ISSUES IN THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING
PERFORMANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

The implementation of evaluative procedures in higher education is widespread with major concerns in the areas of:-

> **Quality of teaching**
> **Curriculum content**
> **Subject relevance**
> **Coursework assessment**
> **Staff helpfulness and accessibility**

In the main the objective of this monitoring and evaluation is to maintain standards, identify weaknesses and to improve, wherever possible, the quality of courses and institutions. Often the methods employed to assess professional performance are contentious (Curling 1994), particularly so when criteria are sought for the granting of tenure, promotion, the renewal of contracts and the dismissal of staff (College of The Bahamas Evaluation Report, 1985). Among other evaluation procedures, student evaluation of lecturer's teaching performance receives its share of faculty criticism and hostility.

This paper is concerned with student evaluation of teaching performance in higher education. Initially the methodology employed in this review is described. Selected issues in student evaluation of teaching performance are presented and examined. Finally, the review is summarized and suggestions made.

Methodology

Standard secondary sources of the evaluation literature were supplemented using the computer based facilities of the Library Services Unit of the Liverpool John Moores University. Extensive literature searches were initiated to the on-line data bases in the United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada, including the British Library Blaise, Systems Development Corporation ORBIT, the Canadian SPORT and RECREATION INDEX, the Social Science Citation Index DIALOG, and the National Institute of Education ERIC. The abstracting and indexing services of the Sports Documentation Centre located at the University of Birmingham, England, were also used.

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Details of the search strategy, especially the key words employed, the number of references or hits secured and the combination of sets used, are indicated below:-

Figure 1.

Computer On-Line Search Strategy for Evaluation Literature

Action	Key Words	Hits	Set
Search	Student Attitudes Higher Education	5345	1
Search	Courses	26000	2
Combine Sets 1 & 2		756	3
Search	United Kingdom or Great Britain or Scotland or Wales	–	4
Combine Sets 3 & 4		38	5
Search	Teacher Evaluation	5121	6
Combine Sets 5 & 6		–	7
Search	Teacher Performance	6809	8
Combine Sets 7 & 8		7	9
Search	Student Feedback	161	10
Combine Sets 10& 4		18	11

Using the DIALOG Information Retrieval Service, ten (10) abstracts were printed on-line during the search and forty (40) abstracts were requested off-line and received by airmail from the retrieval centre located at Palo Alto, California. Additionally, the Inter Library Loans Unit of the Liverpool John Moores University was used to secure photostat copies of research papers considered pertinent and useful.

Issues on Student Rating of Faculty Teaching Performance

The common method of obtaining student opinions of teaching in higher education is using lists of desirable teaching qualities with rating scales. The practice in the United States of America and Canada is well established and extensive. Citing the work of Remmers (1939), Flood-Page (1974) provides a useful taxonomy of arguments that support or object to the student evaluation of teaching.

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Arguments for Student Evaluation of Teaching

1. The educational process is in essence democratic and the use of student opinion makes possible a wholesome kind of cooperative effort to improve the learning situation.

2. Acceptable theories of learning stress the importance of learner attitudes.

3. Students alone observe the teaching process day after day and thus information acquired through systematic collection of their opinion is unique.

4. Analysis of student opinion often calls attention to undesirable attitudes, methods of instruction, courses of study and teacher personality, of which teachers themselves are unaware.

5. Student opinion systematically collected can create awareness of problems and situations not readily discovered in any other way and offer possibilities of remedial measures.

6. Student opinion provides quick, economical and easy means of evaluation with the minimum of disruption.

7. Evaluation increases interest in teaching problems.

Objections to Student Evaluation of Teaching

1. Students are not competent to judge the merit of another process or the results of teaching.

2. It is a democratic fallacy that teaching is best when it pleases the majority.

3. Students are immature, superficial, mistaken, prejudiced and inclined to make unreliable judgements.

4. Validity and reliability of student judgements may be affected by assessments received and fondness or dislike of lecturer, student interest in the subject, difficulty of subject and pre-established reputation of the lecturer.

5. Student ratings tend to disrupt staff morale. Staff hostility to assessment may interfere with teaching efficiency.

6. Student ratings tend to have a disruptive effect on student morality with the danger of students feeling they are the judges of their teachers, curriculum and content. Additionally, there is the expectation on the part of the students and administrators that teachers should change their ways.

