

Personal Interviews as a Means of Obtaining Student Evaluation of Teaching Quality

Franklin E. Eldridge

INTRODUCTION

Measure the quality of the teachers in a college and you have measured the quality of the college.

Recognize and reward high quality teaching and the quality of teaching in a college will rise. good teachers will become better. and young scholars will aspire to become teachers.

These statements seem obvious in their simplicity. The complex key to making them work lies in the first clause "measure the quality of the teachers". The measurement is complex because teaching is a complex activity. The difficulty of measurement, however, cannot be an excuse, for measurement of quality cannot be avoided. The chairman of a department or the director or dean of a college can discuss methods, debate purposes, and argue about the values. but when promotions are being considered and budgets are being made they must make decisions about quality of teaching. If their decisions are correct and logical. the morale of the staff will rise. If these decisions are wrong. or if they are avoided (which can easily be worse than being wrong). morale will suffer and the quality of teaching will drop. The search for reliable methods for evaluating quality in teaching, therefore. is crucial.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

In any process of evaluation, the first step is to state objectives in measurable terms. When teaching quality is being evaluated it is first necessary to identify the characteristics which are accepted as indicators of good teaching. These characteristics then need to be stated in terms which will permit measurement of the degree to which they are accomplished. Many lists of characteristics, or rating scales, have been developed (1) (2) (3) (4). Similar lists may have been made up in your own college. These scales can be used to obtain comparative. numerical estimates of teachers. The simpler ones, which have proven reliability, are particularly useful. These rating scales are frequently used by teachers for self-evaluation and self-improvement without submitting them to the dean or department chairman.

Deans or directors commonly depend upon recommendations or ratings made by departmental chairmen. This has the advantage of placing responsibility on the supervisor who is most closely associated with the work of the person being evaluated. The chairman has an occasional opportunity to observe the teaching in a classroom, to visit with students who are taking the courses, and to talk with the colleagues of the instructor. One drawback of this method is the rather common lack of an organized, objective approach to evaluation by the chairman.

A less desirable basis for evaluation which frequently is given undue weight in making administrative judgments is one I will call "critical incidents". This method relies upon those situations which come to the attention of an evaluator because they are outstandingly good, or bad, but which may not reflect with any degree of accuracy the consistent teaching pattern of an individual. Frequently these incidents are reported over a cup of coffee, perhaps with pride or perhaps as a humorous episode. Almost any consistent, organized attempt at measurement is superior to "critical incidents".

Student evaluations of teachers have been both praised and condemned. McKeachie (5) published an excellent and extensive review of student ratings. Different student bodies may have different sets of objectives and, therefore, rate faculty members differently (6). High achieving students may

differ from low achieving students in their views of what they think is quality in teaching (7). Students may give an instructor a different (more unbiased) rating after grades have been assigned than before, or when the ratings are signed or unsigned.

Critics of student evaluations say the students have too little experience, or are seeking entertainment more than education, or name only the popular or easy teachers, or that they really don't know what is best for them. Proponents point to the student as the ultimate consumer, the customer, the client or the buyer of an education and, therefore, the most interested and best qualified to judge. Others point out that the student is the closest to the performance of the instructor and, therefore, most able to evaluate consistently. Students will vary on how conscientiously they try to evaluate an instructor.

Dixon (8) stated that, "The experience of nearly thirty years at Antioch suggests that students' judgments of teachers are on the whole supplementary and complementary to the judgments of faculty colleagues. Only students are in a position to observe and contrast teaching abilities and styles. On the other hand, students deeply respect faculty members' judgments of their colleagues' scholarly and research qualification." Student evaluations of teaching quality may be obtained in different ways, including personal interviews by the teacher or by other persons.

Personal interviews are viewed with greater or lesser degrees of confidence, depending upon many factors including; purpose for the interview, bias of the interviewer, objectivity of questions asked, etc. McMurray (9) states, "One of the principle criticisms leveled at the interview has been that its findings are highly subjective. While there is no denying that interviewers' judgments must, of necessity, be subjective, it does not follow that they must lack reliability and validity simply because they are subjective. Subjective judgments are not necessarily wrong."

The most perfect estimate of future performance in teaching is an accurate measure of past performance. Even this method is not perfect, because (a) conditions in the future are never exactly the same as in the past and (b) different measurements of past performance will vary. Probably one of the reasons for skepticism about the use of personal interviews is the fact that they are usually used to predict future performance and, therefore, include both of the previously listed sources of variation. Some improvement in confidence in the use of personal interviews might be gained if it were recognized that the interview (or any other method of evaluation) is an attempt to measure past performance. Future performance can then be estimated with the recognition that unknown sources of variation will cause the correlation to be less than 1.0, the level of perfection for which we always strive.

Furthermore, the evaluation of teaching quality should use not one but all methods available in attempts to obtain the most accurate measure of past performance. Opinions and numerical estimates of quality should be obtained from department chairmen, colleagues, and students at all levels of achievement. Final decisions and component parts of evaluative instruments should be recognized as subjective judgments which have real meaning and value. These measures of past performance can then be used with some degree of confidence as predictors of future performance.

