



College of Professional Studies

Changing Perspectives in Evaluating Teaching

CHAPTER 10

ADMINISTRATIVE COURAGE TO EVALUATE THE COMPLEXITIES OF TEACHING

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With over 13 years in academic administration, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the whole context of teaching evaluation, including my own role as dean. We have evaluated teaching largely based on our cherished assumptions and the legacy of past practices in evaluating it. Nowadays, one reads about many challenges to the traditional assumptions about teaching and, surely, it is time to re-examine ways we evaluate it.

HISTORIC VIEW

In the historic view of teaching, a tweedy professor talks to students who soak up the professor's knowledge and enthusiasm for the field. Students who fail to absorb the intellectual juices flowing around them are considered lazy little sponges. Reference works and teaching conferences provide all of the techniques needed for teaching well. With this approach, most faculty members pick up fairly effective teaching techniques from various cookbooks within the six-year window for tenure. In fact, most professors come to relative comfort within a short time, freeing them to divert their attention to other (more important?) matters (North, 1995).

Teaching as a Simple Activity

According to this paradigm, the fairly simple teaching evaluation exercise focuses on the professor's knowledge, actions and characteristics. Does the professor know more than the textbook, speak clearly, organize the materials well, appear enthusiastic, ask good questions, pace through the material efficiently, and have good eye contact? Is he or she likable? The spotlight is entirely on the professor and students are the photographers. Student evaluations dominate the evidence for effective teaching. Literature on evaluation of teaching grows heavy with empirical research on statistical fine points related to validity and reliability of student evaluations. (see Chapter 2).

The typical administrator's role in the evaluation of teaching is also simple: calculate the student evaluations and compare the results of one faculty member against the evaluations of other faculty members. This simplistic view of teaching and its evaluation fits well into the administrators' responsibility to treat people uniformly and fairly across campus. We use small common denominators and standard, simple ways of measuring quality to provide the comfort of comparability and the appearance of fairness. Who can argue that a 2.5 isn't comparable to another 2.5? The naivete of this attempt at simplicity and fairness across the board reminds me of a cartoon which was circulating in 1982 when Congress was (again) trying to simplify the federal tax process. The form asks one question and requires only one action. It asks: "How much money did you make this year?" And then it directs: "Send it all in."

Weeding in the Dark.

Another assumption within this traditional approach to evaluating teaching is that the administrator (usually the Dean, but sometimes the Vice President, if the Dean is shirking his or her duty) serves as the weeding agent, probing personnel files and departmental recommendations for any hints of weakness. There is an unspoken understanding that the departments will not point the way to any uncertainties they might have. At my end of the food chain, the dean has to play a hide-and-seek game with departmental recommendations and glowing peer evaluations, never certain if the department wants or doesn't want a culprit found.

With this uncertainty about the department's true professional judgment, administrators cling tightly to quantitative student evaluations and pray that negative personnel decisions do not turn sour or if they do, that there is enough of the right kind of documentation to substantiate negative action and a very good university attorney. This kind of thinking led me to lament the 1998 retirement of senior attorney, John Tallman, University of Wisconsin System attorney, as follows:

"Say It Isn't True"

How can you leave us,
stuck as we are in
all the messes, muddy trenches,
unresolved places, mid-crises,
about to be sued, wanting to sue,
thinking "bite me,"
in a stew, without a clue,
under incomplete personnel rules,
wandering aimlessly,
tripping over dead bodies and partially-true rumors,
hearing scandal, repeating the line,
running amok, causing a scene,
dropping the ball, losing the war,
hitting a snag, twisting in the wind,
hanging on paradox, afraid of the puzzle,
too young to retire, and alone, all alone?

This little ditty captures, I hope humorously, the dread that many administrators harbor when contemplating evaluation decisions: fear and loathing over possible legal ramifications. The university attorneys coach us on "doing things right," as notions of "doing the right thing" fade. For instance, legal advisors counsel deans to carefully curtail their verbosity when informing faculty members of personnel recommendations; they claim that less is better. But doing the right thing might actually call for including more detailed feedback. If fear clutches administrators in this process, it absolutely paralyzes candidates and gives peers indigestion. The administrators want to make sure that they weed out the right people for the right reasons, using "objective" data. The peers want to make sure that they are not blamed for any negative decisions and worry that any association with bad news will boomerang and hit them when their turn arrives. The candidates, twisting, twisting in the wind, beg for clues about what is going to happen to them under the shroud of evaluation. But they are not likely to get much enlightenment from departments busy "washing their hands" or from administrators cautiously weighing each word.

