

Insights & Ideas for Teaching & Learning

a publication of the Oakland University Senate
Teaching and Learning Committee

Fall 1997

Vol. 9, no. 2

Ed. Note: One uniquely American phenomenon that is ubiquitously practiced in today's American academia is student evaluations. Outside of this country, this practice is generally looked upon somewhat suspiciously, or even humorously. This issue of TLC Newsletter focusses its topic on student evaluations: Should there be changes or not? We plan to present this topic as the main theme for discussion at this semester's Meeting of the TLC on December 1.

December 1 Luncheon on "Better Method of Evaluating Teaching"

(A Free Lunch Courtesy of the Oakland University Teaching & Learning Committee)

by Austin Murphy (Oakland University)

Our luncheon last winter was very successful in indicating that teaching is evaluated at Oakland University almost exclusively with student evaluations and in indicating that many faculty are dissatisfied with such an ineffective method of evaluating what should be so important. Many research studies have been conducted that indicate the lack of a positive relationship between teaching effectiveness and student evaluations. For instance, in referring to student evaluations of teaching, a recent research study reported in Change (September/October 1997) concluded: "It is hard to imagine a practice more harmful to higher education than one that encourages instructors to satisfy the demands and pleas of students who resent the appropriate rigors of college instruction. These forms are not just

invalid and unreliable; they are pernicious."

If we really seriously value good teaching, we need to change the way teaching is evaluated. If we don't, then we need at the very least to be fair to faculty in stating how one can succeed in being evaluated as a good teacher under the current system. For instance, quoting from the same Change article, "**Professors who want to raise evaluation scores can do so quite easily by simply complying with student demands and dumbing down their courses.**" Another study reported in the same issue found that a teacher can increase student ratings of how much they learned by over 33% without actually increasing their learning (as measured by test scores) by just demonstrating more enthusiasm in the classroom (similarly, enthusiasm was found to increase by over 33% student ratings of the same textbook and other factors that had not changed). To summarize, one needs to transform oneself from being a teacher into being a salesperson who gives the customers (the students) what the majority want (a diploma with good grades without much effort on their part but with a lot of entertainment delivered to them).

On Monday December 1, 1997, the teaching & Learning Committee is holding a luncheon in one of the **Gold Rooms of the Oakland Center at 12:00 noon** on the topic of "Better methods of Evaluating Teaching." We hope to use this luncheon as a forum to initiate change in the way teaching is evaluated at Oakland. We can start by exchanging ideas on how the system can be improved, which is the purpose of the December 1 luncheon (note that

there is no committee currently investigating this problem--the University Assessment Committee, which might be thought to have something to do with this problem, has indicated its incredible doctrinaire ideology of stating that assessment has nothing to do with the evaluation of teaching).

If you have any ideas on how teaching can be improved, or would like to participate in or listen to the discussion, you are encouraged to attend the December 1 luncheon. If you are unable to attend, you are encouraged to express your opinions and ideas by E-mail (jamurphy@oakland.edu), campus mail (502 Varner), or phone (2125) to Austin Murphy (Chair of the Teaching & Learning Committee). In addition, even if you plan to attend, you are encouraged to express ideas, experiences, or information on this subject to Austin Murphy before the meeting (especially welcome is information on other methods of evaluating teaching used at other universities). This subject is vital to the future quality of teaching at our university, but it is very unlikely that anything will be done without your support and participation.

Please R.S.V.P. to Carole Terry at terry@oakland.edu, or x3285, or 409 Varner Hall by November 17 as to whether you can make it to the luncheon or not. Thank you.

Lateral View of Student Evaluations

by Seigo Nakao (Oakland University)

In the last issue of the Newsletter, Austin Murphy argued the necessity to change the way student evaluations are currently practiced; for one of its solutions, he proposed to incorporate the alumni evaluations for a long-term evaluation. In general, students evaluations, as they are practiced now, tend to be given in a somewhat hurried manner, tucked away at the end of the class, immediately before the final when many teachers are more concerned with covering all

the topics in the syllabus rather than spending time for a non-pedagogical topic. Under this condition, students may not have enough time to reflect upon the pros and cons of their teacher's teaching method. Some teachers may use the whole hour so that the students can have enough time to evaluate the effectiveness of their teacher's teaching method, however, problems will still linger: Is the teacher too accommodating to the students in many ways? Do the Students have language to express their objective views? Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci, in their article "How'm I Doing?" in September/October issue of Change, conclude that: "Given all the limitations of a naturalistic case study, our modest study nevertheless shows that student ratings are far from the bias-free indicators of instructor effectiveness that many have touted them to be." They are concerned about the manipulative side of student evaluations as politicians do before elections, and they propose to review the currently practiced mode of student evaluations. Student evaluations as they are practiced now are based on short-term cause and effect. To include evaluations based on a longer-term view will modify the current lopsided method.

Longer-term effect of teaching is sometimes unforeseeable when a student is still attending the class. The former New York City Mayor Ed Koch chided New Yorkers when they voted for Dinkins at the preliminary and thereafter complained about overall deteriorations of the quality of life in NYC. Koch said that they were rightly punished because they could not recognize his merit at the time of the election. Under Giuliani's regime, the plans that Koch's administrations processed are being materialized, most notably, the redevelopment of Times Square. By the same token, students may later discover the real merits of their education, which they could not see at the time they evaluated their teacher.

There are numerous researches and articles on the merits or demerits of student evaluations that most of the readers have had

chances to read before, and therefore, it would be redundant for me to reiterate them here. In order to exemplify a type of long-term effectiveness of education, I would like to mention the teacher-student relationship at higher education institutions in Japan as a comparison.