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS OF STUDENTS

Each year for over 14 years the University of Nebraska has given one or more Distinguished Teaching Awards which carry public recognition and a check for a thousand dollars. Nominations for the award are made by each college, annually.

In the process of making nominations from the College of Agriculture and Home Economics a procedure using personal interviews with students was developed which has become invaluable as a means of evaluating quality of teaching. In addition to selecting one or two nominees this process has yielded a body of information concerning the quality of teaching done by many members of the faculty, which has been used when considering promotions and when making annual budgets. This procedure is described in this report.

Each of the five committee members has interviewed from 10 to 15 students selected randomly (using a table of random numbers) with respect to grade point average, excluding recent transfers and persons interviewed in previous years. In some years students were selected from sophomore, junior and senior classes, and in other years they were selected from junior and senior classes only. From 50 to 75 students were interviewed per year from a student body which now has over 2000 undergraduate students and which has doubled in size in the last 10 years. Over a six year period more than 300 students have been interviewed.

In order to encourage consistency among interviewers the following interview schedule was developed.

STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

for

Distinguished Teaching Award

- I. During your attendance at the University you have come into contact with quite a few different teachers. You have formed opinions about their teaching. As you think back about different teachers you have had, what did you like about these teachers? What are the Characteristics which make a teacher a good teacher? Just tell me what you think about as you consider good teaching. (Allow time for student to express himself fully.)

Subject matter:

Teaching methods:

Personality traits:

Other Comments:

- II. Are there some negative factors which you believe should exclude a teacher from being considered for a Distinguished Teaching Award: What are these factors?
- III. Recognizing that most teachers do not measure up to set standards for an ideal teacher, we would like to have you name one or more teachers from the Ag College faculty that you think would logically be eligible for a Distinguished Teaching Award. Give some specific reasons for each person you name.
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- IV. To what extent do you believe your opinions are shared by the student body as you are familiar with them?

Are there any other faculty members that you have heard other students mention that you think might represent distinguished teaching?

The order of the questions in the interview schedule was intended to cause the student to think first about "... the characteristics which make a teacher a good teacher." By asking this question before asking for nominations we hoped to minimize any tendency to nominate "popular" or "easy" teachers and focus the student's attention upon those general attributes of teaching which further his real educational goals. After our first year's experience with this, we realized the need to record the student's statements as nearly verbatim as possible. Paraphrasing his replies, condensing his statements, or trying to interpret his meaning led to an injection of the

interviewer's personal biases. Analysis of the statements was not made easier by recording them verbatim, but analysis was considered to be a secondary consideration at the time that the interviews were being held. The sub-headings "Subject matter", "Teaching methods", etc. were only for the interviewer's convenience in categorizing replies and were not mentioned to the students as topics which needed to be covered. One interviewer (FE) assigned number one to the first characteristic named by a student, number two to the second, etc., and these priorities were considered to reflect the importance assigned by the student to each comment. Review of the distribution of the answers revealed that listing by priority had little significance.

The statements given by the students were grouped under some general description of characteristics. The frequency of the statements were then used as an indication of the relative importance of the characteristic. Selection of general characteristic descriptions was not simple. Some statements would fit under more than one description. These groupings indicate the importance of certain characteristics to the students. The most frequently expressed idea, Interested in students, is listed first below and following this idea are some typical statements.

Interested in students

- "Takes interest in students, helps with problems"
- "Personal interest in students"
- "Outgoing, likes young people"
- "Instructor has to care about the students"
- "Personal identification with students"

The characteristic description under which the second largest number of statements was made was:

Makes the course interesting or challenging

- "He can hold my attention - makes the course interesting so you want to go to class next time"
- "Makes a required course interesting"
- "Be able to make the class interesting"
- "Makes a class atmosphere that causes a student to want to go to class - informal"
- "Challenges a student to learn, not earn a grade"

The next three characteristics were about equal in the frequency of supporting statements.

Interest in and knowledge of the subject

- "Know what they're talking about"
- "Should be interested in his subject and convey interest to the student"

Organization, preparation, clear presentation

- "Material clearly outlined"
- "Lecture should be easy to follow, follows an outline"
- "Organization"
- "Well prepared and organized"
- "Organized and orderly"

Gets the subject matter across

- "Being able to put the subject material across in an understandable manner"
- "How well they get the subject matter across"

Some students also mentioned tests, fairness, communication, breadth of knowledge, personal experience and a number of other items or statements not fitting under the above listed headings.

