

**IMPROVING TRANSFORMATIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING BY  
ADVANCING HIGHER EDUCATION FEEDBACK-BASED DIALOGUES  
AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

LUKE A. OAKS, CHANDLER D. SEBEK, KISHAN B. PATEL, and SAMUEL A. EVANS

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Dr. Heather H. Wilkinson

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## **ABSTRACT**

Improving Transformational Teaching and Learning by Advancing Higher Education Feedback-Based Dialogues at Texas A&M University

Luke A. Oaks, Chandler D. Sebek, Kishan B. Patel, and Samuel A. Evans  
Student Government Association  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Heather H. Wilkinson  
Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology  
Texas A&M University

Feedback mechanisms are critical to iteratively improving most societal systems, and yet there is minimal documentation on the best practices of leveraging feedback to improve teaching and learning in higher education. We attest that facilitated dialogues have the potential to start conversations relevant to improving policy that otherwise would not transpire. In higher education, facilitated dialogues between students, faculty, staff, and administration provide a unique face-to-face opportunity for all participants to provide feedback to one another on real-time institutional strengths and weaknesses. More specifically, facilitated dialogues have the potential to start a conversation on improving the learning in higher education. This work notes the theory facilitated dialogues and offers discussion on the long-term potential for such conversations to serve as a medium for iterative feedback in larger societal systems. Further, this thesis documents our development of a facilitated dialogue, The Student-Faculty Dialogue, which will act as a plenary event at Texas A&M's inaugural Transformational Teaching and Learning Conference on April 17, 2018.

## **DEDICATION**

The authors dedicate this thesis to Dr. Heather Wilkinson and all of the visionaries who have made Texas A&M's inaugural Transformational Teaching and Learning Conference possible.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to acknowledge David Villarreal, for providing his time and efforts in the facilitation at our mock trial and plenary event. They would also like to thank Kiersten Potter for her dedication to the team, determination to see this event succeed, and continuing efforts to promote a campus that is inclusive and open-minded of all. Finally, to the hundreds of individuals within Texas A&M's 68,000+ student body who made this possible by attending one or more of our events, thanks & Gig 'Em!

## INTRODUCTION

Texas A&M University (TAMU) strives to develop students that are competent in the workplace, strong in their core values, and matured through high-impact transformational learning experiences. TAMU's upcoming inaugural Transformational Teaching and Learning Conference (TTLC) demonstrates the university's commitment to improving the learning experience for the betterment of the student body. This conference will provide a space for faculty and students to consider their responsibilities with regards to learning.

Feedback mechanisms are critical to iteratively improving most societal systems, and yet there is minimal documentation on the best practices of leveraging feedback to improve teaching and learning in higher education. We attest that facilitated dialogues have the potential to start conversations relevant to improving policy that otherwise would not transpire. In higher education, specifically, facilitated dialogues between students, faculty, staff, and administration provide a unique face-to-face opportunity for all participants to provide feedback to one another on real-time institutional strengths and weaknesses.

To this end, we have developed and will soon host a plenary workshop event at TAMU's TTLC in collaboration with the Office of the Dean of Faculties. This facilitated dialogue, referred to herein as "the Student-Faculty Dialogue", will be held in the Bethancourt Ballroom of TAMU's Memorial Student Center from 3-5pm on April 17, 2018. This thesis documents our development of the Student-Faculty Dialogue, shares the theory behind the event structure, and offers discussion on the long-term significance of this exploratory research.

# CHAPTER I

## METHODS

### Plenary Event Structure

We developed a framework for a two-hour facilitated dialogue event through iterative analysis of small scale student-faculty dialogue events. A trial workshop was hosted on Tuesday, December 5th from 2-4pm in a conference room with 8 faculty members and 8 students. An upscaled workshop was facilitated on Thursday, March 1st from 3-5pm with 21 faculty members and 12 students. After both workshops, a survey was used to gather data on participant experiences. Subsequent survey analysis, in part, led to restructuring of the facilitated dialogue itinerary over time. The following chart outlines the time allotted to each event activity.

