



Faculty Forum

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Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?

I have studied the new "Policies For Evaluating Teaching," which was recently approved by the Faculty Senate. I find one thing about these policies very disturbing. We say that the most important component of Western's existence is the student-teacher teaching and learning relationship. Yet, the policies fail to include the measuring of student learning. The document defines teaching "in terms of the following dimensions: Content Expertise, Instructional Delivery Skills, Instructional Design Skills, Course Management Skills, Evaluation of Students, Faculty/Student Relationship, and Facilitation of Student Learning." These seven "dimensions" equate teaching to the actions of the instructor—that is, putting on a good show on paper and in front of the class. Teaching, however, does not occur unless student learning occurs, and this may or may not have much to do with the approved teacher behavior as defined by these seven "dimensions."

First and foremost, the most effective teacher in a given course is the one who effects the most student learning in that course. Any measure of teaching effectiveness must be centered around the measuring of student learning; anything else is merely political. Not only are these policies not centered around the measurement of student learning, but measuring student learning is not even mentioned in them. The buzzwords "Facilitation of Student Learning" are used in the document, but this is not tied to the measurement of student learning.

The "Policies" indicate that the evaluation of teaching should use "data" (and I use the term very loosely) by student evaluations, from an instructor's report, and from a review of that report by colleagues. This is nothing new, for that is precisely the long standing AFE procedure.

But, no matter how students evaluate us, no matter how we evaluate ourselves, no matter how other observers evaluate us, no matter how closely our actions match the opinions of those who are telling us what an effective teacher should and should not do in the class room, we cannot know what kind of job we are doing without knowing how much our students are learning. Yet, determining degrees of teaching effectiveness is a major factor in how we are ranked among our colleagues and how we are paid.

We are professional educators, so it is our business to determine what common core of knowledge, skills, etc., a student should gain from a course, and measuring the degree to which this is accomplished should be the way that an instructor's teaching effectiveness is ranked. Since this is our profession, we better be able to do this. However, if for some reason we conclude that student learning cannot be measured for a given course, then we should admit that teaching effectiveness cannot be measured for that course and then move on.

During the Faculty Senate meeting at which the "Policies" were approved, it was said by certain senators that sometimes an instructor may do everything right but because of the quality and/or attitudes of the students, there may not be much student learning going on; thus, teacher actions and not student learning should be the basis for evaluating teaching. Clearly, an instructor

may do everything right and get poor student evaluations. This is why student evaluations should be eliminated.

Others at the Senate meeting said that teacher actions and not student learning should be the basis of evaluating teaching because measuring student learning was just too difficult. So we take the easy way out? Is it really too difficult, or is it clear that by measuring student learning, we would find out some things that we do not want to admit?

Experts on teaching and learning in the college classroom have studied student entry characteristics, task characteristics, instructional methods, student motivation, student cognition, and student involvement in self-regulated learning as factors contributing to academic performance and have concluded that instructional methods play only a minor role in academic performance. Thus, it is unlikely that the true teaching effectiveness of a given instructor during a given year can be measured accurately using information collected during that single year. There are too many variables to account for. To get a true and accurate measurement of teaching effectiveness, one needs to track relevant measures over several years.

It all comes down to the fact that our procedure for evaluating teaching effectiveness continues to be based on promoting ourselves, that is, convincing the appropriate people (including our students) that we put on a good show regardless of how much or how little our students learn. I fear that this proposal is an attempt to rationalize the current procedure of giving raises and awards based on subjective measures of teacher performance as perceived by individuals who control such rewards, rather than basing them on the more objective reality of the amount of learning taking place.

The best teachers that I ever had were the nonconformists. They were the scholars who did not bow to the pressures of pleasing all those who thought they could define the art of teaching in some closed form. They knew what should be learned in their courses and they held their students responsible for those standards. Instead of being forced to conform to someone's fixed definition of good teaching, I would wish to be judged by the amount of learning which takes place in my classes.

Recently, the University of South Carolina and the University of Saskatchewan conducted a study which asked 406 students to rate the importance of enthusiasm, rapport, learning, course difficulty, organization, breadth, group interaction, assignments, and examinations as factors of teaching effectiveness. Consideration of these factors led the students to rate student learning as the most important factor. Unfortunately, within a classroom situation where personalities come into play, students are often unable to evaluate these factors objectively. If the students say that learning is most important and we know that learning is most important, then why do we not use some objective measure of student learning as our basis of evaluating teaching effectiveness? Why do we "attempt" to measure instructional methods, something which has little effect on academic performance and can not be measured accurately, when we could measure end results? Why? Because it is easier to reward the people we wish to reward rather than the people who produce the best results. So, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the students get short changed.

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