

Faculty peer-to-peer learning and support online during difficult times: Main types of interactions and engagement during structured faculty conversations

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Abstract

The Faculty Conversation Series at North Carolina State University, offered by the Office for Faculty Excellence, is a virtual option to connect faculty across campus to discuss topics immediately relevant to the unique teaching needs that we are currently experiencing, ranging from technical aspects of teaching online to mental health needs of faculty and students. The purpose is to engage faculty in discovery and discussions that will be helpful to their teaching practice. To this end, we provide the attendees with reading materials, invite a subject matter expert, and facilitate a confidential conversation among interested faculty members in a secure online learning environment. In this article, we discuss the outcomes of the first year of this program, both qualitatively and quantitatively, including a content analysis of written faculty comments collected during the sessions, as well as best practices to organize similar meetings and to facilitate this kind of inclusive faculty engagement.

Keywords: faculty development, peer-to-peer learning, learning spaces, online learning communities

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated events represent the largest disruption to the higher education system in recent memory. Considering the global scale of the event, and the nearly universal need to implement emergency remote teaching for most subjects, it has become a large-scale case study in how to handle education in the aftermath of a catastrophic event, one that continues to ripple throughout the world until this day (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020; Marín-Díaz et al., 2022).

Student satisfaction with instruction and engagement under pandemic conditions has been the subject of many studies (Gopal et al., 2021; Lengetti et al., 2021; Pagoto et al., 2021). However, instructors at all levels appear to be the neglected victims of the rapid shift to online instruction (Carpenter et al., 2022). Isolated and overworked instructors have continued to teach in spite of the difficult conditions, but the situation has taken a toll on their mental health and their productivity (Miguel et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). The situation has had differential impacts on faculty members depending on their race and gender, which some institutions have addressed with tenure clock extensions and work-from-home accommodations whenever possible (CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022; Smith et al., 2022). McClure and Hicklin Fryar (2022) coined the phrase “the great faculty disengagement” to describe the lack of engagement that currently plagues faculty, who are burned out after all this time in emergency mode. These feelings, coupled with the despair that comes from a lack of feedback from in-person interactions and tangible milestones, and a perceived lack of institutional support cause many faculty members to feel an increased sense of disconnection from their institutions (Warner, 2022).

Addressing Faculty Disengagement

Although many of the aspects of faculty disengagement are beyond the realm of what faculty development can address, there are strategies that can help some faculty members. One such strategy is to

create faculty learning communities. Learning communities have been shown to increase faculty success, help faculty embrace ambiguity, increase empathy, and increase aspects of well-being (Cox, 2004; Tackett et al., 2018). In addition, online faculty learning communities increase confidence, increase reflection, and increase persistence. As Dancy et al. (2019) described, "It was their engagement with others that helped them meet challenges and supported them emotionally as they navigated difficulties" (p. 020147–19). The decision was made to engage faculty members through online faculty development called Faculty Conversations that has been offered since Summer 2020 by the Office for Faculty Excellence at North Carolina State University (NC State).

In the best of times, faculty and staff at higher education institutions face many pressures and have little time to devote to educational innovation (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Eib & Miller, 2006). Faculty groups focused on educational materials can be effective for mentoring and faculty development (Hessling et al., 2018; Holleran et al., 2011) as well as foster closer ties with colleagues. Given the fast pace of change in the educational literature, it is essential to stay informed about the latest developments, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even more important to keep abreast of the educational landscape. Without knowing what other instructors are doing, we each would have to create solutions to every emerging issue in our classrooms and labs: thus, it makes sense to stay informed, now more than ever. Furthermore, when McClure and Hicklin Fryar (2022) described faculty disengaging from their institutions, what they were also describing is faculty disengagement from their colleagues. Strategies to re-energize faculty are varied, but many of them rely on peer-to-peer faculty learning networks as a way to overcome feelings of uncertainty, overwork, and under-appreciation (Carpenter et al., 2022).

