

Our department has always been committed to high standards in education. Recently, with support and leadership from the CWSEI, we have made increasing progress in successfully implementing research based educational methods in our classrooms. An increasing number of our faculty are showing keen interest in these developments. In response, we distribute this monthly newsletter to keep you up-to-date with the latest CWSEI efforts. This month, we reproduce with permission a blog post by Claire Potter (tenured-radical.blogspot.com) about handling student evaluations.

If I Could Stick My Pen In My Heart And Spill It All Over the Stage: Teaching Evaluations

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*If I could win ya, if I could sing ya
A love song so divine
Would it be enough for your cheating heart
If I broke down and cried? If I cried?*

"It's Only Rock n' Roll (But I Like It)," Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, 1974

In the past week or so, as many of us have been putting together classes for the new semester, teaching evaluations have arrived. I suspect they arrive electronically at most places now, as that is substantially cheaper for the institution. [At Wesleyan] we switched over from a paper system, where students filled them out together in one of the final classes, to an online one in which they fill them out alone and receive access to their grade for the course only after having done so. Like everyone else, students are bowling alone.

I have thought for years that fall teaching evaluations, received as the promise of the new spring semester dawned, can have a particularly discouraging effect on new teachers. One curious phenomenon is that practically everybody I know can get 99% great to good teaching evaluations, and the one nasty evaluation can have a

particularly devastating effect. Regardless of how incoherent it is, or how wrong, an anonymous student cutting you off at the knees about a course that you poured yourself into can feel like a stab in the back.

Because, of course, it is. It was intended to be. Or, at least, it's hard to imagine the student furrowing his brow and thinking, "So how can I say how much I loathe you in a *constructive and empathetic way?*"

So without further ado, let's talk about how to read teaching evaluations, being hurt by comments, and what your own assessment of the student evaluations you receive has to do with being a good teacher.

Remember that they are students. While students can have good insights into why a class worked or didn't work, insights that need to be listened to, they are not master teachers, nor has anyone ever taught them how to evaluate a classroom experience. Because of this, they will say things that are upsetting to you without actually meaning to do so. They will say, "This is the worst class I have every taken." They will say, "This class reminded me of high school." They will say a number of negative things, and frame it condescendingly by saying, "I know s/he is young and inexperienced, and I am sure s/he will improve." They will describe you as an adjunct -- when you are in the third year of your tenure clock. They will comment on your appearance (increasingly, I see this showing up in student evaluations of men as well as women): you are "eye candy;" "not hard to look at;" or "hot." This feels even more degrading when paired with negative comments like: "Discussion sessions were really a drag, but fortunately s/he's easy on the eyes."

Comments like this have led to an increasing number of young professors asserting that they are being "sexually harassed" by their students, which I must say, I think is beside the point. The point is: the student has so offended and embarrassed you (because you know this will be read by dozens of other people at your next evaluation) that whatever else the student has said that might be useful is lost to you. At this juncture you must not:

- obsess about which student it was;

- obsess about the possible effects on your tenure case of being perceived as a “cougar in training”;
- dismiss the rest of the evaluation, and any others with negative comments, as entirely informed by sexism, racism, homophobia or any other form of prejudice. Even though your view that they are inflected with prejudice is probably accurate, it doesn't mean that there may not be something you need to pay attention to. Similarly, students who get bad grades are not entirely wrong about whether they were taught well or taught poorly, even though they may misrecognize their own role in a poor classroom experience.

Instead, consider this:

- Create a grid for yourself, in which you begin to classify comments about what worked and what didn't work that allows you to separate useful from useless comments, and put all the evaluations in a much broader context.
- See if there are criticisms that repeat, and imagine whether you can re-think some of your methods without giving up aspects of your teaching that you believe in.
- See if there are substantive compliments that repeat, and give yourself credit for what you have done well.
- Remind yourself that students do bring prejudices into the classroom that they are not entirely aware of, that they say and write thoughtless things to each other, that Internet culture has aggravated this, and that it is part of our job as adults to socialize them.

Remember that your colleagues know a lot about how to read teaching evaluations. While students are an important source of raw data, they are experts at consuming a classroom experience -- not experts in pedagogy itself. Your colleagues are. Go to them.

Untenured people tend not to want to do this because they are convinced that letting people who will evaluate them know that they have not been 100% successful will be damaging to their reputations. And yet, this fear can leave an inexperienced person in the frantic position of trying to fix something that might not be broken; or of re-inventing the wheel when a more experienced colleague could easily demonstrate how to address the problem. Said person might also offer reassurance, a cold beer, and be favorably impressed with your desire to improve your teaching.

It's also worth saying: you can't exactly hide your teaching evaluations. People will read them eventually. Although teaching evaluations do have something to do with whether you will eventually succeed at being a college professor (i.e., get tenure and be permitted to remain in the profession), the relationship is not a direct one, and your

senior colleagues can help you shape yourself as a teacher. Whether student comments please you or do not please you, it is wise to ask someone to help you interpret your first few batches of evaluations so that you can get a sense of what they mean *where you are*.

For example, when I began my teaching career, I taught two classes at an urban SLAC and two at a public commuter college. I tended to begin each class by linking the day's topic to a political event that had happened that day and sparking a 5-10 minute exchange about it with the students. When I received the SLAC evaluations, it was clear that this went over quite well, and that students thought it made the whole course more "relevant" to their interests. In the public college setting, it didn't: I received numerous comments in which students characterized me as lazy, wasting time, and unfocused.

Why? The answer, I think, was quite easy, once I got over being hurt and embarrassed.

- What I was doing was *good teaching* at a residential institution where students hoped and expected to build relationships with professors that would last over a period of years. They were very political, and had come to this college to have a "relevant" education. My strategy made them feel valued and respected, and it did help them connect to the material.
- What I was doing was *bad teaching* at a college where students were fully embedded in the world: they usually had families, carried a full course load at night, and worked full-time jobs during the day. They were sacrificing a lot for their educations and expected every minute to count. They had come from high schools where teachers felt free to give them standardized tests about material they had never been taught. Worse, since this was the late 1980s, when adjunctification was becoming the norm in public education, they had reasons to be suspicious of those of us who trooped in and out on our way to somewhere else.

Sharing your evaluations can help you learn a lot about teaching, and can help you acquire some empathy for why students might characterize you in ways that seem wrong. This empathy can help you teach them better: one outcome of talking through the evaluations I describe above was also to understand that, although they had evaluated me positively, I might have also made certain assumptions about my SLAC students that needed to be corrected. More importantly, going public with your evals also have the effect of dispelling paranoia and shame, something we are easily prone to in situations where privacy can cause criticisms to fester without activating their potential to make us better teachers.