7. There are objections to lecturer evaluation based on time and cost considerations. (after Remmers 1939 cited by Flood-Page 1974. p 30).

Rummery et al. (1975), in a response to Flood-Page (1974), examined some points the latter had provided to support student evaluation of teaching. It was argued that rather than education being a democratic process, it is essentially directed at achieving change on the part of the students towards some desired end. The logic of this change depends on some presumed difference between teacher and student, not a difference in personal worth, but rather a difference in crucial educational aspects such as knowledge, experience and critical facility.

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It cannot be assumed that teaching of whatever quality has to meet unqualified student approval. Reasons specifically related to intended educational goals rather than those related to student preferences should be the primary justification for changes in teaching behaviour. The argument that students alone observe teaching day after day is not sufficient to support their role as evaluators because the task of observing and evaluating are not the same. Furthermore, the use of student ratings because they are quick, economical and easy to obtain is suspect as there is no evidence that such evaluation leads to improvement in teaching performance.

Costin et al. (1971), in a review of the American tradition, conclude that student ratings can provide reliable and valid information on the quality of courses and teaching. It is argued that such information can be of use to academic departments in constructing normative data for the evaluation of teaching and may aid individual members of staff to improve their teaching effectiveness. Data on the relationship between personality traits of lecturers and students' perceptions of teaching ability are too limited to permit definite conclusions. Costin et al. (1971) conclude that systematic measurement of students' attitudes can not be ignored but it is emphasised that such ratings fall far short of a complete assessment of teaching performance.

At Bradford University in England, Elliot (1969) asked students to provide variables of teacher behaviour. Content analysis reduced the number of variables to ten (10), which were used to construct an evaluation form. The results indicated a level of agreement of lecturers' strengths and weaknesses. The same evaluation forms were completed by equivalent groups of students at the end of two subsequent years. The consistency of the results over the three (3) year period showed that the teaching profiles of individual lecturers remained stable even when obtained from different cohorts of students. It was concluded:-

> that student evaluation provides a reliable index of a teacher's performance. It is valuable in providing in a standard form a statement of strengths and weaknesses, together with specific examples of those showing where attention is required. Furthermore, it is welcomed by students as an attempt to improve the standard of teaching, and could possibly be justified on the grounds of providing a safety valve.
>
> (Elliot 1969 p 313)

Cooper and Foy (1967) produced a lecturer characteristic schedule consisting of forty-three (43) statements. One hundred and ninety-six (196) students were asked, firstly to rate on a five (5) point scale their judgement of the

hypothetical ideal lecturer, and secondly, to rate an actual lecturer. Ratings
of the hypothetical ideal lecturer were also made by twenty-four (24) members of
staff. There was a highly significant relationship between student and staff
ratings. The student ratings of the actual lecturer remain confidential.

Gauvin (1968) concluded that opinion expressed by informed students can be
a useful contribution in course planning and that quality control of teaching
can be achieved. Pickard (1971) was in broad agreement with these findings.
Young and inexperienced students lack critical analysis but their assessments
show a degree of consistency which suggests that their views should be taken
seriously. Attention was drawn to the value of open ended questions which often
prove to be the most fruitful source of information.

The direct and indirect benefits likely to accrue to staff and students from
the evaluation of teaching is outlined by Lawrence and Katz (1972). Using
interviews, group discussions and questionnaires, a number of evaluative
programmes were implemented that revealed common areas of student discontent.
Of paramount significance was the lack of student-staff interaction, and it was
suggested that this deficit may well be a common denominator of student
dissatisfaction. It was argued that the true value of student evaluation of
teaching lies in facilitating dialogue between teacher and student, and by
providing feedback which can be used in the improvement of teaching.

The advantages and problems encountered in administering student evaluation
of teaching have been summarised by Ramsden (1977):-

Advantages

1. A means of lecturers finding out student opinion of their teaching that
    permits students to comment anonymously.
2. Stimulates staff to think more about their teaching.
3. A way of building better staff-student relationships.

