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Thinking About the End, Even at the Beginning: Some Thoughts About Student Course Evaluations

The beginning of a semester may be an odd time to talk about course evaluations, something very much tied up with semester endings. But the other day, our recently-retired colleague Rebecca Evers tagged me and several others on Facebook with a link to a recent study about student evaluations of teaching. The study suggests that student evaluations are biased against female instructors, by statistically wide margins, and that there is not much that can be done to minimize the bias. Here is a link to the study, if you want to read it fully:

<http://tinyurl.com/z99rtbu>

Rather than comment on the article, I want to talk about evaluations in general. I know that most of us have suspicions and doubts about some aspects of course evaluations, but like them or not, they are a part of our institution and the wider academic culture.

Is anybody else like me? I have a class of 30 students, and while the

majority of evaluations are very positive, I focus on the minority that are negative. Sometimes that is only *one* negative response, but that is the one that stands out to me. I remember a class from 25 or so years ago, with glowing evaluations, but also with this comment: "He wastes valuable class time with his stupid jokes."

That comment stung me, hard. And even though I had numerous comments in that class, and constantly over the years, that said something like, "He makes learning fun and interesting with his sense of humor and his stupid jokes," I could not shake that one negative comment, that outlier.

Even though we should pay attention to all responses, we should remember to put things in perspective and see the bigger picture. If those negative responses dominate, then we can take more notice of them.

I know from my time on college and university

personnel committees that those of us who are evaluating colleagues for tenure and promotion take course evaluations seriously, but we also try to keep things in perspective and see the big picture. Despite the fear some people have that student evaluations can singlehandedly dominate a tenure and promotion decision, that has not been my experience while serving on those committees. Course evaluations are just a part of the larger picture, although they surely do have an effect.

Although we cannot rid course evaluations of their inherent problems, I think there are some steps we can take to make them more effective and reliable. Do you remember doing course evaluations when you were a student? Even though that was a *very* long time ago for me, I remember very well. Course evaluations seemed like just another chore, a pesky chore at a time when all I wanted was for the course and the semester to be over so I could go home. I usually

“Although we cannot rid course evaluations of their inherent problems, I think there are some steps we can take to make them more effective and reliable. Do you remember doing course evaluations when you were a student? Even though that was a very long time ago for me, I remember very well. Course evaluations seemed like just another chore, a pesky chore at a time when all I wanted was for the course and the semester to be over so I could go home.”



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treated them in the most perfunctory way, unless I really liked or really hated the course and/or instructor. I did not realize the value and importance of course evaluations, mainly because I was never told how important they were.

So one thing we can do is to make sure students have a clear understanding of what course evaluations are and their importance to a variety of audiences. In the old days, two or so years ago, I would talk for a few minutes before I handed out the evaluation forms. Now, with online evaluations, I give that talk when I open the link to the evaluations, telling students what happens to evaluations: they go to the department chair, who reads them, then back to me. I read them, of course, but I also use them to write my annual report. I submit them when I am going up for tenure and promotion, and they are read by several committees, who make important decisions about my life and future, based in part on those evaluations. I think most students do not know this process, but I find that they take evaluations much more seriously when they understand the stakes.

I also urge them to be specific in any comments they make: “it was really good” or “it sucked” are not very helpful.

And I tell them that I pull out old course evaluations when I am preparing to teach a course again, and that I often make changes to the course based on suggestions in these evaluations.

I really do find that my five-minute talk yields course evaluations that are fuller and, I hope, more honest. That negative one still sticks out and gnaws at me, but I guess I can't help that. Hey, I know just how bad most of my jokes really are!

And who says Facebook is useless? While I was writing this column, a former student, who recently completed her PhD in English, posted a link on Facebook to an article from yesterday's *Chronicle of Higher Education* by James M. Lang, “Small Changes in Teaching: Four Quick Ways to Shift Students' Attention From Life's Distractions to Your Course Content.” Here is a link to the short article: <http://tinyurl.com/z99rtbu>

You may already use these techniques, but I think they are good

reminders. And unlike my column about course evaluations, these are techniques you can use now!

This Friday, January 15, is the deadline to register for the 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning, to be held Saturday, February 6 from 9:00 am to 5:30 pm. The registration fee is \$45, which includes conference materials, a continental breakfast, a buffet lunch, keynote address by Dr. Daniel Mahony, and 25 sessions on innovative teaching tools and practices, technology and online learning, strategies for student success, and more. The conference has grown in its third year, with more presenters and more participation from colleagues at area schools and colleges. Please join us for what I know will be an informative and stimulating conference. I love to travel to conferences, and my trips to Boston or San Francisco or Washington, D.C. are always highlights of my year. But those trips are very expensive, and with travel funds ever diminishing, a local conference is a very attractive thing. Make plans to join us on campus for a day that will have a big effect on the most important thing we do here at Winthrop: teach our students.

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
At

www.winthrop.edu/tlc

The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Saturday, February 6, 2016 we will have our 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. Register by Friday, January 15 on the TLC website:

<http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

Thought For the Week

New Year's Day—"Now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual."
--Mark Twain