Faculty members have always known that there is something wrong with the simple view of teaching. But attacks on that view took the form of resentment toward student evaluations instead of demands to reconsider the assumptions about teaching which undergird this approach. Now, at long last, new assumptions are clamoring for attention, forcing us to acknowledge the need for more complexity and shifting roles in the evaluation of teaching.

NEW ASSUMPTIONS

Teaching as Learning

First, we are slowly coming to grips with the notion that teaching cannot exist without learning, a simple concept that changes everything (Barr and Tagg, 1995). Peter Seldin tells a wonderful story about a Stripe cartoon in which Stripe boasts that he has taught his dog to whistle. Skeptical friends convene in the fellow's back yard to witness this miracle. After waiting for over an hour and hearing nothing but "Arf, arf, arf," the group confronts the braggart, saying, "We don't hear your dog whistling!" Stripe says, "I said I taught him. I didn't say he learned it." Teaching and learning are clearly different.

If one's expanded view of teaching includes evidence of influencing student learning, how does one document success at this new challenge? Learning over what period of time? What kind of learning: intellectual, social, attitudinal? Do all students have to learn the same content or can variations occur? Do we need to measure the strength of the faculty influence itself or just the outcome, however it was achieved (cause and effect)? Do we take into account that some learners are more ready than others, so that teaching is easier for some of us than others? Where would we look for evidence of effective learning?

Those who have resented the near monopoly of student evaluations as the measure of effective teaching may view this attention to student learning as the last straw in the fight for peer control over teaching evaluation. Actually, peers can play a more vital role than ever. Peers are ideally suited to assess the appropriateness of course goals, to help define types of evidence for student learning, to evaluate the evidence, and to come to judgment (see Chapter 4).

Students can-and should-continue to describe and evaluate their experiences in classes. They are often accurate and reliable observers, but conflicts between the instructor's goals and their own expectations can too easily influence them, especially as we make the transition from teacher-centered pedagogy to more active student learning. We must listen to students in our classes, because they have the front seat in observing the drama play out and because we need to know how they feel about the interaction. But students cannot be the sole source of information on which we base opinions about teaching effectiveness (see Chapter 2).

The Teacher as Person

We come face to face with greater complexity inherent in teaching when we begin to acknowledge the connection between teaching and the inner life of the teacher. In recent years, we have heard more about the personal, passionate core of teaching, which moves our thinking about teaching from mere outward behaviors to what one author calls "the humanity of teaching" (Schmier, 1995). Authors such as Jane Tompkins and Parker Palmer (Tompkins, 1996; Palmer, 1998) shed light on how the inner landscape influences a teacher's relationship to the content, to the students, and to the teaching process itself. Palmer explains, "Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together" (p. 2). These authors remind us that teaching is essentially a fully human activity, not just a manifestation of a talking head coming solely from one's intellect. Schmier (1995, p.24) elaborates, "...the most effective teaching technique that I have at my disposal is me, the teacher, and human being...The essence of my teaching is to recognize myself and to understand myself in my teaching. My power to teach, then, flows not just from my mastery of the subject, or from my use of technology, or from the power I have over the students, but from my own self-mastery."

We are poorly equipped to act as evaluators for this inner area, certainly with our traditionally simple, quantitative approaches to evaluation. We seldom even discuss this aspect of teaching, possibly because "the very term 'professional' connotes the impersonal, as if our profession were a mask designed to conceal our individual identities" (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p.42). And yet it is hard to argue that the personal dimension does not influence the effectiveness of teaching. How does one measure the faculty member's humanity and add this dimension into an evaluation formula? Perhaps a shift from quantitative to qualitative approach will provide some answers.

ASSUMPTIONS INTO ACTION

Complexity of Teaching Requires Colleague Assessment

If we are going to use complex qualitative data to assess teaching effectiveness, faculty colleagues must take the spotlight in evaluation. Delving into content issues, the interplay of content/student learning/faculty orchestration, and the heart of the teacher requires mature professional judgment from colleagues who know the context. Only colleagues can detect the scent of staleness, and only colleagues can provide the spark that can lead to revitalization.

If departments take a more active role in assessing teaching effectiveness, we need not continue the guessing game between departments and the dean or between the department and the faculty member. When people viewed teaching as simple and able to be gauged mostly by student evaluations, deans could accept token evaluation from departments. But no more. With the sure knowledge of the full complexity of teaching, the role of peers in evaluating the gestalt of a person's teaching is inescapable. We administrators must then stop overrelying on student evaluations, guessing what the department hopes the administrator will do, and being preoccupied with fairness across the campus. Instead, we must insist on complex information in personnel files to support recommendations, rely on more honest and deep department review and recommendations, and commit ourselves to view each person individually within his or her own context.

