a traditional face-to-face classroom, a Small Group Analysis session can take place with as many students as are enrolled in the course. The Online Small Group Analysis, however, allows only a limited number of students to participate synchronously since the online voice chat room where the technique is administered works at an optimal number of four or five students per chat.

Step 4. The OSGA interview session begins when the group of students has logged in to the course management system at the appointed time using an interactive voice tool (e.g., the *Horizon/Wimba™ Voice Direct* tool, which is used at our institution). Once the students have activated their USB-enabled headsets, the facilitator begins the interviewing process. The online voice exchanges occur in a special course created by the CMS System Administrator that lies outside of the academic course in which the student is enrolled, therefore making the students’ comments anonymous to the course instructor (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Organization of virtual meeting spaces.

The first part of the OSGA interview poses this question to the students, “What aspects of this course and/or instruction are helping you learn?” (Appendix B). Students either type text-based responses to this question, or are given the “microphone” so that their voices can be heard/recorded and, subsequently, formatted into audio (.wav) files to be archived until the analysis phase. Each student has the opportunity to provide a response. Once the individual responses have been offered, the floor is opened for additional comments and responses by students. This is done by reiterating the first question and passing the “microphone” to the group members wishing to comment. Through this step, the facilitator attempts to bring the group to consensus in identifying the most significant features thought to contribute to their learning in the course.

The second question, “What aspects about this course and/or instruction would you recommend be changed to help your learning?” also prompts students’ individual responses. Afterward, the facilitator probes for group input to the question in an effort to elicit constructive feedback the faculty member can then use to remediate obstacles believed to be hampering successful learning. The goal is to identify common strands of reflective elements that the students believe may enhance their learning processes.

Finally, students are given the opportunity to respond to specific questions related to the instructor’s explicit intentions for student learning. For example, questions about teaching procedures, the learning content, instructional activities, etcetera, are negotiated between the instructor and the facilitator

prior to the student interview so that part of the resulting feedback addresses methods and resources expressly applied by the instructor to meet the suggestions emerging from the course review.

Throughout the session, the facilitator acts strictly as a neutral intermediary – a sounding board for the students. The facilitator should strive to clarify ambiguous statements, asking for examples to elaborate each case-in-point.

Step 5. The fifth stage is the analysis and reporting phase, which occurs only after all groups have met in their respective virtual meeting spaces. Depending on the number of students enrolled in the course, the analysis and reporting can consume a large amount of the instructional developer's time to complete. Transcriptions of the individual students' statements (verbatim) are compiled into a list for the report. In addition, the group consensus feedback is transcribed (verbatim) and included in the report. The instructional designer then performs a qualitative analysis of the responses using the constant-comparative method (Glaser, 1967) to articulate any themes or major areas of focus that emerge from the data. The report is finalized when the analysis of the data leads to suggestions for improvement and other strategic recommendations that will enable the faculty member to make the necessary instructional changes in a timely manner (i.e., before the course concludes).

Step 6. A follow-up meeting is then scheduled, which allows the requesting faculty member and instructional developer an opportunity to discuss the findings and suggestions offered for course improvement. Specifically, at our institution we follow the advice of Millis (1999), who suggests that, in the post-analysis phase, the resulting report should incorporate the headings of "Things to continue," "Things to consider changing," and "Other suggestions."

A particular strength of the OSGA is the use of a pedagogical expert, the instructional designer, as evaluator/facilitator. Support for this practice can be found in the literature on faculty development (Ramani, 2006). Ramani concludes that consulting with experts when designing instruction helps to minimize deficits in performance. Thus, with the OSGA, the instructional designer serves as a neutral intermediary between students and the instructor, while also applying his/her expertise to assist the instructor in determining how conclusions drawn from student feedback might be acted upon to enhance instruction in the course.

Step 7. In the seventh and final stage, the faculty member meets with his/her students. It is at this point in time that he/she discusses with the class conclusions resulting from administration of the technique. This is also the point at which the faculty member should implement the ideas he/she received, through feedback, for improving the course.

The complete process of conducting an OSGA involves several key stakeholders: the facilitator, the students, and the faculty member. Each player has a direct impact on the others. The faculty member plays the role of one striving for improvement in the realms of scholarship and practice. Students take on the perspective that constructive feedback can only serve to benefit their own learning experience. The facilitator functions as the neutral observer, recorder, and reporter, as well as a consultant to the instructor with regard to enhancing the teaching and learning experience.

Results of the Pilot

The OSGA was piloted in 2007 on two entirely online graduate education courses, *Curriculum Development* and *Assessment Methods*. Each course was taught by different veteran online instructors. The courses were offered in a mid-sized, regional comprehensive university located in the southeast. The role of the facilitator was performed by an instructional designer who was a full-time staff member of the Coulter Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, in addition to holding faculty status at the institution.

Reactions to the newly-piloted OSGA process were highly favorable on the part of both the instructors and the students. As one of the instructors explained:

I requested the assessment because I was feeling uncertain about the course—it was one that I was in the process of redesigning. I was using some new activities that I hadn't tried before, at least not in that form. I had the feeling things were going well in the course, but I guess I just didn't trust that feeling. The OSGA evaluation was great, for several reasons. It pretty much confirmed my feeling that the course was working, which of course made me feel a lot more confident about it. What was even more helpful was that it told me which specific activities the students thought they were learning a lot from...so it helped me identify some things that I definitely want to keep doing in future versions of the course as I continue to develop it.

