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Lee, Robin H.

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student participation in the assessment of courses and lecturing

R. H. LEE

Despite a vast amount of empirical research, university teaching still remains something of an **art,** rather than a **science.** It is not yet amenable to conceptual analysis or empirical proof. Consequently, in the words of Sir Peter Venables, Vice-Chancellor of Birmingham University,

> Results will vary with the topic and with the groups of students, and the best way (for a lecturer) to improve (his) performance is to ask the recipients and listen to their answers.[1]

In other words: there are a great many theories about what teaching (and education) might, or ought to be. If lecturers want to improve their courses and their teaching, they must proceed pragmatically. The first people they should ask for advice and opinion are students; they should not be the last, as is often the case. Students are in fact uniquely equipped to provide information about a course or a teaching performance, since they are the only audience for whom the course is designed, and they are the only people whose careers and futures are tied up with the success of the course. Consequently, as a group, they alone possess an operational knowledge of the course and the teaching, and they are also uniquely motivated to generate opinions and, if asked politely to express them.

Compare, for instance, assessments given by a colleague of the lecturer. First, there is the ethical problem. Even if I were to invite a colleague to assess my lecture, he will still have residual guilt feelings about violating the time-honoured autonomy of the lecturer in his lecture theatre, and it has been shown that this influences his attitude: usually making him more lenient in his judgements. The student, on the other hand, has the **right** (and, in some lamentable cases, the **duty**) to be present at the lecture, and feels no guilt in assessing it. Secondly, a colleague will inevitably possess a wider and deeper knowledge of the subject than the average student. He will have a conceptual framework that will allow him to make connections and create logical orders, whether these are present in the lecture or not.

The average student, on the other hand, will fail to perceive the structure of the lecture if it is not in the lecture. The student then is a more reliable judge of whether the lecture has a structure that is clear to the student.

Thirdly, most colleagues have neither the time nor the motivation to attend an entire course and their opinions, based on one or two lectures at random, may be quite wide of the mark, for the course as a whole. The student, on the other hand, attends the whole course, and has overviews that must be lacking to the colleague. For these and other reasons, students have often been shown to be more reliable assessors of a course than individual colleagues of the lecturer. Consequently, I make no apology for directing attention to the possibilities of student assessment, and intend to analyse the nature of student assessment, its limitations, its potential and some modes of co-operative effort between students and lecturers for the benefit of both, and of the university.

Examination results do not assess a course

There is first one hoary old **red-herring** that must be disposed of — that is, that student achievement in examinations is relevant to the assessment the value of a course. There are so many empirical results refuting this point of view that I find it almost as difficult to select the central few as many departments find it difficult to give up the idea that pass and fail percentages in a terminal examination give them guidance as to the value and difficulty of the course. However, these are the four main reasons. First, in any course an unspecified and probably indeterminate

number of values must intervene between the effects of the component courses and the results of terminal examinations. This is especially true of South African degree structures. Such variables will be student reading, discussion with other students, simple growing maturity and so on. Secondly there is a body of irrefutable evidence that in any essay type examination (and in most others) the marking standards on which the percentage marks are based are only slightly better than chance, if a correlation is made between different markers or the same marker at different times.[2] Thirdly, examiantions are designed (when they are **designed** at all) to assess students and not to assess courses or teaching, and the inference from one to the other is not proven. Finally, there is a normative point. Examinations should not be used for the purpose of assessing courses, but should properly be conceived of as part of the teaching structure.[3] Students should learn from examinations, and examinations are thus properly conceived of as part of the course. Logically, therefore, they cannot be the instrument by which the course is to be assessed.

Consequently, we must seek for other methods of assessing the value and suitability of the prescribed teaching and learning process called the **course,** and it is increasingly clear that students can play a vital role in this. In discussing these newer forms of assessment of course, two lines of enquiry are worth pursuing.

