

Criticism from the consumers

by Gene Allen
reprinted from The Varsity

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 preserved 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 a parent, knows best.

On this view the student is an empty vessel; a tabula rasa. S/he lacks something, a certain body of knowledge, which the professor by definition has and will do his/her 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.

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. She/he just doesn't know what she/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 she/he wants to

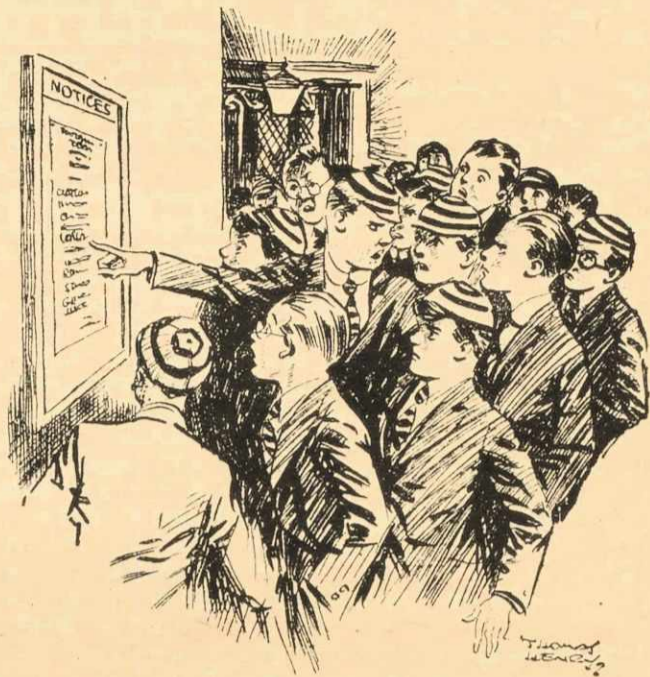
get the most for his/her money. This is certainly a reasonable request, particularly in view of the extremely high cost of university education. One year's tuition is now about as much as the price of a good used car, and selling used cars with no brakes can get you into trouble. While it seems unlikely 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.

Course Unions

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 a course, asking for answers to questions about how the course was organized and taught. Typical questions asked one 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.

Statistics never lie?

In some departments course evaluations are reported in a 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. 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, answer 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.

Professors' attitudes

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 spent the first meeting of an upper-year seminar course explaining to students why they shouldn't take the course. An incredulous student reported, "She/he was very alienating. She/he said she/he hadn't done any reading in the subject area for the past three years. I've done lots of reading he hadn't done. He made it very clear he was much more interested in departmental bureaucracy".

One professor who gets very poor ratings on course evaluations year after year pins them to his/her door, underlining the most damning comments with a kind of perverse pride.

"Most specialists in the subject have to take a course from her/him whether they want to or not, and she/he knows it", a student involved in the course union said.

But more common than outright contempt for undergraduates is indifference to teaching. One student complained that, although she was in a small seminar course, it was not until halfway through the year that the teacher became aware of the students' names.

'Best' courses of ten worst

Traditionally, professors have seen themselves as "scholars" rather than "teachers". The main thrust of the present student campaign for parity representation on tenure committees is to ensure that this imbalance is corrected. Paradoxically, sometimes the professors who have succeeded in mechanizing their courses to the greatest extent are evaluated most highly. This occurs when it is the aim of both student and teacher to have the course proceed above all as painlessly as possible.

Thus the evaluation of a professor's attitude depends on the

But they all look like logarithm tables

by John D'Orsay

At Dalhousie there appears to be little enthusiasm for either course evaluation or student participation on tenure committees. At least among students the idea that students can effectively participate in making decisions about their daily existence qua students is received as, at best, idealistic and, in some quarter, as an impractical proposal of irresponsible revolutionaries. Consequently, participation by students in departmental decision making is so limited as to be almost invisible and in most departments is at sufferance of the faculty. The aspect of sufferance is key since the university's administrative structure is so far from democratic that the faculty has very little power to share; which accounts for both the boring meetings and the desire of the staff to be jealous of their privileges. Both staff and students will have to be much better organized to ever be effective in participating in decision making at all levels.

Course evaluations have existed at Dalhousie for some time with the student union taking responsibility for this area four years ago and producing a series of "Anti Calendars" which have become progressively more refined in construction and presentation. Recent experience indicates that the faculty see them to be of more value and are much more willing to accept the philosophy of course evaluations than students.

Briefly; there are three purposes to evaluating teaching performance: (1) as a service to students in selecting courses by giving them the benefit of students judgements from the previous year. (2) as an aid

to faculty members who are conscientious enough (or worried enough) to try to improve their effectiveness as teachers. (3) in those occasional cases where teaching ability enters the criteria for promotion, reappointment or tenure the course evaluation may be used. To satisfy all three of these demands the evaluation has to be detailed, replicable and designed in such a way that varying perceptions of a feature by students do not conflict in such a way as to produce meaningless results. Typically one is lead to combine these elements in a highly structured questionnaire so that each student expresses an opinion on a number of common points. Imagine asking two students about a course in which there were video tape cassettes, films and lectures. If we ask "what do you think of the course", one says the films were great the other the lectures a drag.

Can these two be combined in this form? No. However, if we ask (1) How important were video cassettes, films, lectures and labs to the overall composition of the course? (2) How would you rate the films, lectures, labs, and video cassettes? We might have some redundancy in a course that only had lectures but our two students have now had to give us their opinions on all the aspects of the course and have provided us with a means of developing a relative weighting. Of course, we had to ask eight questions where before we only asked one but we now have comparable data so it would appear that we have made a better use of the students' time.

The aim in course evaluations is

to break teaching down into as many characteristics as are meaningful (which is realistic) and assume that teaching ability is some sort of aggregate (which is debatable) or combination of these features. Also if a student is asked something about his own motivations his answers can be weighted, at least in theory, to reflect the biases he might have. Of course, we choose characteristics which are of the type that can vary from black to white to give an identifiable shade of grey rather than ones which require the answers red, orange, blue, green, yellow to be mixed. Naturally, the result is that any picture we produce is a black and white presentation rather than living colour.

One cannot assume that the students start their education with a blank mind. If that were the case teaching ability could be measured by merely taking the increment of knowledge by the students on a subject. Students all start with some skills; reading, concept manipulation; and the ability to teach is the deployment of these skills to produce the effect of an increment to knowledge.

Finally, it should be noted that while acceptance of course evaluation by the faculty is not universal, in past years some 70% of those asked have co-operated by circulating the questionnaires. This level of participation can be expected to vary with changes of faculty's perception of the malevolence / benevolence of the student sponsorship of the activity, thus confidence and co-operation is important to bear in mind when talking of alternatives.

continued on p.13