<b>Time Allocation</b>	<b>Activity</b>
10	Introduction/Video
10	Expectation Setting
15	Stand Activity
15	Human Barometer
20	Big Group Discussion
30	Dyads
10	Taps
10	Ultimate Purpose

*Figure 1: Planned Student-Faculty Dialogue Event Time Breakdown*

In Figure 1, 10 minutes are dedicated to an introduction and video in the interest of bringing students and faculty together to discuss the classroom experience. This segment does not bias the conversation, but rather presents facts. 10 minutes are then used for expectation setting, in which the importance of confidentiality, challenging the idea rather than the person, having one speaker, and talking in “I” statements is emphasized. Small groups are provided time to address their individual expectations, as well.

A 15-minute Stand activity follows. This segment provides participants the opportunity to demonstrate their background to the room by standing, as able, when prompts apply to them. Facilitators will prompt: “Stand if you are a student at Texas A&M University. ... Stand if you are an instructor or faculty at Texas A&M University. ... Stand if you are a first generation college student. ... Stand if you believe you impact the campus. ... Stand if you feel a part of the Aggie Family. ... Stand if your home life every affects your work or studies. ... Stand if you have ever felt alone in a classroom. ... Stand if you feel supported by the students at Texas A&M. ... Stand if you feel supported by administration at Texas A&M. ... Stand if you have ever made a bad grade in a class. ... Stand if you have been treated unfairly by students or faculty at Texas A&M. ... Etc.” The follow up to this activity will be exploring if any questions caught the attention of audience members or led participants to feel conflicted.

The subsequent 15 minutes allow for a human barometer activity, in which participants denote their position on a prompted question by standing at any point along a physical Likert-based spectrum of strongly disagreeing to strongly agreeing. Facilitators will prompt: “It is the student’s responsibility to learn. ... Grades have a large impact on the relationship between students and faculty. ... Faculty should separate personal life and school life.”



This activity flows into a 20-minute large group discussion on Transformational Teaching & Learning. Some potential topics for discussion include: “What positive or negative memorable experiences have you had in the classroom? ... What obstacles have affected your performance or ability to learn/teach? ... Should it be the norm for professors and students to know each other as people? ... What are you try to achieve as a student or teacher – and why? What gives you a sense of fulfillment in the work that you do? ... Do professors have an obligation to facilitate transformational learning experiences in their classes?” The follow up to this activity will be a discussion on the reasoning of the participants and explore the variety of perspectives present in the room. The participants in the discussion guide this activity to share their own experiences, feelings, and thoughts about the topics.

The following 30 minutes include to a dyad activity in which student-faculty pairs have individual conversations on transformational teaching and learning. These questions allow for more personal discussion: “Name someone who has impacted you in your life. What enticed you to come to this discussion? What would you like to be remembered for? What hardships have you overcome to get to where you are? What has been the proudest moment in your life thus far? What is something people don’t know about you? Who is the most important person in your life? What is one thing you would want to change about the learning experience at TAMU? How have your experiences as a student impacted your teaching philosophy? What frustrated you during your college experience?” Participants similar guide the direction of these breakout discussions.

The plenary conference event closes with a 10-minute activity called Taps. Taps is an activity that amplifies the impact of the events’ dialogue through physical touch. Breaking the discussion circle into groups, facilitators read statements aloud: “Tap someone who opened your eyes... Tap someone who is brave... Tap someone who can change the world... Tap someone who

challenged you...”. In response to these statements, participants tap someone who they feel fits the statement. A few participants are walking around giving taps while the majority of event attendees are seated with their eyes closed. In feeling a physical tap following the aforementioned statements, participants are able feel the impact they have made and further connect with those around them.

The plenary conference event closes with time for audience participation in defining the event’s call to action. The ultimate purpose of this event is for students and faculty to better support each other despite our differences in identity – and to continue the conversation started by this dialogue.

### **Video Production**

A video was created with the support of the TexAgs Production Group, which will be shown at the plenary Student-Faculty Dialogue event on April 17, 2018. The video features student and faculty responses regarding the significance of transformational learning to their experiences at TAMU. The authors also asked individuals: How do you learn best? What can faculty do to better support you as an individual? What is one thing you wish all faculty members knew?

