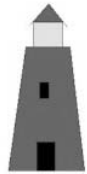




THE BEACON



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Stan's Soap Box

LIFELONG LEARNING

Lately it seems that educational literature is full of the importance of lifelong learning skills. So much of this is because all of human knowledge has been growing by geometric proportions. The internet has made it possible to access information in seconds that previously would have taken a lifelong to accumulate. Nowhere is

this information explosion more noticeable than in the field of medicine. Because of the rapidly changing face of medicine, health care professionals must endeavor to remain current on the latest research findings, best practices, and new techniques.

That calls for lifelong learning. So, if lifelong learning is so important, what can we as educators do to develop lifelong learning skills in our students?

The very first thing we can do is to be great role models. Our offices need to be full of up-to-date medical books and journals. Students need to see their professors reading journals, reading books, attending seminars, and searching the internet to get new ideas and to clarify treatment modalities. Almost every day there are several hundred research publications that report medical information.

The second thing we need to do is to say, "I don't know," when a question is raised in the lecture hall that goes beyond our expertise. Be sure to follow that with, "But I will look this up and find the answer." Better yet, take your students with you on your learning excursions. Let them observe how a content expert finds new information, evaluates it, and integrates it into his or her existing cognitive map. Part of lifelong learning skills is to know how to find information on your own, read it, comprehend it, and integrate it into an area of the brain where you attach it to what you know. Learning psychologists call this going from the known to the unknown.

The third element has to do with attitude. Some people don't know but want to know. Others don't know and don't care that they don't know. Over the years, the first group becomes lifelong learners. The second group becomes incompetent. As educators we can help to eliminate the don't know/don't care attitude by demonstrating our passion for our subject with our students. Let them see your delight, show them why they should care, and make the material relevant to their lives.

The fourth element is, I believe, genetic. For some people, the first word out of their mouths is why. Their parents often describe the continual why, why, why as annoying, but parents and educators would do well to foster this behavior. Curiosity about the world and how it works is a key to being a lifelong learner.

In summary, having good role models, knowing how to learn, caring about learning, and having curiosity all make for a good start in lifelong learning. Let's send our graduates into the world with the skills that won't become obsolete—the skills of a lifelong learner.

NOTICE TO ALL CRITICAL THINKERS

Your comments are needed!

We have two articles in this issue, which are quite controversial. We really want your comments, and we will print these in subsequent issues. In fact, we plan to add reader reactions to all future issues because we believe more information is always helpful in coming to closure dealing with educational matters.

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Ask the Experts: "STUDENT EVALUATIONS: A CRITICAL REVIEW - PART 2"

by Michael Huemer, Ph.D.
University of Colorado at Boulder

Informal student evaluations of faculty were started in the 1960's by enterprising college students.¹ Since then, their use has spread so that now they are administered in almost all American colleges and universities and are probably the main source of information used for evaluating faculty teaching performance.² There is an enormous literature on the subject of student evaluations of faculty (SEF).³ The following is a part 2 of a two part series written by Michael Huemer that reviews developments in that literature that should be of special interest to faculty

Dumbing Down Courses

A related complaint many have is that SEF encourage professors to dumb down courses in an effort to keep students happy at all costs. In one survey, 38% of professors admitted to making their courses easier in response to SEF.¹²

Peter Sacks provides a more detailed, though anecdotal picture. Sacks reports having almost lost his job due to low teaching evaluations from his students. He was able to dramatically raise his teaching evaluations and gain tenure, he says, by becoming utterly undemanding and uncritical of his students, giving out easy grades, and teaching to the lowest common denominator. Sacks claims that this behavior is not unusual but is rather the norm at his college, where students are king and entertainment is all that matters. An excerpt from Sacks' book:

