The Role of Student Evaluation of Instructors

Jonathan Lewin
Contents

Prologue 1

Teaching Effectiveness and Popularity 3
  What is Teaching Effectiveness? 3
  A Few Subjective Words 4
  Coordinated Courses and Autonomous Courses 5

The Dignity of Our Profession 8
  Excerpt from the Survival Guide 8
  What Message Are We Sending to Our Students? 8

Epilogue 11
Prologue

There is, of course, no doubt that the task of evaluating the competence and effectiveness of its academic instructors is one of the most important tasks facing any university. A university has to fulfill two missions:

1. It has to serve as a key ingredient in the community-wide effort to advance knowledge and understanding of the world around us by making new discoveries and by developing profound new creative ideas.
2. It must act as a communicator of knowledge and ideas, handing down our knowledge and understanding to the next generation so that our advancement can continue in the future.

There is an undeniable link between these two worlds of university activity. It can be argued, for example, that effective instruction at university level is contingent upon excellence, creativity and enthusiasm on the part of the instructor in the discipline that he or she is teaching. It can also be argued that true competence and creativity in an academic field does not exist in a person who is unable to communicate his or her thoughts to others and that, even if such competence did exist, in the absence of ability to communicate it, the competence would be wasted in most academic environments.

In spite of this link between academic performance and communication, our nation’s research universities continue their lamentable lack of concern for quality of instruction. As we know only too well, such institutions provide little or no incentive to their faculty to perform well as instructors and, all too often, leave much of their undergraduate instruction to post-graduate students. Then, on the other side of the coin, our teaching institutions often fail to appreciate the importance of an ingredient of academic depth, insight, creativity and passion in determining the quality of an academic instructor.

This document presents a focus on the activities of the teaching institutions and it restricts much of its conclusions to the teaching of mathematics. It may well be that some of the message of this document could apply to the teaching of other disciplines but such a determination will be left to those who are experts in those other fields.

As I have said, we should not doubt the enormous importance of the process of measuring the teaching effectiveness of our instructors; but that does not mean that any kind of measurement will do. Just as I have railed against the simplistic and mindless use of a single GPA number for measuring
the quality of a student, so I make here an equally passionate appeal for our community to refrain from making meaningless quantitative measurements of faculty quality. Before we make quantitative measurements we have an obligation to understand just what it is that we are measuring.
Teaching Effectiveness and Popularity

There is an undoubted relationship between teaching effectiveness and popularity. Certainly, an instructor, who cannot engage in person to person relationships or who would be disliked as an individual by those whom he or she is teaching, has some significant hurdles to overcome in order to be an effective teacher.

This is not to say, however, that the popularity of an instructor is a solid and reliable measure of that instructor’s effectiveness. The universities tread a dangerous path indeed when they identify effectiveness with popularity and, in so doing, provide their faculty with a strong incentive to play popularity games.

What is Teaching Effectiveness?

Teaching effectiveness is the ability of an instructor to bring out the best in his or her students, to motivate them to make their best efforts to succeed and to reach the point at which they can begin to appreciate the value and the aesthetic beauty of the material they are studying.

Teaching effectiveness is the ability to plant the seeds of further study in the minds of one’s students so that, when the present course ends, their desire to learn will endure and will carry them forward in their lives.

Teaching effectiveness is the ability to provide students with a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding that will be sufficient to support students who progress to the next level of study and will remain for ever in their minds.

Every instructor wants to be popular but an instructor is not an entertainer. Every instructor wants his or her students to be happy and contented and to feel good about themselves. However, feeling good about oneself is not the same as actually having learned something. Sometimes an instructor is forced to make decisions in the full knowledge that the decisions are unpopular. Students may not appreciate the need to study certain material that they may see as painful, boring, irrelevant or intimidating. Students may not understand an instructor’s decision not to permit the use of electronic calculators in an examination. Students may not understand the importance of being able
Teaching Effectiveness and Popularity
to justify the validity of the methods they are using to solve mathematical problems.

But students are not often in a position to be able to make valid judgments about such matters. Sometimes an instructor must stick to his or her guns and say what is right instead of what the students want to hear and the interests of our society would not be served if we did not grant our instructors the freedom to take an unpopular stand when it is necessary for them to do so.

We must not lose sight of the fact that a university instructor is a highly trained individual of superior intelligence who has worked for many years to develop the professional skills and insights that the process of instruction demands and who cares deeply about the welfare of his or her students. We should be willing to place our trust in the professional training of our instructors and to exercise the utmost care before we try to second guess them.