### **Development of Survey Instrument**

Post-event surveys were developed to gather quantitative data on trial workshop experiences using a Likert scale for the following questions:

1. This activity gave me greater insight into the experience of TAMU students.
2. This activity gave me greater insight into the experience of TAMU faculty.

3. This activity led me to feel empathy for someone.
4. The instructions for this component were clear and easy to follow.
5. The time allotted for this activity seemed appropriate.

The survey also gathered qualitative data from event participants through the following short-answer questions:

1. What did you learn about the student/faculty experience?
2. What benefits do you perceive for facilitated dialogues among instructors and students?
3. How could this event be improved?

A unique post-event survey has also been developed for the plenary Student-Faculty Dialogue event. At the conclusion of the conference event, participants will be emailed the link to a Qualtrics survey. The first page of questions explores the effectiveness of individual event activities. The second page includes five short-answer questions. The final page consists of general and unique demographic questions for students, faculty, and staff to further inform our understanding of variables affecting the impact of facilitated dialogues on subgroups of the TAMU community.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The Student-Faculty Dialogue is intended to provide students and faculty with insight into the experiences of one another, as well as provide a space to recognize opportunities to improve learning at TAMU. This event is inspired by a facilitated learning model championed by the Posse Foundation, one of the most comprehensive and renowned college access and youth leadership development programs in the United States. We have succeeded in bringing people of varying identities together to participate in facilitated dialogues on the strengths and weaknesses of learning at our institutions. The audience of our trial events has included administration, faculty, staff, and students – including the Student Body President - in the interest of giving voice to the diverse perspectives of stakeholders at TAMU. Trial dialogue events fundamentally informed the development of the plenary Student-Faculty Dialogue event at the upcoming TTLC. With the support of faculty mentor and Associate Dean of Faculties Dr. Heather Wilkinson, the team was able to engage with distinguished faculty members and a well-rounded group of students.

#### **Outreach**

The success of a student-faculty dialogue is not measured by the number of individuals that attend, but by the empathy, impact and growth that the members of both parties' feel throughout the event. This metric is difficult to quantify but is highly dependent on the experiences and backgrounds of the people that attend. It is critical to enlist a wide variety of students and faculty members to ensure that the final population is diverse and representative of the campus community

and culture. A range of outreach approaches are available when determining the best method to recruit students for a large-scale dialogue event; however, incorporating aspects from both the dynamic and targeted advertising techniques will turnout a greater and more distinct student population.

The focus of a mass or dynamic recruitment model is to generate awareness and attention for a campaign or event. This style is rooted in the quantity over quality ideal, as it suggests that the more people who know about an event the larger the turnout will be. When this method is employed, it is important to provide only the necessary information needed for the audience to understand their role or purpose. The first step in launching a mass advertising technique geared toward students is determining which platform will be seen by the most people. Social media, bulk email and platforms such as Ecampus or Blackboard can serve as starting points for this type of campaign, allowing the key details of the event to be viewed by a sizable audience. After gauging student interest, incentives such as free food, T-shirts and monetary prizes can be used to continue increasing event recognition and engagement while constituting the event as a Panhellenic point or other honors designated activity can raise student interest and appeal. These techniques are important to use in the beginning when the student-faculty dialogue has a date, time and location, but lacks other details. The sooner a dynamic recruitment model is implemented the better, as utilizing this technique days before the event will lead to a disappointing student turnout.

To create an event that is inspirational, insightful and eye opening, you must find students who are involved in a range of different majors, colleges and organizations across campus. By accurately representing the various facets of Texas A&M's campus we can ensure that all voices and experiences are heard and noted. This wide diversity of students has a mixture of experiences that can be emotional and thought provoking for faculty members to hear. These stories and

conversations are the foundation of the student-faculty dialogue process and necessary to make the event a positive progression towards mutual understanding. By using targeted advertising approaches such as organizational speaking and individual asks, the types of students who attend the event can be directed and controlled. The most effective way to prompt certain students into attending is by speaking at their organizational meetings for the first 5-10 minutes on the importance of the student-faculty dialogue and its logistical details. This method is more personal than a dynamic recruitment method, but still influences a large number of students depending on the organization's size. Individual asks is a grassroots model that requires students to invite their friends and peers to the event. This method can be effective if a sizable army of students is already knowledgeable on and aware of the student-faculty dialogue. However, this process is limited to the inner circle of a base knowledge on the event and can lead to only a certain type of student being represented. It is important when using a targeted advertising technique to determine what type of audience you are looking to attract and the best ways to communicate with that group.