And so, in my mind, I became a teaching teddy bear. In the metaphorical sandbox I created, students could do no wrong, and I did almost anything possible to keep all of them happy, all of the time, no matter how childish or rude their behavior, no matter how poorly they performed in the course, no matter how little effort they gave. If they wanted their hands held, I would hold them. If they wanted a stapler (or a Kleenex) and I didn't have one, I'd apologize. If they wanted to read the newspaper while I was addressing the class or if they wanted to get up and leave in the middle of a lecture, go for it. Call me spineless. I confess. But in the excessively accommodative culture that I found myself in, "our students" as many of my colleagues called them, had too much power for me to afford irritating them with demands and challenges I had previously thought were part and parcel of the collegiate experience.¹³

Educational Seduction, or the Dr. Fox Effect

In a well-known study, a professional actor was hired to deliver a non-substantive and contradictory lecture, but in an enthusiastic and authoritative style. The audience, consisting of professional educators, had been told they would be listening to Dr. Myron Fox, an expert on the application of mathematics to human behavior. They were then asked to rate the lecture. Dr. Fox received highly positive ratings, and no one saw through the hoax.¹⁴ Later studies have obtained similar results,¹⁵ showing that audience ratings of a lecture are more strongly influenced by superficial stylistic matters than by content.

Adding support to this conclusion was another study, in which students were asked to rate instructors on a number of personality traits (e.g., "confident," "dominant," "optimistic," etc.), on the basis of 30-second video clips, without audio, of the instructors lecturing. These ratings were found to be very good predictors of end-of-semester evaluations given by the instructors' actual students. A composite of the personality trait ratings correlated .76 with end-of-term course evaluations; ratings of instructors' "optimism" showed an impressive .84 correlation with end-of-term course evaluations. Thus, in order to predict with fair accuracy the ratings an instructor would get, it was not necessary to know anything of what the instructor said in class, the material the course covered, the readings, the assignments, the tests, etc.¹⁶

Williams and Ceci conducted a related experiment. Professor Ceci, a veteran teacher of the Developmental Psychology course at Cornell, gave the course consecutively in both fall and spring semesters one year. In between the two semesters, he visited a media consultant for lessons on improving presentation style. Specifically, Professor Ceci was trained to modulate his tone of voice more and to use more hand gestures while speaking. He then proceeded, in the spring semester, to give almost the identical course (verified by checking recordings of his lectures from the fall), with the sole significant difference being the addition of hand gestures and variations in tone of voice (grading policy, textbook, office hours, tests, and even the basic demographic

profile of the class remained the same). The result: student ratings for the spring semester were far higher, usually by more than one standard deviation, on all aspects of the course and the instructor. Even the textbook was rated higher by almost a full point on a scale from 1 to 5. Students in the spring semester believed they had learned far more (this rating increased from 2.93 to 4.05), even though, according to Ceci, they had not in fact learned any more, as measured by their test scores. Again, the conclusion seems to be that student ratings are heavily influenced by cosmetic factors that have no effect on student learning.

Academic Freedom

Some argue that SEF are a threat to academic freedom.¹⁷ Not only do SEF influence instructors' grading policies, teaching style, and course difficulty, but they may also restrict what a professor says in class. Professors may feel inhibited from discussing controversial ideas or challenging students' beliefs, for fear that some students will express their disagreement through the course evaluation form. More than one author has described SEF as "opinion polls," with the suggestion that SEF require professors to think like politicians, seeking to avoid giving offense and putting style before substance.¹⁸

Alan Dershowitz reports that some of his students have "used the power of their evaluations in an attempt to exact their political revenge for my politically incorrect teaching." One student, who complained to Dershowitz about his (Dershowitz') teaching about rape from a civil liberties perspective, informed Dershowitz that he should expect to be "savaged" on the student evaluations at the end of the term. Several students subsequently complained on their teaching evaluations about the content of his lectures on the subject of rape, saying that they were offensive, that he should not be allowed to teach at Harvard, and so on. Alan Dershowitz, of course, need have little fear of losing his job. The same is not true of less prominent, junior faculty at institutions across the country.¹⁹ I have personally received evaluation forms complaining that the professor "teaches his own views," and I have as a result been influenced to remove controversial material from my classes.

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PROFESSOR OF THE YEAR: An Illusion of Excellence?

