

Course evaluation

FIRST, THERE WAS EXAMINATION APPEALS, THEN COURSE EVALUATION... AFTER THAT, STUDENTS WERE SITTING ON TENURE COMMITTEES NOW, THEY WANT TO RUN THEIR OWN STUDENT UNION... I THINK I'M GOING TO VOM IT!



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The notion of students judging their professors is to some people a fantastic anomaly, stranger and more bewildering than a dog quoting Shakespeare. Do criminals, they ask rhetorically, evaluate magistrates? Do penitents criticize their confessors? Well then, why should students judge their professors?

While such analogies are admittedly farfetched, they preserve an essential feature of the argument against student representation in academic decision-making. This is the idea that students are passive, that their education is and must be something that happens to them through the benevolent agency of the professor, who like father, knows best.

On this view, the student is an empty vessel, a tabula rasa. He lacks something, a certain body of knowledge, which the professor by definition has and will do his best to impart. If the professor actually does impart

this specified body of knowledge to the student, the enterprise is deemed a success, the student gets a degree, and everyone goes home happy.

But (alas for the sorry state of human affairs), there are flaws in this neat little scheme. The most common criticisms expressed by students fall into one of two categories: first, that the education offered does not measure up to its advertised aims; and secondly, that the advertised aims themselves must be modified.

Most of the everyday frustrations experienced by students fall into the not-as-advertised category. Anyone who has ever taken undergraduate courses will recognize the following examples of incompetence or indifference in teaching.

In a course with several sections, there is little co-ordination between professors teaching the different sections. Material appears on tests and exams that has been covered in some sections, but has not even been mentioned in others.

The teacher speaks too softly (a common problem in

large lecture halls), mumbles, or rambles along in a sleep-inducing monotone. What's the point of going to lectures if you can't hear what's being said?

Then there is the absent-minded professor syndrome—also called unpreparedness.

The teacher does not appear to have lecture material organized, is not sure what he wants to say. Uncertain of how much he has covered in the previous lecture, he either repeats himself or skips large bodies of material. This may be cute in Walt Disney movies, but it's irritating otherwise.

The course is not taught at the level indicated in the calendar. Vegetarian Cookery Made Easy 130 requires as a prerequisite Calculus and Indonesian History, but students without these prerequisites have no difficulties with the course. Nuclear Physics Made Easy 450 requires only Grade 12 algebra, but by the end of the year, students feel Nuclear Physics Made Easy 350 would have been a more suitable prerequisite.

Marking is consistently too hard or too easy; or is inconsistent among several sections of the same course. Bell-curving, while it provides an appearance of fair marking, is a poor substitute for adequate evaluation of students' work.

The professor is simply incompetent in the subject area. This is rare, but it has been known to happen. He just doesn't know what he's talking about.

Such typical complaints reflect the concerns of the student-as-consumer.

Education is a commodity which the student is required to pay for, and he wants to get the most for his money. This is certainly a reasonable request, particularly in view of the extremely high cost of university education. One year's tuition is now about as much as the price of a good used car. While it seems unlikely that the university will be hauled up before the Better Business Bureau, many students consider course union activity as a way to make sure that the product lives up to its pitch.

The conception of the role of course unions in influencing the quality of education is based on the course evaluation. Course evaluations usually take the form of questionnaires handed out to students at the completion of the course, asking for answers to questions about how the course was organized and taught. Typical questions asked on course evaluation questionnaires are, "If you knew last September what you know about this course now, would you have enrolled in it?" "How would you rate this lecturer's ability to communicate his material?"; "Were the tests and exams in this course too easy or too difficult?" Responses are then compiled and published so that students will have some idea of what to expect in a particular course.

In some departments course evaluation is reported in purely statistical form, reflecting the breakdown of answers. For instance, in answer to the question "How helpful were the lectures as an aid to understanding the subject matter of the course?", 26.2 percent of the respondents in one course said "very helpful", 13.2 percent said "not very helpful", no one said "useless", and 15.8 percent said "confusing".

But there can be no doubt that what one student considers "helpful" is "useless" to another student. Students enter courses with widely differing aims, talents and standards, so that the appearance of "objectivity" presented by statistical course evaluations is a misleading one. Most course unions have recognized this difficulty, and use the statistics as a background for subjective and interpretive evaluation of a particular course by one student.

The greatest discrepancies among students' evaluations of professors occur when a professor's attitude toward students is taken into account. The question whether a professor speaks loudly enough admits of a clear answer; but by contrast, what one student considers arrogance on the part of a professor may be seen as a stimulating intellectual style by another. Consequently, answers to questions on matters such as a professor's willingness to answer questions and consider alternate points of view on a subject will depend on the student's own conception of the purpose of education. A student who feels students should be treated as children will react differently than one who feels students are to be treated as adults.

Furthermore, attitudes are difficult to pin down except in extreme cases. Few are as forthright about their indifference to teaching as the senior professor who spends the first meeting of an upper-year seminar course explaining to students why they shouldn't take the course. An incredulous student reported, "He was

