

Documenting the Quality of Your Teaching

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Abstract

Faculty constantly contend that teaching does not count; that their teaching is not rewarded. This article argues that the documentation of most professors' teaching is so poor that it would be hard to reward it. Suggestions are then offered to help faculty substantially improve the documentation of their teaching.

Most of the general public and academicians alike readily agree that universities exist to educate students. High quality teaching is essential if colleges and universities are to fulfill their missions.

Yet, frequently these days, faculty in colleges of agriculture feel that teaching does not adequately count in the promotion and tenure and salary adjustment process. There is some validity to the claim. Certainly, it is difficult to clearly document the quality of one's teaching. However, it can and must be done before excellent teaching can be rewarded.

Too often, when reviewing faculty members dossiers, it is nearly impossible to determine whether the person is an excellent teacher or not. Little evidence is presented and that which is presented is so incompletely portrayed that one has great trouble being sure what one is judging. When this is the case, those rendering judgement are perplexed. They become frustrated. They are not likely to conclude that there is something of quality present which merits reward.

In some ways the dilemma is analogous to the old saw about Christians: "If a person were charged with being a Christian and brought to trial, would there be enough evidence to convict the person". In the case of those who feel excellent teaching should be amply credited the question is: does the typical dossier contain enough evidence to sustain the claim of excellence. Is there enough evidence to convict the person? Too often the answer is no. Too often reviewers of dossiers have only sparse evidence of teaching quality.

In the case of research, generally one can just list the publications. In the case of lists of refereed publications, readers of dossiers generally assume the entries are of high quality since they have already been reviewed by peers.

Faculty must improve the way they prepare the section of their dossier which portrays their teaching program. It is possible to clearly illustrate that one has taught a sufficient amount at a high enough level of quality to warrant recognition. Such recognition will not be forthcoming if the faculty member merely lists the number of courses taught along with enrollments. Neither will the quality of teaching be rewarded if there is no clear and systematic portrayal of easy to

interpret student ratings of teaching for each course taught. When reviewers do not know if the data were collated by an unbiased party in an appropriate setting, they discount the data. If reviewers do not know how many students were in the course and how many student evaluations were returned, they discount the data. Likewise, reviewers have little patience with reading all open-ended student comments. They do not trust "representative" comments if the person who desires the reward drew the sample. In addition, many reviewers are leery if the only evaluative data presented is student evaluation data. Later in this paper, suggestions will be offered for overcoming these documentation problems.

Many faculty and administrators claim that teaching quality cannot be judged. Little progress will ever be made in rewarding teaching so long as we hold to that claim.

Granted, it is difficult to adequately judge teaching performance. Such judgement is far from being clear-cut. However, it must be argued that the judgement of the quality of teaching is not all that different from deciding when a dissertation is acceptable, whether performance on a Ph.D. exam is satisfactory or unsatisfactory, whether a research problem is worth pursuing or whether a colleague's theoretical framework is adequately developed. Experienced authors can attest to the widely diverging opinions of peer reviewers of their manuscripts. Yet the academy steadfastly adheres to the value of such reviews as a means of certifying the presence of quality. If we in the academy can adequately make judgements such as these, then we can assess the quality of teaching.

Far more is known about good teaching than academicians are willing to admit. All too often reviewers are too narrowly prescriptive in their view of what good teaching is. Some want to focus on mannerisms. Some rate the art of delivery. Some focus on personality traits. This never works. Excellent teaching is far too complex an activity to be narrowly defined. The basis for evaluating the level of quality of teaching should rest on the most fundamental underlying indicators of quality. Such a basis does not overly restrict the teacher. The teacher remains free to interject creativity, a sense of self and even approaches with which some may disagree.

Fundamentals of Excellent Teaching

In order to assess the level of quality of teaching, one must examine five fundamental aspects of teaching. One must judge content, delivery, expectations, evaluation of learning, and the teacher's relationship with the students.

