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NEWSLETTER FROM THE CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING

Documenting Teaching: Artifacts, Observers, Lenses

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A few months ago I served on the institutional accreditation team for the University of California at Berkeley. I was paired with Lee Shulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and charged with evaluating teaching at Berkeley. During one meeting, Shulman challenged: "When you judge research for tenure or promotion, you rightly demand artifacts that demonstrate accomplishments. Moreover, you often enlist peer experts from across the country to evaluate them. Where is the parallel effort for evaluating teaching?"

At Berkeley, as at most universities, including Illinois State, that effort consists mainly of student course evaluations. Faculty often complain about the inadequacy of that practice. We fret about the effects of personality, course rigor, grades, and even physical appearance on student ratings. And yet, paradoxically, we seem resigned to student evaluations as the lesser of various evils, especially the effort and intrusion it might take to paint fuller portraits.

To our credit, Illinois State University has generally been more energetic in evaluating teaching. During spring 2004 I surveyed departments about their practices. Of the 22 who responded, all used student questionnaires, but a healthy 15 also conducted reviews in some fashion of syllabi or other course materials. Class observations were mentioned by eight departments, although the formality and weight of them varied. Six departments required or strongly encouraged reflective statements by faculty, and three employed other strategies, such as a required presentation about pedagogy.

Teaching and Exchange Value

Several factors may account for faculty and institutional ambivalence about evaluating teaching. One is a tradition of independence and academic freedom that

has historically rendered the classroom a private space. This stance is perhaps best embodied by an ancient colleague named Congleton at my first teaching job, who once allowed (only partly in jest) that, "It doesn't matter what the course schedule says; when my door closes, it's Shakespeare." Complicating this rooted autonomy is the performance anxiety that many have regarding peers viewing their practices. A second factor may be the perception of teaching as a *techne* or art in the classical sense, that is, as a complex of practices that defy easy analysis or algorithmic codification.

Why:
1. class is private
2. teaching is not
3. its value

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A third is that, since teaching lacks the exchange value that other faculty activities possess, extra efforts yield scant returns. To put it bluntly, career mobility depends primarily on elements other than teaching prowess. Even within the institution, teaching excellence may have a relatively lower exchange value. To what extent does it routinely produce exceptional merit evaluations? When competent teaching is perceived as a necessary but not sufficient condition of tenure and promotion and even exceptional teaching is insufficient, one can expect faculty and departments efforts to respond accordingly. Moreover, disciplinary identity, which tends to be stronger for most faculty than institutional identity, hinges primarily on research.

I’m painting with a dangerously broad brush, I know. After all, university promotion and tenure guidelines stipulate only that “the candidate’s continuing professional growth and professional activities should be of sufficient quality to warrant [promotion or tenure],” leaving departments and colleges more precisely to articulate those activities and their measure. Many likely do reward teaching on the same level as research.

My point is actually more subtle: the exchange value of teaching is a function of the extent to which it produces analyzable artifacts. If good teaching produces no artifacts or only ones that lack status—as in the case of student evaluations dismissed as popularity contests—then it’s no wonder it “counts” marginally. After all, a researcher who never publishes or presents enjoys small status. The result is a chicken or egg situation in which not much energy is expended evaluating teaching because teaching has little exchange value—and teaching has little exchange value because it’s not seriously evaluated.

Please note that this doesn’t mean that professors don’t care about teaching. Every one I know does, and passionately. So does Illinois State, as embodied pervasively in its mission statement and *Educating Illinois*. There’s simply a gap between what we espouse and the efforts we make to describe it.

Before going further, I want to confess my own occasional weariness at assessment, evaluation, reports, accountability, and on and on. As much as I value reflection and see not only the political need but also the professional desirability of analyzing effects of our efforts, I begrudge the competition for my time and energy. This is especially true in strangled budget climates populated by far more sticks than carrots. My urging greater care evaluating teaching, then, falls against a reluctant backdrop.

Three Evaluation Factors

Three components comprise any evaluation: what **artifacts** are being considered (course evaluations, syllabi, teaching portfolios, etc.), who is the **observer** of those artifacts (students, the faculty member, a peer, a department chair, etc.), and what is the **lens** through which the observer looks (common sense, local criteria, national standards, etc.)? This constellation of elements reveals a range of evaluative options.

Artifacts

The most important shift in higher education over the past decade has been from a focus on **delivering instruction** to a focus on **producing learning**. In *The Learning Paradigm College*, John Tagg elaborates a couple dozen characteristics of the new paradigm. In such a shift, the gold standard of evaluation would be the direct measure of student learning. By this measure, someone could be a tyrant or a buffoon, but if his or her students learned according to some established measure, that professor could be accorded a good teacher. Of course this simple direct measure is anything but. There are epistemological challenges, complicating environmental factors, and even undesirable consequences. Consider No Child Left Behind. Still, looking at artifacts of student learning—exams, papers, projects, web discussion transcripts—provide valuable evidence about teaching.

So, of course, do artifacts from professors: syllabi, yes, but also assignments, handouts, course web sites, and so on; written comments on student papers or lab reports; class observations, especially those going beyond whether the instructor spoke clearly and was organized. For example, what’s the evidence that students even in large lectures are actively engaged in the course, say, in classroom assessment techniques or other pedagogical best practices?