The Faculty Conversation Series is a virtual option to connect faculty to discuss topics immediately relevant to the unique teaching needs that they are currently experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Although perhaps not preferred by

most faculty members (Rusticus et al., 2023), online learning became imperative due to the pandemic. Faculty are encouraged to attend Faculty Conversation sessions and to find community in sharing their experiences with other colleagues who might be experiencing many of the same struggles teaching in an online learning environment. In this article, we will discuss the organization of these sessions as well as best practices to facilitate this kind of inclusive online faculty engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This work is guided by the several theories that support the use of faculty learning communities (FLCs) to promote faculty development and student learning. This study was grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which is based on the idea that faculty members learn better when they work collaboratively in groups and learn from one another through discussions, sharing of best practices, and peer review. We also draw upon the communities of practice work by Lave and Wenger (1991), which described groups of people who share a common interest and work together to solve problems and develop new knowledge, supporting their professional growth and development. Groups like those participating in Faculty Conversations are based on the idea that faculty members learn best when they are engaged in collaborative, reflective, and experiential learning activities that promote their professional growth and development. As Chen et al. (2022) found, these types of groups “serve a social function of engendering a feeling of belonging within our profession along with rejuvenating our mental and emotional energies for our daily work” (p. 146).

The primary question under study is what are the main types of interactions that lead to engagement between faculty members in a structured, online, peer-learning environment? To answer this question, we used qualitative and quantitative outcomes of the first year

of the program, including a content analysis of faculty comments collected during the initial sessions.

Organization of the Faculty Conversation Series

Each semester, the Faculty Conversation Series events are offered via Zoom, once a month on the same day of the week and at the same time in order to facilitate scheduling. The first offering of the program was during Summer 2020, and it consisted of four sessions during the month of July. This was an accelerated schedule in order to assist faculty trying to move their courses online in order to comply with stay-at-home orders for Fall 2020. In Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, the frequency of the meetings was decreased to a rate of one per month, to accommodate the busy schedules of faculty engaged in teaching and other obligations. Whenever possible, faculty and staff from NC State as well as other institutions who had expertise in the subject being covered were invited to participate in the events as guest speakers. Confidentiality was a hallmark of the program, and participants were assured that the sessions were not being recorded to encourage an authentic exchange of ideas, experiences, and points of view.

Subjects Covered and Faculty Participation

Table 1 contains the dates of each of the events offered during the first year as well as the subject matter, suggested readings, and number of faculty in attendance for each instance. Subjects were selected according to current trends in higher education periodicals and by needs associated with the campus schedule and in some cases were suggested by members of the faculty. The readings were selected to support the topics for discussions and to provide a jumping-off point for energized interactions. Attendance seemed to be higher the more precise the topic of conversation.

Table 1. Faculty Conversations by Date, Including Suggested Readings and Faculty Attendance

Date/title	Suggested readings	Faculty attendance
Summer 1 - July 8, 2020 Finding Motivation and Inspiration and Avoiding Burnout (with Jennifer Stanigar, NC State)	Pope-Ruark (2020)	16
Summer 2 - July 15, 2020 Creating a Course-That-Does-It- All: Introducing HyFlex (Hybrid and Flexible) (with Claire Major, University of Alabama)	Kelly (2020)	19
Summer 3 - July 22, 2020 Engaging Students in Online Courses: Synchronous and Asynchronous Options (with Angie Smith, NC State)	Forbes (2020)	16
Summer 4 - July 29, 2020 Creating Effective Online Assessments That Don't Require Proctoring (with Diane Chapman, NC State)	Chapman (2020)	13
Fall 1 - September 9, 2020 Rebalancing your Teaching	Gooblar (2017)	9
Fall 2 - October 7, 2020 The New Face of Student Engagement	Ives (2020)	12
Fall 3 - November 4, 2020 Preparing for Spring	Lederman (2020)	7
Spring 1 - February 10, 2021 Faculty Well-Being for the Long Term (with Angie Smith, NC State)	Flaherty (2020)	9
Spring 2 - March 10, 2021 Ungrading: What Is It and How Does It Work? (with Rissa Sorensen-Unruh, University of New Mexico)	Sorensen-Unruh (2020)	18
Spring 3 - April 14, 2021 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as Part of Your Teaching Practice (with Diane Chapman, NC State)	Elon (2020)	11
Spring 4 - May 5, 2021 Addressing Mis/disinformation Through Systems Awareness and Information Literacy (with Anne Burke and Hannah Rainey, NC State Libraries)	Glisson (2019)	11

Use of Padlet as an Engagement Tool

Padlet (<https://padlet.com>) has been an effective way to organize the session content and has also been used to capture ideas and questions from participants. Sharing a link to the Padlet during each conversation as well as a PDF of it with the participants after the session has been a way to continue engaging faculty past the time allotted for the meetings.