A Few Subjective Words
When first I arrived on the campus of Kennesaw State University, some two decades ago, I was acutely aware of the fact that I was more than just a “new boy”. I was an instructor from a different culture who speaks a different language (though I hasten to add that I too call my language “English”) and that I needed to establish myself. So I wantonly prostituted myself for several years, throwing away the academic principles which I had developed for myself so painstakingly over the preceding twenty years. I played the popularity game.

No, I didn’t exactly sell out the academic standards of my courses. I made a careful assessment of the academic standard that would be expected in the Kennesaw State University environment and aimed for that standard. But I did so with an eye on popularity rather than on sound academic principles. I am not proud of what I did, but I did what I felt I had to do in order to survive and I did what I saw others doing around me. In mitigation I plead that I felt that my survival could bring long term benefits to the community. In other words, apart from my desire to eat, pay the rent and wear clothes, I argued that the ends sometimes justify the means.

During this period, I rapidly developed a reputation among students as someone whose courses were seen as desirable and my department chair, Chris Schaufele, beamed at me when we met to do my annual evaluations. He little knew how sick I felt at what I was doing. During this period, I received a nomination every year for the Kennesaw State University distinguished
teaching award and I did my best to inform both students and faculty that I disapprove of such an award and would not allow myself to be considered for it. In the (hopefully) unlikely event that I should ever win such an award I would be forced to make a difficult decision: On any given day, I feel that I can hold down my breakfast or I can accept a meaningless distinguished teaching award; but I cannot do both.

When I felt that I had established myself sufficiently on this campus, I changed my approach to optimize what I consider to be teaching effectiveness and sound academic principles. I was glad to see that I continued to enjoy a significant popularity with students but this popularity was no longer my principal goal. I permitted myself to make decisions, from time to time, that I knew to be unpopular, in the knowledge that my judgement, based on decades of training, insight into my discipline and hard work means more than a student’s off the cuff subjective opinion made in ignorance.

I stopped looking at student evaluations and I haven’t looked at them for years. I hear about them second hand at my annual evaluation meeting.

Coordinated Courses and Autonomous Courses

Among the many universities at which I have taught mathematics over the years is the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. That university lies somewhere between the research universities and the teaching institutions as we know them in the United States. I can’t say much about the academic standards that exist there today but they were very high during and before the decade of the nineteen seventies. The university had a highly respected faculty of engineering, dental school and medical school, and its physics department was known world-wide.

It would have been completely foreign to the culture of the Witwatersrand University to conduct surveys of student opinion of instructors in the Department of Mathematics but, all the same, we knew very well just how well each instructor was doing. As a matter of fact, I think I can say with confidence that we had a much deeper insight into both the quality and the popularity of each instructor there than we have today at Kennesaw State University.

At the Witwatersrand University we had two different kinds of mathematics courses:

Coordinated Courses

Coordinated courses were taught in multiple sections by a variety of instruc-
Tutors. A single course coordinator, possibly assisted by colleagues, had the responsibility of coordinating the different sections and had the responsibility of composing all the midterm and final examination question papers. The midterms and final were graded by a collective body of the instructors in the department, rather than by the instructor whom the student saw in the classroom. Generally, the more elementary courses, containing large numbers of students, were handled in this way. This style of course applied to all courses at the level of precalculus, calculus I, calculus II, calculus III, calculus IV, linear algebra and differential equations; particularly those courses directed to students of engineering.

**Autonomous Courses**

More advanced courses containing few students were taught in single autonomous sections in which the instructor was responsible for all aspects of his or her course.

The existence of these two different styles of course, presented and examined in very different ways, provided us with an interesting opportunity to examine the relationship between the popularity of an instructor and his or her teaching effectiveness.

It will come as no surprise that we discovered that instructors who were the most popular in completely autonomous courses were those who were perceived as laid back and easy going; those who soft pedalled the material and then composed “fair” examinations.

However, it should come as no surprise that the instructors who were most popular in such autonomous courses were sometimes the least popular in course sections that were examined by a single common set of examinations. The criterion for popularity in the second kind of course was reliability. Students were anxious to know that the instructor would cover the ground, explain the material properly, cover a good spectrum of exercises and press the students to learn the material. While an instructor of an autonomous course often received a stamp of approval from students for cancelling a lecture or ending it early, an instructor of a coordinated section was expected to squeeze as much productivity as possible into the time available. Students in a coordinated section tended to perceive a cancelled or shortened lecture as a possible threat to their welfare.