The other instructor expressed an equally positive response:

The OSGA offered me a unique insight into my students' perceptions that augmented feedback garnered through scaled surveys and other feedback-gathering procedures. I intend to continue capitalizing on OSGA as a formative opportunity to improve my teaching while my courses remain in progress.

These remarks are consistent with reports of faculty reactions to similar assessment processes in the face-to-face setting. In an example from the literature, a faculty member who recently requested a Small Group Assessment said, "Speaking from personal experience, the SGA provided me with the most helpful and productive feedback I have ever received from my normally closed-mouthed students" (Ceraso, 2006, p. 3).

In the previously-mentioned report, students, too, expressed positive reactions to the process. In particular, they seemed to appreciate the opportunity to interact with a concerned, neutral third party. One student response was that "[The facilitator] made me feel comfortable about expressing my thoughts on the class. It was easier for me to talk to a stranger than directly [to the faculty member]." When this particular group of students was asked whether or not they thought the SGA was worthwhile, they responded with an enthusiastic "YES!" One student followed-up by stating, "It was great. No one ever asks us what we think. It was really cool to have someone listen to our opinions on the class." This positive anecdotal evidence is aligned with Coffman's (1998) assertion that "exposure to the technique itself demonstrates to students that their opinions are valued" (p. 2). As Barab et. al. (2002) have noted, the process builds trust between instructors and students insofar as it conveys the signal that teaching efficacy matters as much to the instructor as does the student perspective about it. A trusting climate is known to promote student learning.

According to Coffman (1998), students' feedback in face-to-face small group evaluations generally falls into seven broad categories: 1) testing and grading, 2) course procedures, 3) instructor's characteristics, 4) instructor's teaching techniques, 5) activities and interaction, 6) course content, and 7) written assignments and readings (p. 3). Using Coffman's framework as a basis for investigating categories of students' responses, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed on students' verbatim comments from a single selected case. A case-based method of analysis was chosen since the technique has only been recently piloted, and a critical mass of reviewed courses had not yet been developed. Interestingly, while five of the seven categories germane to student feedback for traditional, seated classrooms were reflected in the responses, two additional categories emerged. Specifically, students made additional remarks related to: 1) technology tools, software, and applications, and 2) self-referencing comments. The "Self-Reference" category was the most-cited category of

response, and comprised one-third of the total response. Two categories, "Testing & Grading," and "Reading & Written Assignments" were not reflected in any of the online students' responses.

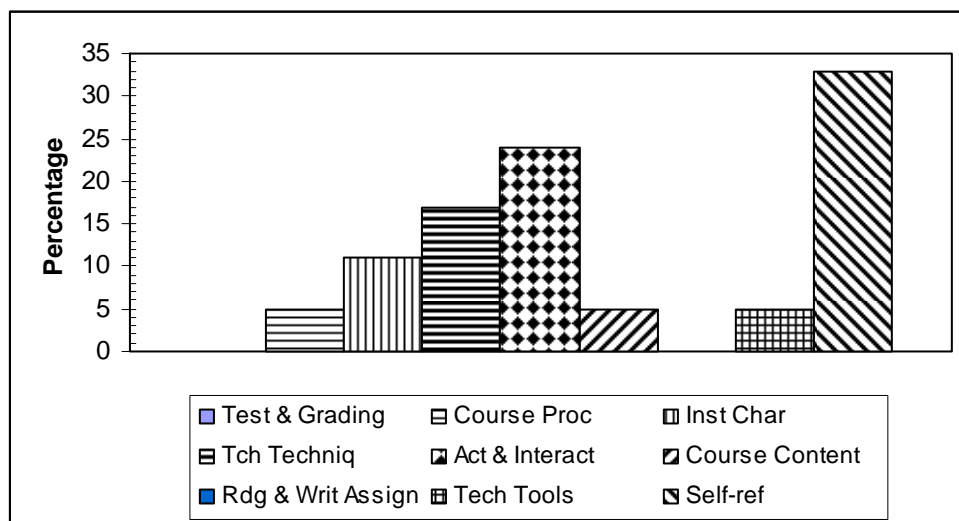


Figure 3. Categories of students' feedback.

Issues and Challenges

In piloting the OSGA technique, we identified several issues, largely logistical rather than philosophical, that pose challenges in implementing the method, particularly on a large scale.

One obstacle to overcome in this process stems from the requirement of transcribing voice comments that have been archived into sound files from the discursive process. Such transcription is laborious task. Because this study was designed as a pilot investigation, timely turnover for transcribing the audio files was not a problem. However, one can visualize large numbers of faculty requesting to have an OSGA performed during midterm or other time when there is a high demand for timely results; under those circumstances, the transcription process could become bottlenecked.

