

Why Take Instructor/Class Evaluations Seriously?

Ken Petress

Student class/instructor evaluation time looms again. For some students, there is confusion as to the evaluations' purpose; for others, who may or may not appreciate their purpose, there are lingering doubts that evaluations really matter. Well, there are purposes for these evaluations and they **do** matter. Student evaluations are not perfect; no perfect judgment instrument has ever been devised. They do serve utilitarian functions -- not in every case -- however, we should not cease a positive practice due to a lack of perfection.

One function of student evaluations is to alert faculty to those course preparation, class delivery, and grading practices that either work well or that need amending or replacement. Faculty need feedback on their performance and on the choices they make in preparing and delivering courses. We do not **know** what works well or what is not working so well; we do frequently have suspicions about these matters; but formal, methodical feedback serves a useful purpose for faculty. Faculty are afforded the opportunity to improve or maintain those teaching practices that work well and to alter or replace those practices that seem not to achieve their desired ends. Caring faculty take these matters seriously and strive to improve their courses. Do all faculty take evaluations equally seriously? No; some of us deride student comments; others dismiss them as unimportant or barely important; while still others see them as threatening commentary; and most of us see evaluations as useful, needed

feedback. Students need to take the evaluation process seriously so that those who read them have a reason to take them seriously.

Faculty colleagues and administrators, too, have a valid reason to want students to take evaluations seriously. Faculty colleagues, Deans, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs are responsible for making retention, tenure, and promotion recommendations regarding faculty members. Faculty colleagues' and administrators' judgments should not be left to whim, rumor, or hunches, but ought to be based, in part, on meaningful student evaluations. If student evaluations are incomplete, missing, vague, or trite, faculty and administrative reviewers have little recourse than to give such evaluations little weight in their personnel decisions.

I believe that the written portion of student evaluations are more useful to me than are the check off scales. This does not dismiss the usefulness of the scaled responses, but is a personal bias. I deplore students who either tell me "This was a wonderful or miserable class." or "The tests were great or awful." These comments are too vacuous to be of use to me. Far better comments would be: "The tests took too much time for me to complete;" or "The tests were structured in a way that afforded an opportunity to show what I know by giving me choices." These last response examples are usefully substantive.

Evaluation comments relevant to instructor behavior also need to be concrete. Statements like: "The teacher was terrible" are not useful. If a comment like: "The instructor habitually

started class late and/or held us beyond the class time" was made, corrective action is clearly called for. Comments like: "The professor gave us detailed feedback on our graded assignments; these helped us do better on future work" or "The teacher offered personal guidance on locating research sources" would offer incentives for faculty members to continue these practices. Professors are like the rest of humanity; we do not read student minds. We are all adults [students and faculty]. We expect mature, direct, honest, and detailed feedback on how we are doing. For the few faculty who do not seem to care about student reactions to their work and for those who need more guidance in improving their teaching, detailed, clear, blunt feedback on problems need to be given by caring students. For those of us who are doing well, comments demonstrating student awareness of positive decisions and actions made by professors are surely appreciated.

I implore students to take the time to seriously evaluate the courses you pay tuition for and take your valuable time to take; your future classes and those taken by future peers rests, in part, on your willingness to take the evaluation process seriously. Will every student evaluation be taken seriously by every faculty member? That is not likely; however, if most students do a diligent evaluation job, most professors will take them and their comments just as seriously.