For each Faculty Conversation, the series facilitator creates a unique Padlet that contains details about the session's special guest, a link to the suggested reading(s), and a number of topics based on the suggested reading. In order to keep all items visible on the Padlet at once, the moderator usually limits the number of items to eight columns of content, including a column for questions. Since the topics of the Faculty Conversations are highly diverse, the way in which participants contribute to the session Padlet can be varied. Some will contribute comments, while others might prefer sharing links or other resources. A sample Padlet from one of the sessions can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 depicts conversational exchanges, starting with some definitions posted by the facilitators and usually followed by comments from participants related to their own teaching and learning experiences. Figure 2 is the second part of the Padlet, and it captures the questions posted by participants during the session as well as some resources suggested by facilitators and participants.

Methodology

The Padlets for each of the Faculty Conversations for sessions from Summer 2020 were used for content analysis and coding using MS Word. Padlet entries were anonymously posted and the Padlets are publicly available, therefore this research was not subject to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval according to the NC State IRB. The materials were coded by two independent coders. The data analysis stage began, as recommended by Creswell (2014), by a combination of thematic coding and summarizing



Figure 1. Sample Padlet Conversational Exchanges

content analysis. Both manifest and latent content (i.e., words as uttered by participants as well as their underlying meaning or significance) were examined and interpreted within the coding frame. Categories were defined as exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Where areas of overlap were found, the coding scheme was reconsidered and refined using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Descriptive statistics for the data set were gathered and focused on the number of comments per category and the attendance to each session. The data under analysis were part of ongoing program evaluations and not subject to IRB approval.

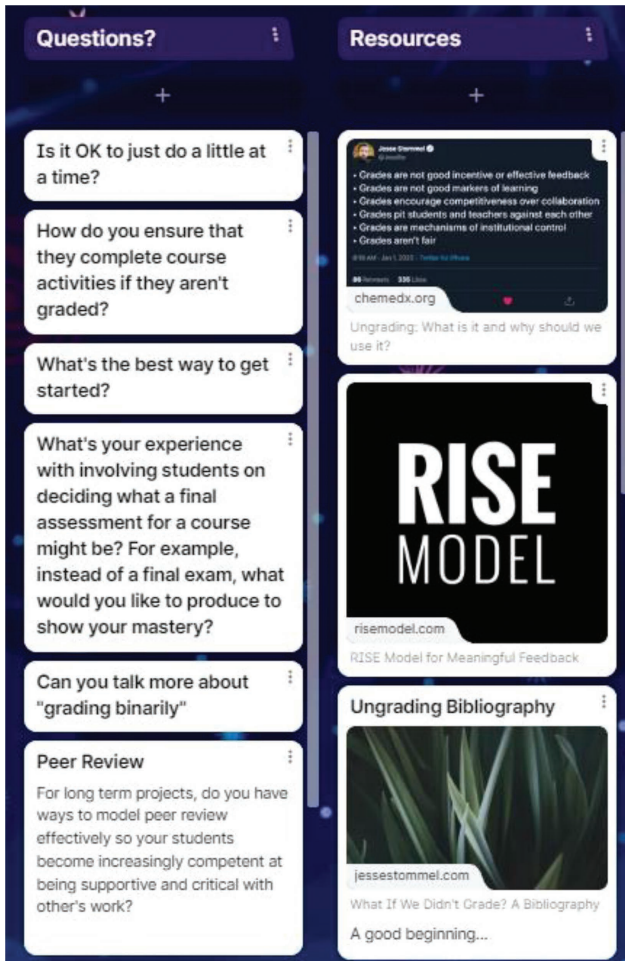


Figure 2. Sample Padlet Participant Questions and Resources

Results and Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the content analysis of the Padlets for the sessions held during Summer 2020. Table 3 contains representative interactions for each of the categories and the corresponding session.