By Paul Abplanalp, Ph.D.
Associate Dean
College of Optometry

What does it mean to be selected as the "Professor of the Year"? Conversely, what does it mean to be passed over for this honor - repeatedly? I will make the argument that it doesn't mean very much either way. The trouble is that your Dean probably thinks it does.

What are the criteria by which such a selection is made? Usually, there aren't any. There may be some flowery declarations that the person chosen must exhibit excellence in all areas of teaching; or they must have exhibited personal concern for the success of their students; or they must have taught their students a great deal; etc. But no matter how many adjectival modifiers are used to embellish such criteria, they remain ill-defined and the students who are making the selection may - or may not - apply them; one has no way to know.

The preceding paragraph suffers from exactly the same shortcomings that it purports to describe. It is vague, ill defined and can mean whatever I - or you - want it to mean. Suppose, therefore, that we put the issue in starkly pragmatic terms. Suppose that a particular professor at a University that condones "Professor-of-the-Year" awards decides that she has been ignored long enough, and she is going to deliberately pursue the "Professor-of-the-Year" award. What, exactly, is she going to do? Should she start to use "Power-Point"; should she write a more thorough syllabus; should she make her examinations more challenging or - better yet - "dumb them down"; should she adopt an open-door policy? What, precisely, should she do? The truth is that nobody has a clue. From this it follows that, if one succeeds in getting the award and then asks why they got it, the answer remains the same: nobody has a clue.

But we do have an example; one that has been provided by a distinguished professor at a leading University, who I will identify merely as Dr. M. In a truly remarkable public display of mettle, Dr. M. declared in his article that he had been taken to task by his Dean because he ranked near the bottom of student ratings of teaching. As a rational and adaptive scientist, Dr. M. consulted with colleagues about a course of action, and decided upon a number of activities. For example, he distributed cookies labeled ERG 100

to commemorate the anniversary of the electroretinogram, he reduced the volume and intensity of the material that he presented, and he distributed little rulers with the imprint "Dr. M. for Best Teacher". None of these were particularly salubrious changes to make, but they worked! Dr. M. rose from the bottom 10% of the student ratings to the top 10% in a single year. But his self-appraisal was much more instructive: "This is the first time I have been ashamed of my performance as a teacher."

Admittedly, the example cited above is a single anecdotal report, and it would be foolish to generalize from it. It would also be foolish to pretend that nobody has ever replicated it - we just don't know.

What are the characteristics of the distribution of votes cast for "professor-of-the-Year"? Nobody knows that, either, but it is an important issue, because we publicly acknowledge and identify only a single point - the top of the range. Can you think of any scientifically valid and socially useful instance in which a complicated distribution of data with many ramifications is described in this manner? Consider this: the difference in votes garnered by the first-place holder (the Professor-of-the-Year) and the anonymous stalwart in second place is virtually certainly much, much smaller than the difference between second-place and last-place. So by identifying only the top dog, you inappropriately dichotomize the distribution and the faculty. You cast the second-place finisher (and everybody else) into the same category as the one who is dead last. In order to uplift a single individual, you crush everybody else. Your artificial dichotomy is best vs. worst, not first vs. second. Surely that is not a rational approach to reward teachers.

Consider a particularly odious analogy to this situation. There is a publication called the Gourman Report that purports to rank medical schools, dental schools, law schools, optometry schools and graduate schools in several disciplines. Consult the ranking of optometry schools in the 8th edition of this publication. Notice that, like Professor-of-the-Year awards, no criteria for this ranking process are ever identified. In fact, I have on several occasions contacted the author and the publisher in an

effort to discover their criteria, but I have never received a cogent reply. The ranking of Optometry schools appears on page 151. All 17 optometry schools are placed in rank order with Berkeley as #1, Ohio State as #2, and on down the line. But all 17 schools are rated on a five-point scale, and all 17 are ranked as "strong" or "very strong". One has to refine this scale to two decimal places before any difference emerges among the three top-ranked schools. Prospective candidates who view this ranking will certainly notice that Berkeley is ranked #1, but they are likely to be dismissive of Ohio State at #2 for the same reason that they will be dismissive of the schools at the very bottom of this distribution, viz. they are not #1. This doesn't make any sense does it? But it is the same line of reasoning that is applied when one identifies a Professor-of-the-Year. Perform a thought experiment on this topic. Suppose that you give the rankings in the Gourman Report to a group of prospective applicants and allow them to merely peruse these data for, say, five minutes. Then, on the next day, suppose that you ask this group of students which school was ranked #1. Most will respond correctly. Now ask them who was #2, #3 and on down the line. You don't really expect their responses to be very accurate, do you?