When an instructor in a coordinated section was not performing properly, it was painfully obvious. The students simply abandoned that section and started attending the sections of other more effective instructors. So the
lecture rooms of some instructors were bursting at the seems while those of others were barren. We were thus able to receive important student input about the quality of an instructor without giving them the dangerous message that they are qualified to sit in judgment over their instructors and that the value of an instructor can be measured by Nielsen ratings.
The Dignity of Our Profession

Excerpt from the Survival Guide

I should like to draw attention to two paragraphs that appear in my survival guide for students:

*Your instructor is a highly trained and highly skilled and dedicated professional whose level of expertise extends to the frontier of knowledge in the material that he or she is teaching you. Furthermore, your instructor cares deeply about your success and has spent many years of his or her life wrestling with the difficulties that are presented both to instructor and student by the kind of course in which you are enrolled.*

*From a standpoint of ignorance of the material, ignorance of where that material is leading and ignorance of how your present studies relate to more advanced study inside or outside of mathematics, you are not in a position today to pass judgment on the contents of your courses nor on the way in which they are examined. The knee-jerk subjective opinions that you may hold today could well be very different from the opinions you will hold two years from now when you understand more about the role that your present courses have played in your longitudinal development. Place your trust in the professional expertise of your instructor and do the work of the course. You have come to university to learn; not to pontificate.*

What Message Are We Sending to Our Students?

I have spoken at length in this document about the dangers involved in taking a simplistic view of teaching effectiveness. I have warned against uncritical reliance on students’ answers to questions that really boil down to the single question: “Are you happy?”

One might argue, however, that intelligent use of student opinions about their courses and instructors could have enough value to make the gathering of those opinions worth while. I beg to differ.

For a start, the use of student opinions is anything but intelligent. Were such data to remain inside an instructor’s academic department, I could possi-
bly be convinced that there might be a desire to look upon it intelligently. But the data does not remain within the department. It is used, as we well know, in a wide setting that goes far beyond academic departments where it plays a key role in the assessment of each instructor. It is used for the awarding of special honours, thus debasing the process by which special awards are made. The data is expected to be included in each instructor’s portfolio, even when that portfolio goes beyond the instructors own department. Thus, the use of student response data is prone to many serious errors and acts of abuse.

However, there is an aspect of the process of collecting student opinions that is graver, by far, than anything I have yet described. The most damaging aspect of our habit of collecting student opinions about courses and instructors is the message that we are thus giving to our students. I believe that the process of suggesting to students that they are qualified to pass opinions about their courses and instructors is an act of sabotage against the educational process.

Allowing students to see themselves as judges of their instructors, putting them in a position, or even giving them the perception that they are in a position in which, by the stroke of a pen, they can affect their instructors’ lives, their salaries and the very stability of their jobs, is an unhealthy perversion of the student instructor relationship. It is incompatible with an atmosphere in which an instructor should be able to exercise sufficient authority to direct the educational process.

Giving students the message that they are qualified to judge their teachers is also an act of sabotage against the dignity of our profession. Few other professionals would tolerate such indignity. Would we expect a judge in a court of law to leave the room so that all those who have conducted business in that court can submit opinions about the judge’s performance? Can anyone believe that our courts would operate more efficiently and accurately if such a process were to be instituted?

Perhaps, the most undignified aspect of the process of gathering student opinions of their instructors is our habit of compelling the instructor to leave the room. That habit alone projects an adversarial atmosphere into the process and suggests by implication that the instructor is not someone who can be trusted.

I find it unbelievable that so many instructors are so intimidated by the evaluation process that they are afraid to open their mouths in order to say
what it obvious to all of us, that the process of gathering student opinions is a perversion and an abomination. Perhaps the hardest words to utter as we go through life are: “The emperor has no clothes.” I have to admit that I, myself, was afraid to utter these words until I had established myself as a senior member of the faculty who is known to be well liked by his students. I suppose that none of us wishes to be accused of making a sour grapes argument.

I find it even more unbelievable and distressing that those who govern the workings of the university systems can be so naive and so thoughtless that they could have instituted the process of gathering student opinions in the first place.
Epilogue

I reiterate that it is the desire of every good instructor to produce contented, productive and happy students but that, sometimes, we must act in a way that is not designed to make all of the students happy. Nor is that possible, given the diverse spectrum of academic backgrounds of the students in our classes. For the sake of our community and for the sake of the value of our institutions of higher learning, we have to show our instructions enough basic respect to allow them exercise their professional judgments and to do their jobs to the best of their ability.