There were four categories of peer-to-peer interactions found upon analysis of the Padlet content. Personal Insights and Stories

Table 2. Content Analysis for Summer 2020 Faculty Conversations

Subject/total number of Padlet comments	Summer 1 Finding Motivation and Inspiration and Avoiding Burnout (with Jennifer Stanigar, NC State) <i>n</i> = 61	Summer 2 Creating a Course-That-Does-It-All: Introducing HyFlex (Hybrid and Flexible) (with Claire Major, University of Alabama) <i>n</i> = 36	Summer 3 Engaging Students in Online Courses: Synchronous and Asynchronous Options (with Angie Smith, NC State) <i>n</i> = 37	Summer 4 Creating Effective Online Assessments That Don't Require Proctoring (with Diane Chapman, NC State) <i>n</i> = 31
Personal Insights and Stories	36/61	7/36	2/37	11/31
Shared Teaching Ideas	4/61	8/36	19/37	14/31
Practical Questions	4/61	17/36	9/37	3/31
Shared Resources	14/61	7/36	13/37	4/31

Table 3. Representative Interactions or Examples for Each Category

Content analysis category	Representative interactions/examples (session number)
Personal Insights and Stories	<p>This resonated with me from the article. I have productive days and unproductive days. I remind myself it's okay to take a break if my mind/body can't keep going that day and hope I can do it the next day. (Summer 1)</p> <p>I have to have a to-do list of what I need to do every day. Otherwise, I get lost in all the details. (Summer 1)</p> <p>I just decided this morning that this is how I want to teach even when we can return to seated classes. (Summer 2)</p> <p>Love the idea of recording outdoors and doing a self-care walk. (Summer 3)</p> <p>Low stakes assignments also give students a chance to practice what they've learned from readings, lectures, etc. (Summer 4)</p>

Content analysis category	Representative interactions/examples (session number)
Shared Teaching Ideas	I asked students to share for 5 minutes every week something good in their week and something that stressed them out. They are welcome to share, not obligated. This helped them open up and see that everyone is in the same boat. (Summer 1)
Practical Questions	<p>How do we become okay with the minimum (especially in academia)? (Summer 1)</p> <p>Discussion boards get bad reviews from teachers and students—feels like busywork. How did you make sure that online discussion was perceived as authentic & resulted in learning? (Summer 2)</p> <p>How did you foster classroom community? (Summer 2)</p> <p>How long before the class starts do you send the welcome email? (Summer 3)</p> <p>How can we continue the conversation about trauma-informed pedagogy? We really need this now more than ever. (Summer 3)</p> <p>Does this imply that such assessments are almost always essays or videos or something else that is intensive to create and to evaluate? (Summer 4)</p> <p>Interested in a discussion about low stakes. If I change two midterms to six exams, with the total weight the same, does that “count”? (Summer 4)</p>
Shared Resources	<p>Unlocking Us Podcast Series (Summer 1)</p> <p>I want to plug this because it has reduced my stress a lot—whether it is using the “Calm” app or taking Jennifer’s Mindful Monday session! It helps me “reset” and let thoughts go and helps me get to sleep when I can’t make the thinking stop! (Summer 1)</p> <p>In HyFlex courses, students decide when and how they participate—that is, for each and every class meeting they can choose to sit in the classroom or to join via videoconference (Zoom, Adobe Connect) in real-time, or they can watch the recording and complete online activities later. (Summer 2)</p> <p>Some tips on creating media from home (Summer 2)</p> <p>Student Check-In for ECD510 (Summer 3)</p> <p>Authentic Assessments (Summer 4)</p>

were essentially viewpoints expressed by participants about how they interacted with or experienced the content. Shared Teaching Applications were peer-to-peer comments consisting of participants sharing examples of how they have used the content or experienced the content in their practice. The Practical Questions category consisted of participant questions about the content or application of the content and may have been directed to the group as a whole or to another participant. The final category, Shared Resources, consisted of comments and information added to the Padlet by the facilitator or facilitators who in most cases were also peer colleagues.

As seen in Table 2, Personal Insights and Stories were the most often seen type of peer-to-peer dialogue in the Faculty Conversations Series for the year under review. Out of the 165 comments reviewed, 56 (34%) could be described as a personal insight or story from the participant. Examples of these insights can be found in Table 3 and were highly positive in nature and supportive of the discussion and indicative of deeper reflection into the conversation. The sessions on avoiding burnout and engaging students in online courses generated the most Personal Insights and Stories.

The category with the second most common comments shared by participants concerned Shared Teaching Ideas related to the topic. Here participants shared their experiences in the classroom and implementation ideas with their peers. Representative comments (Table 3) were specific and replicable for those wanting to implement the idea. Faculty were also eager to share resources during the sessions, with 38 out of 165 or 23% of comments pointing to a resource to help peers. Participants were eager to help one another and were open about their practices and their successes as well as setbacks. The session on engaging students in online courses generated the most conversation about Shared Teaching Ideas.