First of all, in Japan, there is no such thing as student evaluations. When Japanese professors refer to this American phenomenon, they do so with a mixture of derision and apprehension: derision for American academia's surrender of educational authority; apprehension for how they will be evaluated if the system is imported into Japanese academia.

Japanese academia is highly authoritarian: students have to eat what they are served. This derives from the Confucian background of Japanese society: one has to obey one's seniors without question. The Japanese Emperor used to stand at the top of this hierarchy before Japan imported democracy from the USA 52 years ago. After Japan's defeat in WW II, the Emperor lost his political and some of his spiritual authority. However, university professors did not: Japanese universities still stand as the last surviving bastions of traditional authoritarian power. Accordingly, the teacher unquestionably stands above the students. The negative side of this phenomenon is that students do not have any recourse to appeal unfairness or injustice to their grading, or to propose a possible improvement of their teacher's method or content. On the other hand, the relationship between the teacher and his/her students is far more intimate than in the USA. Even though student ratings are practiced anonymously, the professor is likely to be able to identify his/her students' penmanship, and therefore their evaluations of him/her, which may lead to unfair grading of them. Japan's university teacher-student relationship tends to be long-termed (often, life-spanning), plus the Japanese tend to avoid criticism of others. Therefore, the students are more likely to give ratings filled with sincere or disguised euphoria.

The instructor's authority is further strengthened in the students' junior and senior years. After finishing general education courses in the first two years, all the students have to choose their seminar teacher, who are going to be their educator/mentor/consultant for the coming two years. A student has to belong to only one seminar, and thereby he/she cuts oneself from other instructors. In the senior year, the student's seminar virtually becomes his/her only class. What is often witnessed are numerous extra-curricula activities. The teacher and the students together frequent restaurants, karaoke-bars, and so on. The professor occasionally invites his/her students to his/her home for parties, study sessions, or consultations; thus his/her family also becomes acquainted with them. The professor often becomes the students' advisor when they have problems in life even after their graduation. In many cases, the professor is invited to the students' weddings as the most important guest, even though they may not have liked him/her too much. When they have babies, the professor is most likely to be solicited to name the new-born.

The danger of Japanese-style teacher-student relationships is that they can be more emotional than scholarly. On one hand, most of the students feel that they have been rewarded enough for attending a college for the intimate and long-term relationship with their professors. However, students' scholastic achievement is largely left to themselves, not to the professors' effectiveness of teaching. When scholastic achievement is largely left to students' effort, it is not difficult to see the ineffectiveness of student evaluations. When a student wants to learn something, his/her strong will to learn should materialize one's wish regardless of the quality of the instructor's teachings. In this way, Japanese professors have bypassed students' criticism of their method of teaching, content, or curriculum. In passing, I should mention that in Japan, professors do not give a syllabus of the course: it is simply not a part of the culture in Japan.

The majority of students do learn whatever the curriculum offers, however shallow, fragmentary, uninspiring it may be. It is unusual that Japanese university students work as professionals while attending universities; almost one hundred percent of them are full-time students. In this way, cut off from "real world," they concentrate on their education first and try to finish it in four years. During this process, the quality of education is not questioned. When they graduate and start working, they are extensively reeducated by their companies: they there learn how to apply the theory they leaned at their colleges in realistic terms, and finally start to understand the efficacy of their education.

In a recent experiment conducted by the abovementioned Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci involving Cornell University students, the result showed that students evaluations were most likely to be susceptible to the instructor's presentation style of the content rather than content itself. An enjoyable learning atmosphere, or the "halo effects" the instructor creates are more significant than the content of the course itself. Thus, student evaluations are more or less affected by atmospheric inclination. The above research found virtually no difference between the achievement by the students of a style-free class and that of a stylistically enthused class. Enthusiastic teaching style leads the students to be positively involved in their learning, and as a result, they evaluate their class higher than otherwise. Nevertheless, this does not guarantee that the students who are taught in this style, later will find what they learned turns out to be any more effective than otherwise. The real effect of their education will be palpably recognized only some time after when their knowledge is tested in the "real world." In this sense, Japanese professors are adroit to keep close contact with their seminar students long after their graduation, and thereby maintain the "halo effects." At the same time, as long as the students are under this long-term relationship with their professor, their reassessment of the

education they received tends to be interrupted, for it involves emotional tie. However, this tie is spiritually gratifying to them, while education as a hardware can be somewhat materialistic in comparison. M. Banner Jr. and Harold C Cannon wrote in April 16, 1997 issue of Education Week: "... We recall the great teachers of our lives principally as characters--for the stories they told, the distinctive ways they kept order, their extraordinary hold on our attention, their gravities, or their mannerism and expressions--rather than for what they know or how they taught us, which we are likely to have forgotten. These teachers seemd great as human beings before we knew them as superb scholars or ingenious instructors... The truth is that who we are matters to our teaching every bit as much as what we teach and how we choose to teach it. In fact, our characters and personalities determine the quaity and effctiveness of teaching long before what we know and how we present it even come into play." For better or worse, it seems that Japanese professors have known this theory that a professor as a person of authority and intimacy precedes technique and content, and their influence should be long-lasting. Student evaluations, as practiced currently in the USA, in this sense, may need a re-evaluation of themselves.

Editorial Information:

Insights & Ideas is published twice a year by the Oakland University faculty Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, Office of Academic Affairs, Oakland University, Rochester, MI 48309-4401. The newsletter is distributed free of charge to Oakland University faculty. Letters, news and requests for additional copies should be sent to the address given above.

-Seigo Nakao, Editor