It is unlikely that any two members of the same faculty will be reviewed by an identical constituency, and this leads to at least two insidious deficiencies. First, faculty such as clinical preceptors or lab instructors who come in contact with only a few students, can garner far fewer votes for an award than faculty who teach large lecture classes that involve the entire class; no matter how well they teach, the votes just aren't there. Second, the material in some courses is inherently more appealing or is perceived as being more "relevant" than the material in other courses; the unpopularity of the course material is simply not going to be separated from the perceived competence of the faculty who teach it.

Finally, consider the student ratings of teaching that virtually all of us undertake at the end of each semester. Presumably, this measure taps the same underlying qualities that a Professor-of-the-Year award does. Yet, administrations rarely announce for public consumption who received the top scores on that measure. This happens because it is misleading to purport to represent a complex distribution by announcing only the top score. Deans and department chairs who are expected to make personnel

DIRECTOR'S CORNER

by Kaye Robertson, Director
NSU Health Professions Division Library

EXPERT SEARCHING



A major challenge for medical and health professionals is keeping up with the ever-increasing body of medical knowledge. You can save yourself time and frustration by developing a set of "expert searching" skills to help make your search and retrieval of information more efficient.

With thousands of medical journals in existence, it is almost impossible to read or even to scan all of the journals relevant to your specialty. One tool to help this process is the "alerts" service available in several different databases, including PubMed. You simply set up a search string of terms and whenever new articles are published on the topics, an email is sent to you with the citation.

For answering a specific question, there are several strategies which will help you to find valid articles.

- Frame broad clinical questions as more focused, answerable questions.

- Select the best database for your search. Medline/PubMed searches over 5000 journals; Cochrane databases search clinical trials; EMBASE is more specific to pharmaceutical questions, etc.

- Use specialized vocabulary terms to make the search more precise, such as MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms in Medline or CINAHL's thesaurus.

- Use Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT) and limiters (year of publication, patient age, literature type, etc.) to narrow the search.

- Use search filters such as clinical queries and systematic reviews.

- Find additional related articles after you have located a good article by linking to "related articles," a feature in several databases.

- Explore the "advanced search" feature of the database you are using. This screen will usually help you develop a more focused, well-built search.

However, your most effective strategy may be to tap into the expert searching professionals in the HPD Library. They will be most useful to you in constructing a specific search and/or enhancing your own skills as a searcher. Call on them for a training session or for a research interview. Take advantage of their skills as experts in finding information. They can be reached at the reference desk in the library (x3108) or individually: Todd (puccio@nova.edu x3114); Alex (alexw@nova.edu x3107); Vince (mariano@nova.edu x3117); and Hilary (hilary@nova.edu x3121).

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and increment decisions based on student rating data would flatly refuse to do so if they were informed only of the top score. They would do well to apply the same logic to the Professor-of-the-Year.

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2. Gourman, Jack. *The Gourman Report*, 8th ed, Random House, 1997.

Notes

a. There is a distinguished version of Professor-of-the-Year called the Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching; it carries a cash award of \$215,000 to the individual and \$35,000 to his department. Visit their web site http://www.baylor.edu/Cherry_Awards/ and examine the announced criteria for this award; they are every bit as vague and ill-defined as what I have put forth in this paragraph.

b. Optometry schools were chosen as the illustrative example here, because there were only 17 of them to be ranked, but my argument can be generalized to the rankings of the other professional schools, as well.

Quotes to Brighten Your Day...

