

PERCEIVED OBJECTIVITY OF STUDENT EVALUATION OF FACULTY

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INTRODUCTION

Systematic faculty evaluation by students has become an important part of the administrative equation in determining yearly faculty performance incentives as well as potential for promotion and tenure. A recent survey of faculty who teach journalism and mass communication courses throughout the United States indicates that over 90% of faculty is evaluated by their students each semester. Most programs appear to use student feedback that has been obtained by the use of some type of rating instrument (Sitz and Thayer, 1995). These evaluation procedures have often engendered controversy and questions among faculty and administrators concerning not only the participation of students in determining the fate of professors, but the very objectivity of the rating instruments and the students themselves.

If the intent of the student feedback is formative, that is to assist faculty in improving their day-to-day teaching skills, what special insight do students have about teaching methodology? Not all student comments are constructive, or motivated by desire to help improve teaching techniques (Bodle, 1994). Student ratings of professors are more often likely to be implemented as summative judgements to be used by administrators to justify hiring, retention and promotion. Although there is some evidence to show that ratings by students may be reliable as "summative judgements" (Armstrong, 1987; Ellic, 1986; Magnuson, 1987), because of the critical nature of decisions about faculty, it would seem essential to make the systematic evaluation process as scientific as possible. This would include elimination of casual observation, informal influences on the evaluation process, hearsay evidence about the faculty member, and gossip. Although some informal appraisal of teacher effectiveness by passing impressions and feelings on to the other students through social channels will probably always be part of the academic environment, formal systems of evaluation that include the use of instruments that measure student

impressions of faculty and courses should strive for some semblance of scientific objectivity (Goldberg & Callahan, 1991).

A serious concern is that in the eager pursuit to improve administrative decisions, many institutions and department chairs may have moved too quickly to embrace "unscientific" rating procedures, measurement instruments and data-gathering procedures. It is possible that the numerical results of the evaluation procedure may not be used with consideration of their validity and reliability for the intended purpose. And despite a growing body of evidence that empirical data about the quality of teaching is obtainable, controversy and questions persist as to the objectivity of the process.

THE EVALUATION INSTRUMENT ISSUE

Most everyone recognizes that the design of scientific instruments to measure human performance in a laboratory setting is a highly specialized skill. Similarly, the typical instrument used to measure human performance outside of the laboratory lies within the domain of but a few highly trained specialists who have succeeded in providing instruments that have withstood the test of time. The most well-known of these instruments are the standardized tests that many faculty and students have participated in at one time or another. Yet, in a comparatively short period of time, administrators have rushed to embrace a wide variety of new faculty evaluation instruments frequently custom designed by themselves. Other instruments are borrowed and copied, modified and passed on from department to department and institution to institution, and none appears to have a foundation in terms of scientific realities.

Four years ago, a study at New Mexico State University revealed at least twenty-one different evaluation questionnaires being used at the same time. The College of Arts and Sciences allowed each

department to use a different teaching evaluation form, but still apportioned salary increase monies in accord with a ranking based on research, teaching and service. To compare a department using a form of six questions, all on a four-point scale, with a department using a twelve-question instrument employing a seven point scale is just not a very good science, yet such unequal faculty evaluation comparisons are still commonly used among university departments whose survey standards in other types of academic research projects are rigorously controlled to minimize error (Sitz & Thayer, 1995).

POTENTIALS FOR BIAS

Compounding the problems inherent in instrument design and institutional procedures in application of the evaluation systems are many issues surrounding the students' ability to provide useful information. Not only is the quality of the student feedback dependent on the capability of the instrument to elicit appropriate responses, but just as central is the question of student "capability" and motivation.