A student-faculty dialogue is a highly beneficial event for both parties to attend and can lead to an increase in student confidence, classroom conversations and reciprocal compassion. A majority of students don't have the opportunity to have a personal discussion with a faculty member at their university and could benefit from listening to the challenges faculty members encounter as a part of their job. It also gives students the chance to voice their concerns, opinions and perspectives on the learning environment on campus and how it can be improved to better match a transformative society. Ensuring that students are aware of these benefits and how a student-faculty dialogue can change a college campus needs to be echoed throughout any outreach effort. Developing a way to keep track of students who want to attend the event or receive updates is essential in managing the student-faculty dialogues outreach goals and logistics. By creating a

simple Google Form or utilizing an event registration system, attendance can be tracked and monitored. These simple yet effective techniques can improve the student recruitment process and maximize potential turnout.

Overall student outreach for a dialogue type event is difficult and requires immense planning, teamwork and communication. However, by using a combination of advertising methods, student awareness and attendance will escalate, creating an experience that will become a yearly highlight across campus for both students and faculty.

### **Facilitation**

Results from the Student-Faculty Dialogue event and associated discussion will be released following the plenary event on April 17, 2018. Topics of discussion include the difference in facilitation strategy between a small-scale and large-scale event, efficacy in maintaining focused discussion, and the impact of individual dialogue activities.

### **Survey Analysis**

Results from the Student-Faculty Dialogue post-event survey and associated discussion will be released following the plenary event on April 17, 2018. Topics of discussion include the statistical significance of impact as a function of the activities and participant demographics, as well as qualitative analysis of short-answer responses.

## **CONCLUSION**

The plenary Student-Faculty Dialogue will be held on April 17, 2018 in the Memorial Student Center. This event will accommodate a diverse group of approximately 100 students and 100 faculty members who are interested in learning how to enhance the classroom experience for both parties. Participants will engage in a multitude of activities designed to challenge the group's conventional knowledge and perceived notions while creating an environment that promotes compassion, acceptance, and empathy. As the ballroom clears out, the authors desire for each participant to walk away feeling inspired and eager to create a classroom environment that welcomes understanding. The implementation of a faculty-student dialogue at the TTLC is a first step in promoting a more unified relationship between students and faculty. The authors aim to sustainably change the way both groups perceive and interact with one another – for the better.



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## APPENDIX: SGA ACADEMIC AFFAIRS END-OF-YEAR REPORT



*Left image* – Front row: Dr. Heather Wilkinson, Kiersten Potter, and Kishan Patel. Back row: Chandler Sebek, Samuel Austin Evans, and Luke Oaks. Not pictured: David Villareal.

*Right image* – Small scale Student-Faculty Dialogue to prepare for 200-participant April 17<sup>th</sup> plenary conference event in the student union. The Associate Dean of Faculties, Dr. Heather Wilkinson, has been an integral faculty mentor in this development process.

### **Vice President of Academic Affairs and Team:**

**Luke Oaks '19** | Vice President of Academic Affairs

**Chandler Sebek '18** | Chief of Staff

**Kishan Patel '18** | Co-Director of Facilitated Dialogues

**David Villareal '18** | Co-Director of Facilitated Dialogues

**Samuel Austin Evans '19** | Director of Open Educational Resources

**Kiersten Potter '21** | Fish Aide

**Mission Statement:** The Vice President of Academic Affairs (VPAA) and Academic Affairs Executive Team within the Student Government Association (SGA) will strive to improve the Texas A&M University (TAMU) student learning experience.

### **2017-18 Major Accomplishments:**

- Better representing the interests and goals of the TAMU student body through the creation of a 5-member Academic Affairs Executive Team.

- Collaborating with students, faculty, staff, and administration to develop a plenary conference event – a facilitated dialogue with about 200 students and faculty participants on April 17, 2018.