The "quotable quotes" below are all attributed to Clive Staples Lewis, better known as C.S. Lewis, an Irish author and scholar known for his work on medieval literature, Christian apologetics, literary criticism and fiction. He is best known today for his series *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.

Failures are finger posts on the road to achievement.

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.

An explanation of cause is not a justification by reason.

Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil.

Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn.



Upcoming Events

The Faculty Research Development Committee will host Dr. Russell Clement of Broward County Schools on September 14, 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. in the Chancellor's Dining Room. If you would like to attend, please contact Kathleen Hagen at x1235 or khagen@nova.edu.

ASK THE EXPERTS

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College students do not have a universal appreciation for the ideals of free speech and academic freedom. An anthropology professor I once had at Berkeley became locally (in)famous for his criticisms of affirmative action and for his view that minorities and women had lower average levels of intelligence than the rest of the population. Subsequently, a group of students disrupted his class to protest against his allegedly racist, sexist, and homophobic teachings. The students went on to call for his dismissal from the university. Signs appeared on campus saying, "No more racist bullshit in the name of academic freedom."²⁰ Berkeley, it seemed, had come a long way since the days of the free speech movement. Fortunately for him, the professor already had tenure. But what would have happened to a junior faculty member in a similar position? Given the student reaction in this case, it is not difficult to imagine that even much less controversial statements might have elicited low end-of-term evaluations from those students who wished to see the professor fired. Even a small percentage of such extremely negative evaluations could have a significant impact on a professor's career.

Professors discussing unconventional or controversial ideas may also receive a larger number of very positive student evaluations, relative to other professors whose classes are more bland and, perhaps, boring. In spite of this, there are two reasons why the overall incentive created by SEF will be for the professor to avoid controversy. First, the average rating professors receive is 4 or above on a scale of 1 - 5; therefore, a very hostile student can give a rating three points below the average, whereas a very enthusiastic student can only give a rating one point above the average. Thus, assuming the professor is average, the marginal unusually hostile student has an impact up to three times greater than the marginal unusually enthusiastic student. Second, there is a saying in American politics to the effect that one doesn't gain votes, one only loses them--meaning that it is much easier to earn a voter's opposition through taking substantive stands on issues than it is to gain support by doing so. If a politician says three things that I agree with and one that I disagree with (all concerning emotionally charged issues), I am more likely to

vote against him, provided the other candidate did not say anything I disagreed with, even if this was because the latter said very little at all. This explains why American politicians often avoid taking non-trivial stands on issues. A similar principle applies to professors, when their retention is decided in a similar manner: any statement or question a teacher raises that anyone could take offense at will run a risk of evoking hostile reactions from a few students who will regard the statement or question as grounds for a negative evaluation, while there is little chance that even a non-hostile student will take it as grounds for an especially positive evaluation. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the degree to which a professor is controversial would be a strong depressive factor on his student evaluations, although this thesis has not yet been subjected to systematic testing.

There exist simple and well-known ways for a professor to avoid giving offense. One technique, when a class ostensibly focuses on a controversial subject matter, is to focus one's lectures on what other people have said. For example, a professor may, without raising any eyebrows, teach an entire course of lectures on ethics without ever making an ethical statement, since he confines himself to making reports of what other people have said about ethics. This ensures that no one can take offense towards him. During classroom discussions, he may simply nod and make non-committal remarks such as "Interesting" and "What do the rest of you think about that?", regardless of what the students say. (This provides the added "advantage" of reducing the need both for preparation before class and for effort during class, on the part of the professor.) Although pedagogic goals may often require correcting students or challenging their logic, SEF-based performance evaluations provide no incentive to do so, while the risk of reducing student happiness provides a strong incentive not to do so. Some students may take offense, or merely experience negative feelings, upon being corrected, whereas it is unlikely that students would experience such negative feelings as a result of a professor's failure to correct them. Overall, SEF reward professors who tell their students what they want to hear.

