Facilitating Faculty Discussions

Source: Pepper, Chasteen, Pollock and Perkins (2011; http://www.per-central.org/items/detail.cfm?ID=11870)
PDF and editable Word version: https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/seihandbook/chapter/supplemental-documents/

A major part of a Discipline-Based Education Specialist's (DBES's) work is meeting with faculty individually or in groups to discuss teaching or course development. Whether you are meeting with faculty individually or in a group, it is important to approach your meeting strategically by planning well, facilitating the discussion during a meeting to draw out ideas from the faculty partner(s), and summarizing effectively to capture meeting outcomes.

See our other resource documents at **https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/seihandbook/chapter/supplemental-documents/** for guidance in:

- Meeting with faculty.
- Facilitating working groups.
- Facilitating learning goal development.

Meeting with faculty

Outside the Meeting

Engage faculty
Who might be the best attendees for the meeting? In course transformation projects, you might include faculty who have or will teach the course or follow-on courses. It's often best if invitations come from the chair, demonstrating endorsement by departmental authorities. The DBES and departmental director can also start knocking on doors early to encourage people to join. Search now for external motivation for the meeting (such as creation of a new major or a new grant).

Hone your facilitation skills
Engage in your own professional development to learn effective facilitation techniques. One reference given to all new DBESs is *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991). See also *Leading and Facilitating Change* (Charles Sturt University, 2008) on change-oriented leadership in a university setting. Consider 'design thinking' as an approach; design thinking is a user-centered approach to creative problem-solving. Making use of principles and tools from the field of design, it is a useful approach to determining group goals and honing in on decisions; see *Sprint* by J. Knapp (2016) or *Designing for Growth* by Liedtka and Ogilvie (2011).

Be well-prepared
Set an agenda and goals for the meeting. Bring more data and materials than you think you will need (example learning goals or a list of topics taught in adjacent courses, for example), to serve as fodder for discussion. Prepare discussion prompts or activities. If faculty feel that the meeting time is valuable, then they are more likely to stay engaged.

Don't rely on faculty doing homework
The meeting itself is faculty's scheduled time to attend to this work, so they may not prepare in advance. It can be more productive for you to prepare and print working documents to refer to during the meeting. For faculty who haven't prepared for the meeting, help reduce any sense of guilt by getting that work done during the meeting time–this will help them feel that the time spent in meetings is productive and generate a sense of positivity about the project.

Take responsibility for administrative tasks
This includes scheduling, finding space, setting agendas, sending advance reading, printing out materials for the meeting, taking notes, and following up after the meeting with summary notes and action items. In this way, the faculty can restrict their time and attention to the meeting itself.

Communicate in advance of the meeting
Send out meeting reminders (including the agenda, location, and any materials) in advance. It can be very useful to hold individual discussions with faculty in advance to 'prime the pump'.

Facilitating the meeting

As the facilitator, you can ensure the meeting is productive by taking responsibility to provide structure, attend to group processes, and identify the next steps. Be careful not to come across as preaching to the faculty–position yourself as a helpful coach or knowledgeable outsider.

Use active listening
Make sure faculty feel heard. Ask questions to draw out their thinking. Give pros and cons and identify points of agreement and disagreement.

Turn your own statements into questions
This helps you to avoid too much 'telling' and to assess faculty ideas about a topic, and reduces opportunities for misunderstanding.

Summarize what you heard
Sometimes faculty feel that they don't agree because they are actually talking past each other. If you are able to synthesize the discussion in summary statements as you go, faculty may be better able to see their own progress and be more willing to move to the next topic.

Make ideas visible
Use a wall chart, Google Doc, table, small or large sticky-notes, whiteboards, or other structure to organize thoughts, the timeline of the work, a course matrix, etc. Having a visual reference during meetings can be very generative and help keep things on track, as well as being useful when writing summary notes after the meeting.