New directions in course assessment

First, we must analyse clearly the results we desire from assessment. Assessment of teaching can be made for one or more of these reasons. We may assess teaching to provide evidence for decisions on promotion or tenure. We may assess teaching to provide the basis for research into education. Or we may assess teaching to provide information relevant to the improvement of the course and the teaching.[4]

Student assessment has proved of greatest value in the third of these aims — providing information relevant to improvement in course design and in teaching performance, from which, it is hoped, improvements in learning will result. It will be noticed that, awkward as it may be, I link assessment of the course with assessment of the teaching performance. Research has shown that more reliable, and more valid results can be obtained from assessments aimed at the courses as a whole, including performance. Less reliable results are obtained from attempts to assess performance in isolation from subject matter and course structure.[5]

Most recent research, indeed, now bases its procedure upon the question "what constitutes good teaching?", and avoids the question "what constitutes a good teacher?" In this way, attention is shifted from the personal qualities of the teacher to his ability to create learning situations and to manage learning resources. Here, the opinions of students, quantified and treated with due statistical care, have proved valuable, especially if used in conjunction with other modes of assessment.

Justification of student course-assessment

There are three main observations upon which the use of student assessment rests. One is a statement of principle, the other two are observations about practical results. The principle has already been implied: in principle, students have a right to express opinions about the institutions to which people belong or to whose discipline they are subjected. It should be remembered that the right to have and express opinions about courses does not automatically extend to a right to have courses changed in accordance with those opinions. The changes made as a result of student opinion are rather matters of **negotiation** than of **principle.** The teaching staff, the head of Department and the Faculties and Senate also have ideas — more or less valid — concerning the course and the teaching methods, and these must be weighed together with the student opinion.

The real shift of opinion is that the student rating should be weighed at all, whether with the other opinions, or not. As far as I know, this is not done in any South African university on any formal scale; and students have a right here which they should begin vigorously to exercise.

Why involve students in Course Assessment?

The two reasons for involving student opinion in the assessment of courses can be more briefly stated. Firstly, it is always better, in practice, for the lecturer to know what his students are thinking, than for him not to know. If he is prepared to accept that their opinions have interest and value, then discovering what they are is an obviously beneficial step. But even if the lecturer feels that student opinion may be incorrect, it is still better to know what it is than not to know. Then, he may take steps to change that opinion: or if he does not, he should be aware as the negative opinion, (incorrect though it may be by his standards) shows itself in declining student motivation, decreasing lack of response, and absenteeism. Eventually this situation becomes a **self-fulfilling prophecy:** because students think a course is bad, they stay away and the course becomes bad.[6]

For it goes without saying that courses to which no one goes are bad courses.

The second practical reason is altogether more "political". Many research studies have shown that, even if it is felt that student opinion does not help in identifying strong and weak areas of the course, the act of seeking student opinion creates better student-staff relations, and increases the chances of the course being effective.[7]

Students develop a higher opinion of the lecturer, for they interpret his seeking of their opinions as an interest in them. But this initial gain will of course soon be lost unless changes arise from the assessment — or unless at least the results of the assessment be made known, if it is indicated that changes are not required.

Student Assessment and Research

Before concentrating on the means by which student opinion can best be gathered and used, I wish to mention two further points from the research. First, student assessments have been shown to bear clear relationships to personality factors, career expectations, subjects of study, and physical conditions of teaching. Thus student opinion may be based upon, or at least introduce, variables not related specifically to course design or teaching performance.[8]

Consequently, student assessment is not a sufficient measurement in itself. But, then, neither is any other single form of assessment, and the latest research evidence is that a combination of methods is best. Some of these will be of traditional statistical and objective kind, others may involve a more subjective and participatory approach now coming to be referred to as "ethnomethodology."[9] One fact that has emerged, though, is that student assessment, being relatively easy to obtain, has often broken the log-jam of centuries of refusal to consider assessment. Once tried, it has often shown lecturers that assessment need not be the traumatic and threatening process it at first appears.

The final point concerning research into assessment is this: we must still recognize that the variables that make up good courses and good teaching are extensive and at the moment both conceptually unmanageable, and empirically impossible to isolate and measure. Consequently, assessment can only meaningfully take place if the **objectives** of the course and the teaching have previously been defined.[10]

Achievement can only meaningfully be judged against stated aims — not against vague and personal impressions of what might be done in the course. That is why large numbers of recent writers on education have stressed their inter-relation between objectives and evaluation. In terms of student assessment, this obviously implies making the objectives of the course known to the students, in order that their assessments may be directed to those objectives, and not to others unspecified, unmeasurable and, often, simply personal.