Content

Unless professors have suitable content, not much else matters. Professors are hired because they are experts in their subject matter. Yet knowing one's subject, while necessary,

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is not sufficient. One must go beyond knowing the subject.

In order to decide on the level of quality of a professor's teaching, there must be evidence that the content of the course(s) taught is appropriate for the purpose of the course(s). The content also needs to be current.

Delivery

A professor's delivery is a critical dimension of the assessment of teaching quality. How one teaches is just as important as what one teaches. Professors are hired because they can select and organize the most suitable content from a whole body of knowledge and present it in a way that facilitates optimum learning.

When faculty and department chairs are asked to evaluate a professor's delivery, they are reluctant. There is considerable lack of agreement regarding that on which one should focus. Some want to focus on idiosyncrasies, personal preferences or the surface or cosmetic elements of style. It is in this area that there is much controversy as to what is good and what is bad.

Focusing on traits of teachers and their delivery of instruction is not very sound. Generally research does not empirically verify that one trait or specific element of style is superior to another.

However, research does reveal some gross teacher behaviors that are consistently associated with improved learning. These behaviors are: clarity, variability, enthusiasm, business-like behavior and providing students with the opportunity to learn criterion material (Rosenshine and Furst, 1971). An explanation of each follows.

Clarity. Teachers with high clarity scores give detailed directions. They explain thoroughly by making use of concrete examples and numerous explanations. They are willing to repeat the complex. Their pattern of organization is such that students are able to follow the logical progression of the topic.

Variability. Variability refers to the array of methods professors use. Those who have high variability scores use a variety of teaching techniques and media. They change their pace frequently. They are not monotonous. They offer a considerable amount of stimulation for students.

Enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is not to be narrowly defined. It is not merely a rah-rah style. It means intensity; but it can manifest itself in many ways. While there may be many ways by which professors show they are keenly interested in their subject and in their students, never-the-less, students and peers as well can detect this. There is a certain energy and excitement which is evident; sometimes quietly, but sometimes in a robust way. When it is present, students feel it and respond positively.

Business-Like-Behavior. A professor with business-like-behavior is prepared for class, knows the content, knows how to conduct a stimulating class and proceeds with the task. The professor is able to develop a rapport with students and yet maintain the necessary professional distance. The professor knows how to organize the course, develop assignments and tests and provide feedback. Importantly, the professor does not just know how but also puts this knowledge into practice.

Opportunity to Learn Criterion Material. Professors who give students the opportunity to learn criterion material point out what is important to learn, teach to it, and test for it. They are purposeful. They stay on task. They have students engaged in meaningful activities in and out of class. If one accepts that these five teacher behaviors are benchmarks of effective teaching, then information must be collected that reflects how well professors perform with respect to these behaviors.

A Set of Measures

Those who do not accept that these behaviors adequately reflect sufficient evidence of excellent teaching, with respect to delivery, need to develop a set of measures which they feel are acceptable indicators of excellent teaching. All parties involved in assessing the quality of a person's teaching need to agree in advance as to what the indicators of excellence are. Otherwise, teachers do not know the standard against which they are measured. All too often when standards are not agreed upon, reviewers tend to impose their own highly varied criteria.

Expectations

Another important aspect of high quality teaching is the expectations a professor has of students. If professors expect little of students and are just good Joes and Joettes, then they may be popular but they may not accomplish very much. Conversely, professors may expect so much that it is absurd and unfair. This also is not good.

The professor needs to be demanding but for the proper reasons. Likewise, one needs to demand that which matters.

Evaluation of Learning

That students learn is important. Learning is an indication that the teacher is making a difference. Learning must be assessed with proper frequency. This assessment of learning needs to be accompanied by adequate and timely feedback.

Tests, quizzes and other graded work must be valid. They need to measure what the professor indicates is important. They need to be rigorous. They should cause students to think. They should be fair and fairly graded.

These are critical dimensions of high quality teaching.

Student - Teacher Relations

How a teacher relates to students is important. It is an indicator of trust and respect.