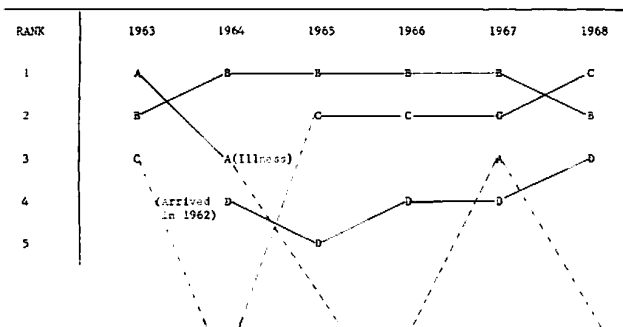
The negative factors named by students had only limited value. Frequently they only reflected the opposites of the desirable characteristics of a good teacher. Some students, however, were more articulate in expressing their views in opposition than positively. Also the negative statements occasionally were more specific or more detailed than the positive statements concerning desirable teaching traits.

In 1967 the group of 50 students interviewed from the junior and senior classes were further analyzed. The juniors had had an average of 7.7 different teachers from the College of Agriculture and Home Economics and the seniors had had 11.8 different teachers from this college. A total of 41

different teachers were named out of a teaching faculty of approximately 132 persons. Memory was a factor since more than half of the persons named as first choice had been an instructor in the most recently completed semester. The same relationship held true among those designated as second choice. The nomination of an outstanding teacher was apparently easy for some students and difficult for others. This probably reflected personality differences in students as well as other factors.

Even though a large number of faculty members received one or more mentions each year, the consistency from year to year among those at the top of the list was noteworthy. Figure I illustrates this consistency.

Figure I. Rank of top 4 faculty members by years, by number of points (3 points for 1st nomination by student, 2 points for 2nd, 1 point for 3rd). Note consistency of ranking from year to year, and certain identifiable reasons for change. The selection is from a faculty of about 132 members. Usually about 40 persons received one or more nominations.



DISCUSSION

When dealing with an issue as complex as evaluation of teaching quality it would be unwise to expect a single method to provide a solution. In the method presented in this report, personal interviews of student, considerable reliance was placed upon the number of students interviewed and the degree to which the sample was representative of the student body. In a similar manner, the results from the interviews were combined with other information before the nomination for Distinguished Teaching Award was made and before these results were used in any other evaluations. Experience has also shown that evaluators, such as the dean or department chairman, have biases they constantly must guard against. Once an opinion is formed it is easy to "hear more loudly" the supporting evidence than the dissent.

The consistency of evaluation from year to year has been a feature of this method that builds confidence in its validity. A method used earlier was to request voluntary nominations from students, alumni, staff and graduate students. Frequently this method resulted in "campaigns" for some one person. Usually these could be identified because they came mostly from one floor of the dormitory, or one fraternity or one group of majors. A representative sample helps eliminate this bias which often reflects popularity instead of genuine teaching quality.

By continuing an organized personal interview system for several years two other factors related to evaluation of teaching quality were recognized. One was the effect, temporary or permanent, of changes in physical or emotional health as a factor causing a change in teaching quality. For example, a highly regarded instructor who encountered a temporary physical health problem was not listed by his students in the same terms as before. Instead there were negative comments, such as "short-tempered" or "not available for discussion", etc. The second factor which was recognized was related to the speed with which teaching quality can be measured. So often it is said that it takes a lifetime to establish a reputation as a teacher. It doesn't. Through personal interviews top teachers can be identified by

the completion of their first year. Combining results for several years reveals trends and permits increased confidence based upon consistency of reports.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Personal interviews of a representative group of students have been held for several years in an attempt to evaluate teaching quality. The results appear to be consistent from year to year and in agreement with other measures of quality.

Student opinions of good teachers and good teaching characteristics are valuable as one part of a total teacher evaluation program. Properly weighted and analyzed they may be the most valuable measure. They can be effectively used in rewarding excellence in teaching. Because of the experience and results, a system of personal student interviews is recommended as a part of the teacher evaluation process in college.

LITERATURE CITED

1. Belknap, Robert H., Greenblatt, Edward L., Heimler, Charles H., Marion, Arthur J., Wyeth, Ezra R., Guidelines for Promotion, IMPROVEMENT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 13(1):14-15, 1965.
2. Cosgrove, Don J., "Diagnostic Rating of Teacher Performance", JOUR. OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, 50(5):200-204, 1959.
3. Hoffmann, Randall W., "Students Portray the Excellent Teacher", IMPROVEMENT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 11(1):21-24, 1963.
4. Renner, Richard R., "A Successful Rating Scale", IMPROVEMENT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 15(1):12-14, 1967.
5. McKeachie, Wilbert J., "Student Ratings of Faculty: A Research Review", IMPROVEMENT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 5(1):4-8, 1957.
6. Pogue, F. G., Jr., "Students' Ratings of the Ideal Teacher", IMPROVING COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 15(2):133-136, 1967.
7. Spaight, Ernest, "Students Appraise Teachers' Methods and Attitudes", IMPROVEMENT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING, 15(1):15-17, 1967.
8. Dixon, James P., ANTIOCH NOTES, 45(7). April, 1968.
9. McMurry, Robert N., "Validating the Patterned Interview" from "Studies in Personnel and Industrial Psychology" Edited by Edwin A. Fleishman, The Dorsey Press, 1961.