ASPT guidelines, in fact, suggest 15 different types of artifacts that might be presented as evidence of teaching. Beyond student evaluations, these include instructional materials; cognitive or affective gain; supervision of students in independent studies, internships, clinical experiences, laboratories and fieldwork; involvement in student organizations and co-curricular activities; new teaching materials or teaching techniques; service as a master teacher to others (conducting teaching workshops, mentoring, etc.); and writing successful competitive grant proposals related to teaching. One challenge is selecting from the menu of artifacts already invited.

Observers

Students completing course evaluations are perhaps our most familiar observers, their observations re-interpreted by a second tier of DFSC members or department chairs. Some things students are good at evaluating: did the instructor return work in a timely fashion, were policies and procedures clear, was the instructor organized and stimulating during lectures?

However, students can judge other things less well. For example, did the course content reflect current knowledge, did the instructor use pedagogies best supported by current research, did the instructor make appropriate assignments, did grades on projects accurately reflect levels of achievement? One’s peers can better make such judgments. It’s not unreasonable to imagine peer reviewers external to the campus. External reviewers might examine syllabi, exams, assignments, websites, examples of student work, papers and presentations about teaching, all the way up to teaching portfolios.

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We shouldn't discount insights from faculty members themselves. How do they understand and represent their own teaching? What evidence do they provide that syllabi and class meetings are a product of thoughtful design rather than chance or habit? How is does the analysis of their students' learning or the scholarship of teaching and learning shape their pedagogy?

Lenses

Supposing that one identifies a set of teaching artifacts and determines who should provide or interpret them, there remains a large question: what interpretive lens do observers use to make sense of everything? We tend to employ the unarticulated lens of common sense and inherited lore. This lens holds, for example, that teachers should be well-organized, fair, clear, rigorous, and so on. No quarrels from me, however difficult it may be to stipulate what these things look like in practice. Similarly, departments might develop a local disciplinary-based, lens for interpreting teaching artifacts.

However, not everything needs to be built from scratch. For example, Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" is a powerful, widely accepted lens. In a nutshell: Good practice 1. encourages student-faculty contact; 2. encourages cooperation among students; 3. encourages active learning; 4 gives prompt feedback; 5. emphasizes time on task; 6. communicates high expectations; 7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering, A.W. & Zelda, F. Gamson (1991). *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 47. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

One might, then, seek evidence of these principles at work. Take "active learning," for example. What evidence can faculty provide that their courses promote or demand active engagement—during class time and outside—rather than only passive passages through the semester?

Or take "time on task," such an old-fashioned term that it nearly creaks. But the point is serious: how much time do students spend studying or preparing? Consider two courses that receive similar student evaluations, but in one students spend two hours per week studying and the other they spend six. In this dimension, the second course is better conforming to principles of good educational practice. To bring this seemingly mundane point home, consider the fact that over 65% of Illinois State University freshman spend fewer than 15 hours per week studying for **all their classes combined** (and 15% spend fewer than 5). (And, no, they aren't working long hours; 80% of ISU freshman work 0-5 hours per week; with virtually all the rest working 6 to 15 hours.) Yet, freshman GPAs and persistence rates indicate these students are being successful. What do we make of this?

My point is that applying well chosen interpretive lenses to teaching artifacts makes their analysis both easier and more productive. It doesn't obviate the need for judgment, but it does give judgment shape.

Advice to Academic Departments

In a perfect academic world (call it Atlantis), there would be time and money to subject multiple teaching artifacts to multiple analyses by multiple observers. We don't live there. However, even modest complements to student course ratings will enhance teaching evaluations. In addition to collecting syllabi, for example, asking faculty to represent one course each year in terms of principles of good teaching will provide a finer-grained portrait and foster professional development. Of course, there are lots of strategies, and selecting appropriate ones might begin with departmental discussions of alternatives. I've facilitated such conversations in various departments and would be happy to help in any fashion.

Advice to Faculty

To the extent we fail to provide thoughtful artifacts and interpretations of our own teaching we become subject to others' data and interpretations. I encourage faculty, then, to gather materials that represent their teaching. For example, in addition to collecting my syllabi and handouts, I occasionally make copies of student papers after I've commented on them. The remarks I make to students document my efforts, engagement, and expertise in concrete and specific ways. Similarly, I've written cover letters for syllabi in which I explain to colleagues (especially on the DFSC), my intentions and designs for a course and why I've made those decisions. Some of those explanations migrate into the syllabi themselves. Finally, compiling a teaching portfolio provides a useful framework for representing your teaching; even if the portfolio doesn't emerge as a polished formal work, the ongoing act of selecting materials for it provides a useful artifact for making your teaching visible.

Why Bother?

Earlier I noted my own weariness of spending ever more time evaluating my work instead of doing it. Why would anyone want to kick the mostly sleeping dog of teaching evaluations? Three answers, then, plus a consolation. First, assessing how we're doing is not ancillary to our work but part of it; good teaching is reflective teaching. Second, faculty who reasonably complain about the limitations of student evaluations alone should realize that shared governance means they can change the way teaching is judged. Third, until we represent teaching with more elaborated artifacts, it will continue to lack exchange value and simply be taken for granted.

The consolation? Even small changes—an additional artifact, an observer in addition to students, a couple lenses from best practice—will improve the process.