Problems

1. In a voluntary system most staff will probably not wish to participate.
2. Student evaluation is seen as a threatening exercise for most staff and
    especially the least confident.
3. Staff are suspicious of the privacy of a confidential system of evaluation.
4. The difficulty of persuading staff to act on the results.

Ramsden (1977) is firmly against the use of student evaluations in decisions
regarding staff promotion and tenure, but suggests the findings of evaluation
are useful for staff development. Flood-Page (1974) suggests that while student

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evaluation can be shown to have some good effects, lecturers who favour it have reservations and find it in some degree hurtful, but he reassuringly concludes:-

> Students generally speak well of teachers, even those they
> think of as being least able, and most teachers' fears
> about the process are not well based in fact. Were the
> facts better known, it is possible that teachers might be
> more prepared to cope with the situation, rather than to
> defend themselves from it.

<div align="center">(Flood-Page 1974. p. 71)</div>

In assessing effectiveness of individual lecturers, McKenzie's (1969) findings suggest that students who performed well rated their teachers as more effective than students who performed poorly. Specific items on which lecturers were rated higher included:- clear explanations, stimulating students' intellectual curiosity, interesting presentation of course material, attention to student reaction, friendliness, permissiveness and flexibility. French (1957) found that the items which contributed most to students' overall judgement of lecturer effectiveness were:

a. interprets abstract ideas and theories clearly;
b. gets students interested in the subject;
c. increases thinking skills;
d. broadens interests;
e. stresses important material;
f. makes good use of examples and illustrations;
g. motivates students to produce best work;
h. inspires class confidence by knowledge of subject;
i. gives new view points;
j. explanations are clear and understandable.

Crawford and Bradshaw (1968) asked students to describe the most effective college teacher. The four (4) most frequently mentioned characteristics were:-

a. thorough knowledge of subject matter;
b. well planned and organized lectures;
c. enthusiastic, energetic, lively interest in teaching;
d. student oriented, friendly, willing to help students.

A degree of similarity also exists in the criteria of good teachers as described by Musella and Rusch (1968) which include expert knowledge of subject, systematic organization of course content, ability to explain clearly, enthusiastic attitude towards the subject, and ability to encourage thought. In the lecturer characteristic schedule developed by Cooper and Foy (1967) students placed a high priority on adequate coverage of subject, integration of lectures and practical work, the spacing of coursework assignments and the possession of a good sense of humour.

Evaluation studies by Dow and Cox (1972) confirmed that student requirements vary with subject area. For example, in one subject students may seek comprehensive course coverage and in another they may prefer certain highlights or important points to be emphasised while other items are left to recommended reading. It was also concluded that the most able students were less concerned with complete coverage and were more hospitable to non-examinable material in lectures, in contrast with students who performed less well.

The most important factor to emerge from evaluation research by Ramsden (1979) is the degree to which students feel their teachers provide a facilitant atmosphere for learning. The most critical dimension in the learning environment is the closeness of lecturer-student relationships characterised particularly by the help and understanding shown to students. Lawrence and Katz (1972) also confirm:-

> **Of paramount importance are the repeated student complaints about the lack of student-staff contact in the university situation. This lack of interaction between teacher and pupil may well be the common denominator throughout many other areas of student unrest, and has important implications for all aspects of the teaching-learning process.**
>
> (Lawrence and Katz 1972. p. 23)

Conclusion

The well established and extensive practice of student evaluation of teaching performance in America was presented. Arguments for and against this tradition were examined, together with evaluation attempts in the United Kingdom. The overall impression appears favourable and no research known to this writer has condemned student evaluation outright. However, serious reservations have been identified including the security of confidentiality, the percieved threatening nature of evaluative procedures, and the potential use of student assessments in considerations of promotion and tenure.

There is still a great deal of work to be done in the field of evaluative procedures. At the theoretical level, advances are required to improve the predictive validity of attitude testing. The complex influence of environmental factors on the formation and stability of attitudes is far from fully understood. More research on internal conflict between contradictory attitudes and aspects of personality is needed. In measurement procedures there is an urgent need to move away from the continuum of unilinear concept of attitude.

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In practical terms the area of student evaluation of teaching performance is thwart with problems. Quite apart from staff apathy, hostility or apprehension, any planned expansion or significant change of student evaluation should seek approval of the instructional staff and teaching trade unions.

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