Teachers need to treat students as individuals of worth. They need to demonstrate that they care about them as individuals. Yet professors need to maintain appropriate professional distance. It is this balance that is needed. It can be accomplished by persons with varying personalities in many different ways.

When positive and well balanced student-teacher relations are present, they are evident to students and outside observers as well. Their presence is important to maintaining high quality teaching.

Data on Effectiveness of Teaching

There are four fundamental sources of data regarding the effectiveness of a professor's teaching. They are: student ratings, peer ratings, administrator ratings, and alumni ratings. All too often the documentation of effectiveness of a

professor's teaching fails to have complete and longitudinal data from even one of these sources. In the section which follows, arguments will be offered for the use of each particular source of data.

Student Ratings

Students represent one source of data regarding how well a professor teaches. The input of students needs to be limited to the aspects of teaching for which they can provide valid input. For example, students are not in the best position to judge the technical competence of a professor. However, they are able to render judgements regarding whether a professor is clear, is enthusiastic, and is prepared for teaching the class. They know whether they understand a professor and how they feel they have been treated. Students are the only group with a census of observations of the professor's teaching; they are present more than any other observer.

In order for student ratings to be most meaningful, they need to be collected with care. If they are to be used as one part of the information which is weighed in making personnel decisions, it is helpful if everyone uses the same or a similar instrument. The instrument should ask for student judgements on aspects of the professor's teaching that students can best assess. This includes aspects such as: whether the professor was prepared, how well subject matter was communicated, whether interest was stimulated, how much was learned, pace of the teacher, whether the organization was clear to the student, whether assignments contributed to learning, whether feedback was received and if it was detailed enough to be helpful.

Student evaluations should be administered in class, near the end of the term, by an unbiased person. Students should know that their ratings are important and will be used by the professor for personal improvement, and if it is the case, by administrators or peers in assessing the person's level of teaching ability.

These ratings should be anonymous and should be collected in such a way as to ensure anonymity. They should not be viewed by the professor until the student's grades have been recorded. Care also needs to be taken to assure that ratings are reported exactly as recorded by students. The collection procedure must insure that the data are valid.

Student ratings will indicate how well a professor meets student expectations. Importantly, these ratings are capable of reflecting improvement over time. Very often student rating forms allow professors to select items to be included from a list of possible items. In such cases it is important that a core of general items be included by all faculty to facilitate some common grounds of comparison among faculty.

Peer Ratings

In determining how well a professor teaches, it is essential that colleagues render their judgement of a person's teaching ability. Peers are in the best position to evaluate the nature of the content, accuracy of the content, expectations and adequacy of evaluation of learning. They can also assess out the quality of student-teacher relations.

Peer evaluation is not just a matter of observing a professor teaching. Important elements of peer review of teaching do not require class visitation.

One or more peers should review the colleague's syllabus and teaching notes. Such a review allows a peer to offer informed judgements about the content of the course. One can judge whether the most appropriate content has been selected, is current, and clearly organized.

It is also important for peers to examine the nature and quality of assignments. Is the professor rigorous enough? Are the assignments meaningful; do they contribute to learning and developing mastery in the area? These observations offer evidence of the nature of the professor's expectations of students.

Likewise, peers should review tests and quizzes. Are they valid (do they test what was taught)? Are they fair? Are they appropriately demanding? Do they cause students to think?

Peers can provide data on each of these elements of teaching without examining delivery at all. And peers are the best source of meaningful judgements on these aspects of teaching. Peers can also study student evaluations of teaching and offer unbiased analyses. This can be particularly useful in the case of analyzing open ended student comments about a course.

Finally, peers should be used to offer judgement as to the quality of the in-class performance of a teacher. Perhaps concerns about adequacy of sampling can never be completely addressed. Likewise there are problems of inter-rater reliability. However, before giving up on peer review of teaching because of possible low inter-rater reliability, consider the inter-rater reliability of peers who referee journal articles. Some refereed journals have discovered that the inter-rater reliability of their reviewers is astonishingly low. The problems of peer review notwithstanding, I would argue that some carefully collected data from peers about a colleague's performance in the class is better than making "judgements" based on no information or worse yet, based on hearsay.

