

# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Responses to "Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?" by Richard Stephens, 3/1/00

There is a series of five articles on student ratings of professors in the November 1997 issue of the American Psychologist. Several of these articles are relevant to issues Dr. Stephens has raised.

*Anonymous*

If I understand Richard's point, he is saying that student learning should determine teaching effectiveness. He doesn't use the word, but could he possibly mean grades? If so, is a "good" teacher then one whose entire class learns the material well enough to make grades of A? Should we base "teaching" rewards on grade reports? Isn't this what the category "evaluation of students" is about? I would certainly question (and have) the teaching effectiveness of someone whose students consistently make more Ds and Fs than passing grades, or whose students consistently withdraw from the professor's courses in high proportions.

I think maybe part of the problem lies in some faculty not knowing how to write a syllabus with measurable outcome objectives based on what the student will learn. With this foundation, it is then possible to write evaluation measures that yield grades that are an accurate reflection of student learning in the course. These measures can include multiple-choice exams, essay exams, short papers, long papers, classroom presentations, clinical performance--whatever is appropriate to the material and methods for which learning must be demonstrated.

Here we are back at the question (rarely asked, I fear) of whether high achievement in one's discipline (doctorate, lots of research, lots of publications, etc.) is sufficient to prepare a competent teacher. Where is the examination of faculty vitae for credentials in how to teach? If new faculty have never had the opportunity to learn the mechanics of effective learner evaluation, is it not our job to teach them? Who mentors someone who has never written test questions or criteria for performance or, Mager help us, a comprehensive course syllabus? Maybe our New Faculty Orientation could incorporate some of these skills, and those who come with them could assist those who don't. As for the faculty who have been with us forever and still don't know how to teach so students learn, I guess we can only pray that they retire soon.

*Sharon Jacques, Nursing*

Richard Stephens' commentary "Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?" seems to focus on two issues: (1) that the Policies for Evaluating Teaching "fail to include the measuring of student learning" and (2) that the evaluation of teaching based on student assessments of teaching, instructor's report, and collegial review of teaching is nothing new at WCU. I would like to comment briefly on each of these issues.

The literature on teaching and the measurement of student learning is voluminous. Many attempts have been made to quantify teaching and learning, but so far none has resulted in any objective measures that can be used to evaluate student learning. What has been accomplished is that researchers agree that there are some major elements of effective teaching that contribute and facilitate student learning. These are the major elements that are identified in the document. Currently there is no effective way of determining just how much a student has "learned" at a given time. How, for example, do you determine how much a student has learned who progresses from level X to level Y compared to a student who progresses from level Z to level N? A test would probably indicate the latter, but has that student really "learned" more? Or there is the student who "learns" a few facts compared to another student who learns a lot of facts. The student who "learned" a few facts internalizes those facts and incorporates them into his/her knowledge base whereas the other student does not. Which student "learned" more and how and who determines how much was "learned"? This raises another question. Is "learning" the ultimate outcome of teaching or is there another level that

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**Responses to ""Effective Teaching or Convincing Performance?," by Richard Stephens," 3/1/00, continued**

goes beyond "learning"? Back in college I had a professor (also a nonconformist) who lamented the fact that there were a lot of people in the world who were instructed but few who were educated. This concept of "educated" is also embodied in the German word *Bildung--die Einheit von Halting, Koennen und Wissen, die sich ein zuechtvoller Mensch erwirb* (the integration of character, skills, and knowledge that a disciplined individual develops over time). This implies that learning is only one step in a long process of becoming educated. If indeed this is true, then how and when do you measure the ultimate outcome of learning?

Though it may be true in theory that the evaluation of teaching based on student assessments of teaching, instructor's report, and collegial review of teaching is nothing new at Western Carolina, this kind of evaluation is not what always occurs in practice. Again, the literature indicates that evaluations are more valid if data are gathered from several sources, each with a different perspective. Researchers tend to agree that these sources should at least include students, colleagues, and self but can also include others. Although student assessments alone are not a very reliable source of information, if they are used in conjunction with other information--and if the instruments are properly structured--student assessments can provide a perspective that can only be supplied by students. Thus the Task Force felt that input from these three sources into the evaluation process would not only yield more objective results but would also create more consistency across campus.

Is this the perfect document? No. Is it chiseled in stone? No. Is it a living document that can be revised and improved? Yes. It was the hope of the Task Force that this document would be the first step towards creating a more equitable and consistent process for evaluating teaching at Western Carolina University and that it would not be considered the final word.

*Anita K. Oser, Chair, Task Force on Evaluating Teaching*

Richard Stephens' *Faculty Forum* piece on evaluating teaching provided a provocative point of departure for the Talking about Teaching group on March 3. Our conversation went in several directions. We didn't necessarily go away with answers, but we did have a good talk about teaching. Some of the ideas that came out of the discussion were as follows:

- Some disciplines and professions focus more on processes, skills and applications than on factual information. Evaluation procedures for teaching and learning may need to take these differences into account.
- You can learn something about how effective a teacher is by watching the students' body language. Alert, active students suggest an engaging teacher; slouching, inactive students suggest a boring teacher.
- Good teaching often includes a variety of approaches. Lectures, small group problem solving, role-playing, and other methods can all be effective. The best teachers are skilled at selecting and sometimes changing methods to meet the needs of the learning situation.
- Teachers teach who they are. (Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*)
- Evaluating teaching is a problem without a perfect solution. The policies passed by the Faculty Senate last fall give us a reasonable approximation of what we mean by good teaching.
- Teaching and learning – the doing and evaluating of them – are inextricably intertwined.
- We often talk about "covering the material." Maybe we need to change our thinking and talk more about how to help students uncover the material.

*Talk About Teaching Group:  
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