Rich Information about and from Students

We need to collect much more information about and from students. We should find ways to use student achievements to document the effectiveness of the faculty member's strategies. Did the students learn what we hoped? Is what we hoped sufficient? Did the instructional techniques match the course goals? Is there evidence of classroom research, that is, testing various ways to attain student success?

What students say about their connections with a faculty member, how he or she helped them grow as scholars and as individuals, can also be an ultrasound view to the inner person of the faculty member. Even as faculty members, we can remember our teachers: "They drew us to them because they possessed a certain gravitas, or they exemplified the great pleasure of knowing, or because their enthusiasm for their subjects filled their classrooms, or because of their modesty" (Banner and Cannon, 1997, p.42).

We should encourage the use of student comments as well as numerical ratings because comments create a clearer context than the numbers do. The most that the score 2.7, for example, suggests is that the students were mildly displeased. About what? Being belittled or being challenged beyond their expectations? One author (McKnight, 1990, p. 57) points out, "We know that much is lost and distorted in the process of transforming complex concepts into numerical values.... This is one reason why most evaluation materials include a section for comments" (see Chapter 3).

Faculty Reflections

We should encourage faculty members to include in their personnel files brief reflections about their teaching. Here, professors can set out the context of the course and the students, as well as their hopes, experiments, and results. Reflections are not self-evaluations, but are thoughtful comments on teaching as a

"human endeavor complicated by the fact that it involves heterogeneous groups of humans under constantly changing sets of conditions" (Theall, 1998).

For me, the professor's personal reflections have been the most eye-opening new information in personnel files. I have to admit that I never fully grasped the heroic undertaking of many faculty members, especially new ones, pushing to influence student learning until I began to read their reflections in personnel files. Laments one faculty member:

This makes the third time that I have taught this class, and each semester students comment that I rush the class, and I do. This semester I didn't rush the course, but I could not cover all the course content I had planned. I feel like I have let the students down; they will really need that material in the next course. Why can't this be a three-hour course?

How can we judge such a person's success or failure in the classroom without knowing this core piece of information provided by the personal reflection? Reflections have revealed struggles with students unwilling to engage in active learning, with attempts to concentrate on classes after the death of a spouse, and with heart-wrenching disappointments over cultural differences. When the agony of defeat comes through, the reader-evaluator rightly relates more to the agony than to the defeat. We see the heart coming through, and we note that this person cares, tries, and tries again---surely factors associated with effective teaching. Also, faculty members seem to appreciate the opportunity to "speak" to the evaluators, to direct them to one or another aspect of teaching performance, to provide interpretation, to share thoughts, and to add their person to the evidence (see Chapter 9).

Reflections are especially useful in post-tenure review, when the focus is more on the faculty member's future directions than on narrow comparisons (North, 1999) (see Chapter 6).

Depth, Not Comparisons

If those of us who evaluate teaching understand the complexity of teaching, we have to study each personnel case, deeply, on its own merits and resist the pull of treating everyone exactly the same. Like it or not, we administrators and faculty colleagues are forced to rely more on our own professional and personal judgments of effectiveness, unscientific as they might be, using numbers as guides not conclusions. I struggled with more than one faculty member whose low student evaluations masked almost Herculean efforts to create more effective classes.

By truly thinking about student learning and about the human elements of a faculty member under review, we open a vast field of questions and possibilities, a space so daunting that old ways of evaluating teaching fail.

Immersion into Emerging Literature

Faculty on personnel committees, department heads, deans, and other academic administrators can expect to find themselves adrift in irrelevant eddies of information if they do not continue to read about teaching. The debates of yore about what constitutes good teaching have given way to miles of print about student learning, about the soul of teaching, about how to create learning communities in distance

classrooms simultaneously--- in sum--- about the basic principles of good teaching/learning. Asking what constitutes good teaching is no longer a rhetorical question (see Chickering, Gamson, & Barsi, 1989; Angelo, 1993). There are serious and genuine debates and significant scholarship about teaching and anyone involved in its evaluation or its practice would be remiss to miss the emerging news. When the academy decided that teaching was a worthy topic in itself, the experts created a rich pasture for study.

We academic administrators---and faculty colleagues---need to change our judgments about teaching effectiveness in fundamental ways to embrace expanded assumptions and purposes of teaching. We are at the threshold of major shifts in our understanding of the teaching-learning process, and few in academe hold much affection for the current short cuts, which we mistakenly call teaching evaluation. Let's not be like the characters in the television program, "Mash," who, when asked how they get used to the war, responded, "We get used to not getting used to it."

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