

Teaching Effectiveness: Conceptualization and Domain Assessment

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To be an effective teacher is a goal to which most academics aspire. Few in our vocation would disagree that our helpfulness and utility to students motivates us to continue to refine our efforts in the classroom. Formal recognition of this effort, whether by colleagues or supervisors, may not necessarily be received. We attempt to show that this is because the methods of measuring teaching effectiveness are woefully inadequate and that the method of measurement as well as the very conceptualization of the construct needs to be revisited.

A review of the literature reveals a wide range of different approaches (i.e., questionnaires, peer evaluations, self-evaluations, outcome tests, portfolios, publication productivity); perspectives (i.e., student/consumer, instructor, administration, alumni, employer); number of dimensions involved (e.g., course organization, communication skills, student/teacher interaction, workload, grading); intrinsic characteristics of the students and/or instructor (e.g., motivation, abilities, interests, gender); and evaluation usage (diagnostic vs. political).

In a very basic sense, teaching is about facilitating learning. And, from theories of learning, whether they are behavioral or cognitive, learning is about change. For higher education, the type of change we are interested in has to do with changes in thinking. To define learning requires an understanding of what is thinking. In defining what thinking is, we can build our way back up to what we mean by teaching effectiveness and established our baseline.

What is thinking? According to Ruggiero (1998, p. 2), "Thinking is any mental activity that helps

formulate or solve a problem, make a decision, or fulfill a desire to understand. It is a searching for answers, a reaching for meaning." Hence, learning is about teaching students to think about things by having them engage in their own questioning, and that the process of learning is directed towards the practicing of being underway.

The movement toward experiential teaching and the exploration of new approaches in the classroom are not making the assessment job any easier. Even the traditional multi-method approaches falter when the construct to be measured is poorly conceptualized. No easy answers exist, but there seems to be sufficient evidence to call into question several practices.

The use of syllabi to show a day-by-day plan for a class and how the various topics will be systematically covered is a cherished institution of higher education. If indeed, we are seeking to allow students to explore the various dimensions of the topic at hand and facilitating "thinking" as we have briefly defined it here, perhaps a focus on more liberty in syllabi and evaluations and less structure would be suggested.

Ironically, the need to show a return on investments into higher-education for donors, legislators and taxpayers has further shifted the emphasis of classroom performance measurement to narrowly-defined terms has left professors discounting teaching evaluations while administrations place increasing weight on them.

REFERENCE

Ruggiero, Vincent Ryan (1998). The Art of Thinking. New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.