It has been demonstrated in a number of research studies that the responses sought by typical faculty evaluation methods such as rating instruments are biased by a number of factors such as age and attractiveness (Cashen, 1985; Levin, 1979; Armstrong, 1987); gender (Petchers & Chow, 1988; Cashen, 1985; Basow & Silberg, 1987); and student grades (Aleamoni, 1981; Goldberg & Callahan, 1991; Levin, 1979). Hudson (1989) found a direct correlation between teaching evaluation scores and expected grades in mass communication courses. An interesting conclusion of that study was that students who expect grades of "Pass," "A" or "B" consistently rated instructors higher than students who expected lower grades of "C," "D" or "F". Other research, however, has failed to find a significant relationship between grades and ratings of faculty (Osunde, 1984). A recent study found an interaction between gender of the instructor and gender of the student, with female evaluators tending to give higher evaluations to instructors of the same gender, and males being likely to evaluate males more favorably (Lueck, Endres & Caplan, 1993). In a discussion of evaluation fairness, one author catalogued the cruel anonymous comments that beset every instructor, no matter how talented or competent, suggesting that some evaluations may be neither fair nor accurate (Bodle, 1994). There are a number of other factors identified in the literature that are

potential sources of bias in the evaluation process that are beyond the scope of this paper -- the issue is apparent without them!

Given the complex context of the evaluation situation, with all of the potentials for bias, is objective consideration of the facts surrounding teaching achievable? In an attempt to shed light on the question, Sitz and Thayer (1994) conducted two background studies described as follows:

Student Perception of Objectivity

In the spring of 1994, a thirty-nine question survey was given to a convenience sample of 89 students in attendance in four different journalism courses at New Mexico State University. On a 1-7 Likert scale, students were asked to address such issues as the importance of being able to evaluate faculty, and the objectivity of their ability to accomplish the task.

Students were asked specifically how important it was for them to be able to evaluate their instructors, how seriously they approached the task, and how objective they perceived themselves as being in the evaluation procedure.

In this survey of student opinions about faculty evaluation, it was found that students reported on a 1-7 scale, with 1 being strongly disagree, to 7 being strongly agree, a high rating for importance of evaluating, the seriousness of the evaluating task, and their objectivity in evaluating faculty.

TABLE 1

Student responses on importance, seriousness and objectivity of evaluating faculty from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Question	Mean	Std Dev
It is important for me to be able to evaluate my instructors.	6.03	1.64
When asked to evaluate an instructor I approach the task very seriously.	5.83	1.57
I believe I am as objective as possible about instructor evaluation.	5.86	1.36

Faculty Perceptions of Student Objectivity

In the second study (Sitz & Thayer, 1994), a

nationwide survey of faculty members belonging to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications sought answers as to evaluation practices in use at colleges and universities throughout North America. Of 60 questions asked of each respondent, seven questions were directly related to the fairness and objectivity of evaluation instruments and how the faculty perceived the fairness and objectivity of the students filling out those instruments.

Using dichotomous questions, the survey writers asked several questions bearing upon the evaluation process: the first two questions asked whether the respondents' departmental evaluation instrument was fair and objective; the second pair of questions asked whether faculty felt that students were the best source of feedback on classroom performance and if the information was of good quality. Finally, three questions addressed whether faculty believed students took the task seriously, were objective in their evaluations, and whether students were thoughtful and fair in their evaluations.

In this second survey of faculty opinions concerning evaluation, evaluation instruments were regarded as fair and objective by the majority of the 960 faculty who returned the survey. Student feedback was seen as the best source of information for faculty performance evaluation by slightly less than half of the respondents, but a majority of respondents saw the feedback as generally of good quality. On the subject of whether students take their role in the evaluation process seriously, a plurality of respondents agreed that students were serious about the task, but less than half said that they believed students to be objective in evaluating faculty. A majority of the faculty members surveyed said that students were thoughtful and fair in their evaluation of faculty.

These independent studies, one focusing on student perception concerning faculty evaluation, and the other about faculty perceptions of student evaluation, yield an interesting dichotomy between what students believe and what faculty believe. Students appear to believe that they are very objective. Professors, on the other hand, appear to equivocate in terms of their views about student "objectivity."

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Since most instruments that are used to evaluate faculty purport to have characteristics that embrace

TABLE 2

Faculty responses on fairness and objectivity of evaluation instruments and student evaluators in %.