G. F. Schueler draws our attention to a related case

Socrates, who is usually thought to have been one of the world's "Great Teachers," nevertheless received rather low marks from his "students"

on his final teaching evaluation. At a time of life when most of us would long since have retired, the Athenian jurors at his trial met his request for a pension by voting to put him to death.²¹

As Schueler notes, there is no reason to believe that the majority of Athenian citizens who were familiar with Socrates' activities would have evaluated his work as a philosopher much differently. The death sentence, allegedly for corrupting the youth and believing in gods of his own invention, was Socrates' payment for his lifelong efforts at challenging the beliefs of his fellow citizens. Though today's students lack the power to put to death professors with whom they disagree, the lesson that such challenges are not always welcome is unlikely to be lost on those professors who hold unconventional views.

Why Use SEF?

In the light of the preceding objections, why do most institutions continue to use SEF? The main reasons are probably the following: (a) SEF are easy and inexpensive to administer. (b) SEF give an impression of objectivity, in comparison with more "subjective" measures such as letters from observers, since SEF produce definite numbers. (The impression seems to be an illusion, however, since the numbers are merely measurements of subjective impressions.) (c) There are few alternatives to SEF, if one wants to assess teaching effectiveness. Steven Cahn argues that teaching should be assessed by experts in the field, i.e., one's colleagues,²² but as indicated in [Part] 1, such measures appear to be even less valid. Greenwald and Gillmore suggest using student ratings but with statistical corrections for grading leniency; this, however, would not address the concerns of the above sections.

Other Approaches

Institutions seeking to improve teaching quality may take one or more of the following measures, which would not be subject, or would be less subject, to the objections of [above] sections:

1. Faculty members could be offered courses or workshops on improving teaching effectiveness, receiving recognition on performance reviews for having taken such courses.
2. Student evaluation forms could be redesigned to emphasize relatively objective matters, such as "Did the professor come to class on time?", "Did he read student work and return it within a reasonable time frame?", and so on, *Continued on page 6*

ASK THE EXPERTS

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rather than subjective items such as "How would you rate this instructor?" or "How fair was the grading?" The former sort of questions would probably be less subject to the effects of bias than the latter. In addition, they have a better chance of inducing improvements in teaching performance.

3. Written comments might be taken into account in weighting student ratings. Evaluation forms on which low ratings are given without explanation, or where the complaints are directed at the professor's beliefs, the harshness of the grading, the difficulty of the course, or the professor's personal characteristics (such as physical appearance, clothing style, or personality) might be discounted.

4. Teaching can be evaluated in part by examination of syllabi and other course materials. These can be used to verify that a course contains substantive content; but professors should not be monitored for the "correctness" or moral or political value of that content.

The Philosophy of Consumerism

A fourth reason why SEF are widely used may be the belief that the university is a business and that the responsibility of any business is to satisfy the customer. Whether they measure teaching effectiveness or not, SEF are probably a highly accurate measure of student satisfaction (and the customer is always right, isn't he?). However, even if we agree to view the university as a business, the preceding line of thought rests upon a confusion about the product the university provides. Regardless of what they may themselves think at times, students do not come to college for entertainment; if they did, they might just as well watch MTV for four years and put that on their resumes. Students come to college for a diploma. A diploma is a certification by the institution that one has completed a course of study and thereby been college-educated. But that will mean nothing unless the college or university can maintain intellectual standards. A particular student may be happy to receive an easy A without having to work or learn much, but a college that makes a policy of providing such a product will find its diplomas decreasing in value.

Part of a university's responsibility may be to satisfy its students. But it is also a university's responsibility to educate those individuals whom it is certifying as educated. Unfortunately, those goals are often in conflict.

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Notes

1. Cahn, 37.
2. Cave, et al., 147; Haskell; d'Apollonia and Abrami, 1198; Wilson.
3. According to Wilson, nearly 2000 studies of SEF have been completed.
12. Ryan et al.
13. Sacks, 85.
16. See Ambady and Rosenthal.
17. See Haskell.
18. Williams and Ceci, 12, 23; Schueler.
19. Dershowitz, 117-19.
20. The incident is discussed in Selvin.
21. Schueler, 345.
22. Cahn, 36-41.

