
Evaluation of Higher Education Instructors By Their Students: Is It Serving Its Purpose? A Reflection

Zewdneh Sahlemariam*

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In modern perspective, students' evaluations of teaching were introduced in Harvard University, Washington University, Purdue University, the University of Texas and other institutions in the mid 1920s.

There is good reason to believe that this evaluation of teaching and learning process lays the basis for recognition and reward of good teaching and learning (Assefa, 1999).

The Process: An Overview

As we all very well know, several years have elapsed since the introduction to higher education of such a relatively new evaluation strategy in which students are granted the 'responsibility' as well as the 'privilege' of evaluating an instructor who has taught them a course or two in a particular semester of an academic year. The teacher on his part has to toil to meet most of the demands as stated on the evaluation checklist as his fate to academic growth or 'demise' seems in part to be in the hands of his unpredictable evaluators. I can safely state that we all have the shared experience concerning

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the matter and it seems we all have stories to tell. The top agenda to be debated is whether the strategy is achieving its objective or it is simply futile and at times a biased effort with ill-results.

The Purpose

I think that the goal of such an academic enterprise is to place the students and the teacher at the center-stage so that they can impart their input to the improvement of the teaching-learning process in a transparent and long-lasting manner. While this is the agreed-upon consensus, the reality seems to be different.

Researchers state that although students' evaluations of teaching are accepted methods of evaluating faculty teaching in many institutions and are said to be more statistically reliable than colleagues' ratings, it remains controversial, and debates concerning the merits and demerits of students' evaluations of teaching still continue.

As a participant in the process and sometimes as a by-standing spectator, I have through the years observed the following ill-sides or pitfalls:

The Pitfalls

- Some students seem to be not very much aware of or are pessimistic (?) about the importance of the process and consider it merely as another day-to-day tune to which they are required to dance.
- A sizeable number of students may not be so sure of the confidentiality of the feedback that they are providing and fear that if the outcome becomes unfavorable, it may even backfire. Because of this they tend to fill out the checklists in a why-should-I-care sense of feeling.

- Most students may be very much preoccupied by the exam that they are about to sit for and do not want to 'mess-up' their memories by attending to questions on the checklist. Rather they want to get it done quickly. Many a times students are requested to fill out an evaluation checklist for a particular teacher at the time of the final exam on a particular subject.
- Still another group of students may attempt to use the opportunity as a 'convenient weapon' to settle their scores with a teacher, e.g., bad grades in a previous semester.
- The toiling teacher, on the other hand, may no more be as responsible as he used to be once he learns that he is being misjudged by his students when he believes that he is trying hard to make ends meet in making his teaching efficient and worthwhile.

The Remedy: Recommendations

Even though the validity of students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness seems to continue to be questionable for years to come, I would like to forward the following general recommendations:

- Open discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of instructors and a clear orientation to students about the impact of the ratings on teaching improvement should be conducted;
- If teachers and students are engaged in an open face-to-face conversation, in which feedback proceeds in both directions, the effect on teaching performance could be more positive and hence could have a beneficial effect on students' attitudes and achievement and overall improvement of the teaching-learning process;
- More attention needs to be given to the factors that influence student ratings such as the overall environment in which the instructor works; and

- Student ratings of teaching need to be used in conjunction with other evaluation methods.

References

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