Let me turn finally to the strategies of student participation in the assessment of courses and lecturing. I will deal with lecturing first. Student assessment of lecturing and lecturers is quite commonplace. It extends from the one extreme of simple 10 point rating scales, devised by a lecturer for use in his own class only; to the other extreme of elaborate 50-60 item questionnaires, standardised and validated in tests involving hundreds of thousands of students. The former type of questionnaire aims to provide the lecturer with some quantified information on aspects of his teaching in that individual course only, and cannot be

generalised to other courses. The second type of questionnaire is designed to produce statistically reliable and valid results, generaliseable from one course to another. In both cases, improvement by the individual lecturer is the primary aim, and maximum benefit is gained if **immediate discussion or changes follow.** A wide and growing consensus concerning valued lecturer qualities is now emerging. It may be of interest to identify the first 5 in a widespread British survey. Students rated highest the ability to present the subject clearly and logically: second, that lecturers should be clearly audible; third, that they bring out the principles of the subject; fourth that they make the subject intelligble at the level of the class; and fifth that they state the material to be covered in the lecture and cover it.[11]

These results accord closely with American Studies, and we have found very similar patterns at the University of the Witwatersrand.

How not to change Lecturer Techniques

Student participation in this form of assessment is, unfortunately, passive. They simply complete the questionnaire, and never hear any more. This should change. Lecturers and students should co-operate in defining the aims of the assessment, and should be involved in the administration of it and discussion of its results. Failing this, the assessment becomes yet another inexplicable and anonymous aspect of a course already full of inexplicable and anonymous activities. However, this mode of co-operation has obligations for student-participants, as well as benefits. They must be at least aware of the nature of such questionnaires, their potentials and limitations, as the lecturer. They must enter into the venture co-operatively. No student-originated assessment that is, or is seen to be, aimed at the staff can bring about changes. Rather, it will harden attitudes. The lecturer's obligations too, do not stop at handing out the questionnaire, and agonizing over the results in private. Ideally, also, the questionnaire should be borne in mind from as early as the formulation of the course objectives, and used diagnostically during the course (with feedback) rather than terminally, when it is too late to make changes.

Course Assessment

Finally, let us briefly consider student participation in the assessment of courses. This will, of course, include assessment of teaching methods used in courses. This activitiy does not by any means have the widespread acceptance and established methodology of assessment of lectures.

A course is altogether more complex a phenomenon than a lecture, involving decisions concerning content, sequence, entrance levels, teaching methods, final examinations and many other components. In this area there has been some advanced work at the University of the Witwatersrand. We begin by refusing to construct our questionnaire. We go to the students and ask for their unstructured opinion of the course, we then analyse and categorise their answers, and from the categories generate a questionnaire of some 160-250 items which covers all the aspects that students have mentioned. This questionnaire is then administered to the whole class and analysed (by computer) to distinguish between: items gaining overwhelming approval, items gaining overwhelming disapproval, and items on which opinion is divided.

The third group of items indicates discriminations, and will eventually provide us with our validated questionnaire. If our changes cause significant changes in these discriminating items, then we have a useful measuring tool.

This procedure, initially based entirely on student opinion, enables us simultaneously to identify the strong, weak and dubious parts of a course, and to create a valid and reliable questionnaire. The technique is currently in use in a medical department, two science departments, an arts department and the law school. In all cases it has been undertaken in consultation with students and in some with their active participation in administering the questionnaires, and assessing the results.

For students interested in educational reform, it will be a valuable tactic to concentrate on course and lecturing assessment. Much can be achieved immediately with individual lecturers, and a process of diffusion of ideas can be set in motion. Staff/student contact in-

creases as well, unlike reform of examinations, bodies outside the university are not often involved in altering courses. Used with discretion and based upon research findings, student participation in assessment of courses and lecturng is viable and valid. Above all, by concentrating attention towards the process of education and away from its examinable products, it may help to make South African universities less like **grading factories** and more like the co-operative learning centres they should be.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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