Use participatory meeting techniques
There are many wonderful facilitation techniques for creating consensus, particularly in the design thinking approach to problem solving (see *Sprint* by J. Knapp or *Designing for Growth* by Liedtka and Ogilvie). Sticky-note activities can be particularly valuable. Ask participants to write one idea per sticky note: For example: "What's one thing you want this group to accomplish?" "What's the most important outcome from this retreat?" "What would success look like for this group?" "What would you like to be able to say that students should know by the end of this course?" You can then cluster notes into themes. Often the group is more cohesive than they thought, and this activity demonstrates that unity. If they are not in alignment, then the activity helps to make ideas public and reveal those differences, semi-anonymously, giving everybody a voice.

Keep the discussion on track
Intervene if the discussion strays from the primary goals. Prodding the group to make decisions can bring them back to the task.

Don't be too wedded to your agenda
Distinguish your broader goals from your individual agenda items. For example, if the real goal of a project is sustainable course change then prioritize that broader goal even if it means you do not address the particular agenda items for that

meeting. If participants aren't willing to move onto an agenda item until they have settled an important conversation, go with that.

Take notes
It can be useful to have a separate facilitator and note-taker. These notes will be useful in documenting ideas and decisions. Identifying each speaker in the notes can be helpful to jog your memory later. Using a Smartpen (such as LiveScribe) can also be useful, as it provides an audio recording which is synchronized to the written notes.

Be aware of language
Use colloquial rather than technical terms from education, faculty development, or business/project management literature, as these terms may be unfamiliar to faculty and feel alienating.

Pick your battles
The less you speak and the fewer recommendations you make, the more weight your words will be given.

Be aware of the time
End on time and pause substantial discussions for the next time, rather than having the meeting go long.

At the end of the meeting

Summarize and reflect
Synthesize the points of agreement and disagreement. Ask participants to consider whether the meeting goals were met, and to identify strengths and areas of improvement of the meeting process.

Designate action items
Identify next steps and designate responsibility, as needed.

Set a time and place for the next meeting
(If necessary).

After the meeting

Keep the ball rolling and think about the implications of any meeting outcomes. Write up your notes in a succinct summary and send them to the group as a whole. This running record will serve as a reference, support a positive sense of progress, and keep those who couldn't attend in the loop. In that communication, ask the group if they have anything to add or modify in these notes, to reflect the conclusions from the meeting. Follow up on action items that you took on or that faculty agreed to. You might rewrite faculty ideas or statements to create a draft document (e.g., learning goals, project timeline, retreat agenda) for review at the next meeting. At some point, you will also want to think about bringing the outcomes of the group to the broader faculty–e.g., presenting learning goals during a faculty meeting or sending an email to the department with the current progress of the group. After the meetings have concluded, communicate to members how their work has been used; it may be helpful to capture this in a brief report to be used as a future reference document. This is useful for ensuring long-term faculty engagement in the process.

Summary: Dos and Don'ts

Do:	Don't:
Meet with faculty individually to identify their personal priorities and concerns.	Treat the group as the only source of input, or as a singular unit.
Encourage broad participation, inviting the entire faculty and targeting individual faculty members.	Rely on mass emails alone.
Distribute a clear agenda and other materials in advance.	Be too rigid in following the agenda.
Choose a topic that will motivate faculty to attend.	Call a general meeting without a topic of broad or urgent interest.
Designate a knowledgeable facilitator who can guide and synthesize discussion.	Hold an unfacilitated discussion or choose a facilitator who is focused on expressing their own opinion.
Approach discussions in the spirit of soliciting faculty guidance and input.	Proselytize about education.
Use language that is familiar to faculty in their department's context, even if more precise terms are available from education or business literature.	Alienate faculty who are unfamiliar with language from education and/or business contexts.
Discuss course objectives and pedagogical issues.	Create the impression you are telling faculty how to teach.
Send out summaries of meeting accomplishments.	Assume faculty will remember or recognize the progress made.
Hold several meetings.	Rely on a single meeting.
Synthesize meeting results and produce working documents for discussion in the next meeting.	Expect most faculty to consistently do homework.
Survey faculty to establish areas of consensus and priority (i.e., rate the importance of learning goals). This ensures they have an opportunity to express their views, even if they choose not to.	Expect to reach clear consensus through discussion alone.
Follow up with faculty about how their input has been used.	Move ahead with the project without letting faculty know the outcomes of their investment of time.