Appropriately selected peers can offer several observations of in-class teaching performance which will provide valuable insight into the quality of a person's teaching. These observations should offer the peers' best judgement of the quality of teaching based on their observation of teacher behaviors associated with improved learning. This is especially true when these data are buttressed with peers judgements of syllabi, teaching notes, assignments, and tests. The value of these data will be enhanced if all who offer peer reviews of in-class teaching will focus on similar indicators of quality.

Department Chair Rating

Department chairs should be sure they are in a position to comment in a detailed way on the quality of teaching of their faculty. In addition to reviewing student and peer evaluations, they should be able to bring additional evidence to bear. Department chairs should observe faculty teaching. If time limits the number of class periods they can observe, they can make such a limitation clear when offering their judgements.

An additional source of data for department chair ratings of faculty teaching is from exit interviews. Chairs who conduct exit interviews with students at the time they gradu-

ate gain important information about the quality of teaching in the department. Exit interviews can pinpoint problems and successes and offer important insight into specific illustrations of effective or ineffective teaching.

Alumni Ratings

Few professors go beyond reporting some student ratings of their teaching effectiveness. Almost none include alumni ratings.

A major criticism some offer of student ratings is that the viewpoint of students is not stable. Critics argue that students cannot really judge what was good and bad until they have "been in the real world" for a while. There is certainly some truth to this claim.

If this point of view is accepted, then graduates should be followed up periodically and invited to offer retrospective ratings of classes and professors. Given the logistics and time requirements of such a practice, it is not likely to be adopted very quickly by most departments.

Evidence of Quality of Teaching

Sections of dossiers which deal with quality of teaching are often difficult to interpret. There are a number of typical problems with the organization and portrayal of these data which need to be addressed.

Very often such sections are not clearly organized. Often they include an overload of unrefined information and hence are too voluminous, or they are so superficial that they provide little meaning.

When student ratings are reported many faculty fail to report how many students were enrolled in the course or how many students completed the teacher evaluation forms. Oftentimes averages are not reported, nor are comparative data for the normative group.

It would be helpful to colleagues and administrators who review assessments of quality of teaching if the candidate began the section on quality of teaching with a brief description of teaching assignment and load. The candidate needs to make it clear how many courses were taught, at what level, and for how many students. Reviewers also need to know what portion of the person's time was assigned for teaching.

Next, student evaluations of teaching should be reported. In the case of a promotion dossier, report data for the same course over time. Lay out a table that displays the data for each course longitudinally. Only report core items which are used by all (or most) professors. Indicate the term the course was taught, number of students who completed the forms, averages for the candidate and averages for the normative group. Data for subsequent courses should be similarly displayed.

This should be followed with a summary of student ratings on items in addition to core items as well as open-ended responses. Prepare a summary, rather than report all open-ended responses, particularly in the case of promotion decisions where several years of data have been accumulated. In order to remove concerns of biased reporting, have a peer study the student ratings of items beyond the core items and the written comments and prepare a summary analysis which can be reported.

The next section of the dossier should contain peer review data. This can be further subdivided into the following categories: reviews of content, reviews of expectations, reviews of tests and classroom observations. If there are several peer reviews in each of these categories, one of the peers can offer a composite analysis.

Administrator reviews can be presented followed by alumni ratings if they are available.

Summary

After reading the section on quality of teaching, it should be clear what was taught to whom and the level of quality of the teaching as judged by students, peers, the department chair, and/or alumni. When this approach is followed, knowledgeable reviewers should be able to determine the effectiveness of the teacher being reviewed.

There should be sufficient evidence to render a judgement as to the level of quality of the teaching of the individual in question. When there is solid evidence to buttress the claim that the teaching was of high quality, reward is more likely to follow.

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