The practical examples that participants shared acted to generate the third category, Practical Questions. This category consisted of participants asking practical questions of one another and the presenters (20%) and the sharing of personal stories about the topics (19%).

Practical Questions were largely aimed at the audience in general and not at one individual (Table 3). Many questions generated further and deeper discussion on the topic, and the HyFlex session generated the most Practical Questions.

Each session included a special Padlet section for resources. Session facilitators started each session with a list of resources shared with participants. However, participants also used the Padlet to share their own resources on the topics, which generated the category Shared Resources. While participants shared resources in every session, many more were shared in the session about engaging students in online courses.

The conversations generated faculty engagement in categories ranging from sharing stories and teaching tips to practical questions and information requests. Participating faculty appreciated the opportunities to be heard and to hear from their peers. This aligns with findings from Charles et al. (2022), who maintained that “the main benefit of peer-to-peer mentorship for teaching lies in the exchange of ideas and strategies for designing and delivering courses, specifically across disciplines in a way that is difficult to achieve within existing department structures alone” (p. 204). This program offers faculty an outlet for communication in a secure online learning environment as well as the opportunity to stay informed on the latest trends in higher education pedagogy. Best practices related to development include:

- Providing suggested reading material ahead of time helps to center the conversation and get faculty thinking before each session. Materials should be easily accessible online, and links should be provided at registration.
- Inviting a subject matter expert helps to generate excitement and might serve as an incentive for faculty to register. Since the sessions are held online, there is no requirement for travel arrangements.
- Most participants appreciate the opportunity to come together to share experiences; however, the session facilitator must be prepared to encourage a positive tone and respectful exchanges between participants.

Best practices related to participant engagement include:

- It is important to start the conversation with a reminder that any items discussed will remain confidential and that the sessions are not recorded.
- Padlet has been an effective way to organize the session content and has also been used to capture ideas and questions from participants during the sessions.
- Sharing a link to the Padlet for the conversation as well as a PDF of it has been a way to continue engaging faculty past the time allotted for the meetings.
- Even as in-person meetings are fully restored, we intend to keep offering this program online to facilitate attendance for all our interested faculty and to minimize travel for our invited speakers.

Our findings and best practice recommendations support what other researchers have found but also add to the conversation. For example, Thornton (2020) found that university leaders wanted pre-readings and web resources at their disposal to help refine and focus the learning community process. We found this also to be true of general faculty and may be largely because of the time restraints under which faculty and leadership are consistently bound. Facilitation will continue to be a vital aspect to successful conversations. Facilitation helps to not only guide conversations to achieve desired outcomes but also keep the conversations productive and collegial. This echoes what Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan found in 2009: "From the outset, the facilitator can help create conditions and opportunities for establishing norms and surfacing mutual expectations" (p. 47). They also noted that "the facilitator can help the group achieve this tenuous balance by encouraging members to tolerate ambiguity and to adopt a 'both/and' mentality toward the tensions that develop" (p. 44).

Our work aligns with the idea of a Networked Learning Community as described by O'Toole (2019), in which a community of learners

uses “information and communications technology (ICT) . . . to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (p. 49). In our case, two of the main differences are the collection of interactions using the Padlet as a repository and the fact that we did not base this program on a cohort model. Instead, faculty self-selected based on their own interests and needs.

Attendees have remarked on the timeliness of the topics offered and have also offered suggestions on other subjects that they would like to see explored. Acting upon this feedback is important to show our institutional commitment to serve the needs of the faculty. In a best-case scenario, we would like to follow up with participants to make sure they got what they needed and have no outstanding questions. However, this is not practical. The use of the Padlet and the sharing post-conversation addresses this need.

Conclusion

This article reports our findings of an analysis of the types of information shared during the Faculty Conversations Series at North Carolina State University. We consider this work an addition to the greater conversations around the scholarship of educational development, particularly the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). As Cruz et al. (2022) contended, “While often serving a facilitator role, the educational developer can serve to further complicate some of the contradictions and debates within the SoTL movement, particularly the tensions that can exist between SoTL and disciplinary ways of knowing” (p. 50). Shedding light on the process and outcomes of programs such as Faculty Conversations contributes to more impactful and successful faculty development programming in general. In particular, this work provides a practical approach to re-engaging faculty through a technology tool, just-in-time conversations with their peers, and curated resources.

Biographies

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