A second challenge is scheduling the OSGA interview sessions. Because online students are geographically disparate, deciding on a meeting date and time proved to be one of the most difficult challenges in our pilot study; the enrolled students had registered for a course that was to be primarily asynchronous. In each of the courses, multiple dates/times were offered for the group interview sessions. This was deemed necessary in order to not only provide flexibility for the students, but also to keep the group size manageable. Herein lies one difference between OSGA and its face-to-face counterpart: Interactive voice tools are sometimes cumbersome to use with a large group, so separate interview

sessions must be held with subsets of the class membership. A suggestion to alleviate some of the pressure arising from the scheduling process is to begin the logistics early in the semester. Another suggestion is to preempt a regularly-scheduled live voice chat session in the reviewed course. Late starts in arranging the schedule only delay the procedure; this, in turn, delays the feedback that is required to make any substantive changes before the close of the semester.

In addition, instructors who use OSGA must decide how best to encourage participation. In the face-to-face SGA, the facilitator drops in on a regular session of the class; students are already in attendance and do not have to go out of their way to participate. With OSGA, however, students who participate must first respond to the facilitator's request to schedule an interview session, then actually "show up" in the virtual interview session at the appointed time. In one of the courses in our pilot study, student participation was considerably lower than desired. The instructor speculated that this was due primarily to the students' difficult schedules on weekday evenings; many students in this course were school administrators who often had to attend extracurricular events in the evenings. In addition, the instructor noted that the students had just participated in a series of live audio sessions for a role-play activity that was required for the course; perhaps the students had just had too many live online commitments in the week or two that preceded the evaluation. Participation in the OSGA by students was completely voluntary in this course. Instructors should carefully consider their own positions on whether participation should be required, whether incentives should be used to encourage voluntary participation, or neither. In making this decision, instructors should also consider the ethical implications of each alternative.

A final question that arises is that of the students' perceived level of anonymity in the OSGA. Although we have no indication that students did *not* feel anonymous in the pilot study, one has to wonder if perhaps the fear of non-anonymity might account for low participation despite the fact that anonymity and confidentiality were expressly assured by the facilitator. In a face-to-face SGA, the students can clearly see that the instructor is not in the room. In the online environment, some students may fear that the instructor is "lurking" invisibly in the virtual interview room, or that the audio archives of the session will be made available to the instructor, who might recognize their individual voices. This is clearly an area in

which further research is needed; students should be surveyed and asked directly about their perceptions of anonymity or lack thereof.

Conclusions

This professional development technique is equally beneficial to faculty who are novices or veterans in online teaching. Recommendations and suggestions obtained through the OSGA process provide just-in-time insight that can then be used to modify or adapt instructional practices. Given that the process is intended to take place during the midpoint in a semester, the online instructor has time to adapt his/her practice based on the suggestions and recommendations received. In fact, we believe that the most important role of the faculty member in the OSGA process is in following through and implementing the recommendations that result from the assessment.

Using this assessment procedure on a broad institutional scale will depend on further refinement of the technique. Some of the rather lengthy components will need to be streamlined, as has been indicated in the previous section. In order to assess the efficacy of the OSGA method itself, a survey of past participants needs to be conducted. This survey will bring to light answers to at least three important questions: 1) Have you made changes to your instruction? If so, how?, 2) To what extent did your class improve as a result of having the technique performed?, and 3) Did the technique have an impact on your students' learning? The findings may reveal additional strengths and weaknesses inherent in the procedure not yet revealed. The findings may also indicate how the procedure might better serve both the faculty member and his/her students.

In conclusion, the OSGA offers another measure of instructional quality in an era marked by a rapid growth of online course offerings. It complements the use of other assessment techniques, such as the Online Course Assessment Tool (OCAT) (McGinty, et. al., 2007), implemented to promote quality instruction and other best practices for online course design and delivery. These measures are utilized to ensure that online instruction is equally as robust as the community-based learning that takes places in the traditional face-to-face classroom, if not more so. The Small Group Analysis technique, long used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of conventional classroom instruction has now been formally

introduced into the world of online teaching and learning as a feedback mechanism and a measure for quality control.

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Appendix A: Guide for implementing the OSGA procedure.

7 Steps involved in conducting the Online Small Group Analysis

1. Faculty member requests the OSGA – the request is made to the Faculty Center; an instructional developer is assigned to administer the assessment
 2. Pre-OSGA meeting – the requesting faculty member and instructional developer meet to discuss the procedure and determine whether additional, course-specific questions should be added to the survey document (Appendix B)
 3. Schedule “virtual” meeting – an email request for participation is sent to participants (students) inviting them to meet in the LMS-based virtual chat room
 4. Meet “virtually” – the facilitator and participants meet in the virtual space; data is collected that will later be transcribed into a formal report
 5. Data is transcribed and analyzed – a formal report is written; report is comprised of a list of students’ anonymous verbatim responses to the open-ended survey prompt questions; suggestions and recommendations emerging from the responses is also included within the report
 6. Debriefing meeting – the requesting faculty member and instructional developer meet to discuss the results of the survey
 7. Results/findings are discussed – the requesting faculty member leads a conversation with his/her students addressing the findings of the analysis, and subsequent changes and adaptations to instruction suggested in the formal report
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