Facilitating faculty working groups

The original vision of the SEI was to create faculty working groups that would collaborate to develop learning goals, develop course materials, align curriculum, and review assessments. Such dedicated working groups often worked particularly well in departments in which such discussions were part of a pre-existing culture of teaching and learning in the department, or in which the SEI coincided with departmental priorities or existing efforts to improve teaching. Working group meetings take careful planning and good facilitation to achieve their goals and ensure faculty voices are heard. The general recommendations above still apply in this case, but there are additional considerations in such working groups. For example, faculty are often not accustomed to collaborating on instructional materials or strategies, and there can be differences of opinion and power structures which can get in the way. Below are some suggestions for overcoming such challenges.

Outside the meeting

Meet individually with faculty
Find out what group members think is important and any areas of concern. This will help you to give voice to all opinions during the larger meeting, and also head off any toxic issues. And for faculty who can't attend the meetings, meeting with them individually can help to engage them and bring their ideas to the process. Interviewing faculty individually before the group meetings start can also help encourage those faculty to attend the meetings.

Survey faculty
To help establish areas of consensus and priorities, you can survey group members or the faculty at large. For example, you might ask faculty to rate the importance of each learning goal developed by the group.

Use your departmental director
Working with several faculty can be a daunting task. Your departmental director might initiate faculty working meetings, and attend them. They can step in if there are issues which need to be addressed and keep you apprised of (and protect you from) departmental politics.

Consider a Departmental Action Team (DAT)
A promising new structure has emerged for departmental decision-making: Departmental Action Teams (DATs). In a DAT, a facilitated team identifies problems of interest in the department and generates sustainable solutions. Such groups have been transformative in many departments. See emerging work on this structure to consider how a DAT might replace a traditional working group: https://www.colorado.edu/project/dat/.

At the first meeting

Establish group processes early
How will the group function? How will we make sure all ideas are heard? What is the role of the facilitator and group members?

Establish the group goals
One productive way to facilitate this conversation is through a sticky note activity. Pose the question, "What would success look like for this group and for you individually?" Each member of the group can write one idea per sticky note, and these can be organized and discussed to generate consensus. Take a photo of the organized sticky notes and synthesize the ideas in your summary notes.

Establish terminology
For example, if you will be discussing learning goals, discuss the difference between course- and topic level goals.

Facilitating the meeting

The meeting facilitation techniques described earlier still apply, but for faculty working groups you are typically trying to come to consensus and make progress towards a common goal. Design thinking can be particularly useful in considering how to productively work towards such an end product. Thus, in facilitating working group meetings you will want to attend particularly to:

- Making sure everybody has a voice.
- Making the group's thinking and progress visible.
- Assessing, and re-assessing, the group's goal.

If groups are stuck

Focus on the problem, not the people

Use data to drive decisions, such as what students think about the textbook. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991) provides many useful suggestions.

Focus on common interests

Sometimes a group doesn't come together well because their connection is happenstance (e.g., they all teach the course at hand.) Find out what they are about and establish common goals.

Establish allies within the group

Try to get allies to advocate for decisions rather than advocating for them on your own. Achieving even partial consensus, with the goal of building that consensus over time, is useful.

Make sure everybody feels heard

A sticky note activity can be very valuable in getting groups un-stuck by bringing out ideas quasi-anonymously. In general, asking participants to write their ideas down allows all thoughts to be collected (not just those of the extroverts).