Question	Yes	No
Do you agree that the evaluation instrument that is used by your department is objective?	63.4	36.6
Do you agree that the evaluation instrument that is used by your department is fair?	65.8	34.2
Do you agree that students are the best source of feedback concerning your classroom performance?	46.5	53.5
Do you believe that the feedback is generally of good quality?	71.8	28.2
Do you believe that the students take their role in the evaluation process seriously?	64.1	36.9
Do you believe that students are objective in their evaluations?	45.2	54.8
Students are usually thoughtful and fair in their evaluation of faculty.	69.1	30.9

the concepts of empiricism, thus scientific methodology, objectivity by implication is an important concept to understand. At issue in this study is whether students "understand" the term "objective" to the extent that is necessary to be able to respond to a direct question in a survey that uses the term "objectivity." This study sought to determine what students perceive to be the idea of objectivity.

STUDENT INTERPRETATION: THE MEANING OF OBJECTIVITY

A convenience sample of 81 journalism and mass communications student respondents at New Mexico State University were given an instrument that asked each to define "objectivity" in their own words. The sample, taken in Spring 1994, would be used to determine if there were terms in common among students and would suggest whether a congruent pool of meaning might exist. The question asked of each student follows:

"Please respond briefly (not more than 75 words) to the following questions: What does the word objective (as applied to 'thinker' not 'goals') mean to you? For example, do you consider yourself to be an 'objective' thinker? If you were asked to evaluate a teacher's performance, could you be 'objective' in your opinion about the teacher's performance?"

Define the word objective using the preceding examples as context (please answer in no more than 75 words)."

Because students were not limited to one-word definitions, most respondents offered sentences or paragraphs as definitions of the term, and researchers planned to extrapolate word factors that would give full dimensions to student capability of defining the criterion word.

RESULTS

Student Definitions of Objectivity

Of the 81 students who completed the questionnaire asking for a definition of the word "objective", 77 submitted usable answers. The answers submitted

TABLE 3

Key student descriptors of the term "objective" by number and percent of the total number of descriptors identified.

Descriptor Terms	Number	Percent
(considering) All sides (views, angles, facts)	21	13.1
Both sides	7	4.3
Unbiased (or phrasing indicating without bias)*	34	21.2
Impartial*	4	2.5
Open-minded	17	10.6
Fair	9	5.6
Detachment*	1	0.6
Neutral	2	1.3
Without prejudice (or discrimination)*	7	4.3
Pro and con	1	0.6
Honest	2	1.3
Without emotion (not influenced by feelings, emotion)	14	8.8
Rational (relying on facts, facts only) (without relying on, using) personal opinions	10	6.3
Analytical (analyzing)	27	16.9
Logical	2	1.3
Total	160	100.0
Thesaurus synonyms for "Objective"		

produced a mean response length of 20 words. When the extraneous articles and verbs were subtracted, 390 descriptor words were identified within the 257 submitted sentences. Thesaurus synonyms for "objective" include such words as impartial, fair, detached, impersonal, unbiased, and unprejudiced. Most of these words were used by students to describe the criterion term "objective."

Other phrases used as part of the definitions written by the respondents included such terms as "free speech, independently, right or wrong, point of view, preconceived ideas, one-sided, not favoring, not influenced, subjective, wholeness, accurate, clear mind, beliefs, broad, whole view, evaluate, different aspects, different ways, educated judgement, negative feelings, right or wrong, opposite of subjective, democracy.

DISCUSSION

While the cognitive structure of objectivity may be difficult to capture, its architecture is expressed in the way people define the term itself. Partisan evaluators may indeed delude themselves that they are being objective when such impartiality may be impossible; however, such imprecise human measurement is true of all members of the academy, not just students.

Perhaps the process of evaluation is too often viewed as an objective scientific endeavor -- with absolute truth as its goal -- when in reality we would be better served considering it as a form of argument, or a point of discussion. But if the ideal of our evaluative methodology is valid, it must be somewhat comforting to see that students appear to have the gist of the idea of objectivity well in-hand.

Analysis of the student responses to the survey yielded terms and phrases like "bias-unbiased," "opinions," "all sides," and "open-minded" that lend a great deal of credence to the students' grasp of the idea of objectivity. Whether students (and faculty for that matter) are able to make the conceptual leap from understanding objectivity to practicing it, is a perennial issue for consideration.

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