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Folks:

The posting below looks at interesting way to encourage more peer review of teaching. It is by Barbara Sommer, Lecturer, and Bob Sommer, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Psychology Dept., University of California Davis. Copyright ©2006 by the authors. All rights reserved. . Reprinted with permission.

Regards,

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UP NEXT: The Scholarship of Engagement: What Is It?

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

1,472 words

The Lecture Club

Attending a colleague's lecture in an undergraduate course is highly unusual. In a combined 75 years of teaching at a dozen different colleges and universities, we had never done it. We have no firsthand knowledge of how our colleagues interact with their students, how much they encourage (or discourage) participation, how they use technology, and if they know their students by name. No colleague has ever asked to attend one of our undergraduate lectures. What would we personally gain from inviting a colleague to attend a regular class session? We are experienced instructors for whom undergraduate teaching is routine, and each term

we are required to collect student response to our courses in the form of end-of-term student evaluations of teaching. We have feedback from those most directly affected by our classroom performance; comments from a one-time visitor, lacking knowledge of context and even subject matter, seems an unnecessary imposition.

Evaluation is stressful, both for the evaluator and for the recipient. We would be reluctant to place a colleague in the position of providing honest critical feedback on our interactions with students. If the individual happened to be in the same field, the lecture would be elementary, and if in a different field (mechanical engineering or nutrition, for example), the material might be incomprehensible, as the visitor would not have attended previous lectures, read the textbook, or know the technical vocabulary. Thus, absence of peer attendance at class sessions is understandable given faculty responsibilities, priorities, and sensitivities.

When judgments of instructional competence are required as part of merit review, they tend to be based on student teaching evaluations rather than first-hand observation, as is also the case with teaching awards. But what do these award-winning teachers actually do in the classroom? We know how a handful of students in their support letters describe the instructors. We have read many articles on the characteristics of good teaching. Good instructors know their topic and are enthusiastic about it. They are respectful of the students in their class. They are organized, speak clearly, explain things in a thorough and engaging manner, are approachable, and willing to answer questions.

Yet we have cause to doubt the applicability of such nomothetic data to individual instructors. In a study on our campus student volunteers visited classes and recorded the amount and nature of student-faculty interaction. One observer visited a large lecture course taught by an instructor acclaimed as one of the best on campus. The observer's records showed not a single instance of student participation. Students confirmed that the instructor gave one-hour rapid-fire performances with wit and sparkle, exemplary in delivery, pacing, and thoroughness, during which he did not want to be interrupted. He refused to acknowledge raised hands during the show, soon extinguishing such

intrusion. The instructor continued to receive very high ratings from his students and retired with his reputation intact. Another award-winning instructor had an office so messy and chaotic that we could not imagine how he could be organized and effective in the classroom. Yet his students had a high regard for his personal style and interest in their learning.

Such accounts led us doubt the validity of a single or even consistent image of an excellent teacher. From the students' perspective, traits of enthusiasm, openness, respect, humor, and organization, may not be necessary for good instruction. An award-winning instructor might have some but not all these attributes, and possess others that are idiosyncratic. As we lacked first hand knowledge, we remained ignorant in this regard.

We gained much more insight as a result of The Lecture Club. The Teaching Resources Center on the University of California, Davis, campus is charged with improving undergraduate instruction. In previous years faculty who won teaching awards were invited to talk about their teaching practices. This took the instructor's time, and provided what was essentially "another talk to faculty." To provide first-hand knowledge of the instructor's teaching practices, classroom visits were initiated in 2004. Award-winning instructors were asked if they would allow other faculty to attend one or two actual class sessions during a given week. All of the seven instructors contacted gave permission for classroom visits. Information about The Lecture Club was circulated to faculty on the Teaching Resources mailing list and in an article in the campus paper.

Lecture Club members were given the choice of attending one of two separate lectures in the same class. Visitors sat in the back of the room to observe, and then met the following week to discuss the visit, without the instructor present. It was made clear that this was not a critique, but rather, an explication of the teaching practice of an award-winning instructor. Participants were urged to focus upon the teaching rather than the teacher. Following the discussion, the coordinator (the first author) provided the instructor with a summary of the discussion.

The award-winning instructors were from the

departments of Animal Science, Anthropology, Medieval Studies, Nutrition, Physics, Psychology, and Studio Art. Participants came from 22 departments - from the humanities, social sciences, biological sciences, mathematics, medicine, and veterinary medicine. Many of the participants were experienced and often good instructors themselves. In the free form discussion we gleaned insights from one another and shared useful instructional techniques. In addition to being a source of new ideas, The Lecture Club provided an opportunity for instructors who care about teaching to interact with and support one another. This function is of particular value at a Research I university where teaching often takes a back seat to research.

Attending lectures in so many different fields was stimulating and enjoyable. Even when we did not fully understand the content, observing the pedagogy and student response was valuable. Substantial variation existed in technology use. One award-winning instructor employed professionally-created PowerPoint images with sound and animation. Others lectured from the podium as their predecessors had done a century earlier. All instructors used the backboard, but some more than others. One award-winning professor filled seventeen blackboard panels (we counted) with formulas and problem sets written and erased over the course of the hour. Students did not seem to lose interest (although the instructor's writing slowed down by panel #12, and he made mistakes that students corrected). Students sat in rapt attention, and did not leave until the class ended. We did not observe anyone reading the newspaper or eating. Afterward we questioned students about the blackboard writing. They liked it as it showed the development of a solution.

Knowing students names is considered a mark of a good teaching. In the case of our local award-winning instructors, wide variation existed both in knowing students names and calling upon students by name. Several instructors in classes of 80-100 students knew their students names by the third week of class and called upon students by name. Others knew the names of only a handful of students by the end of the term, and never called on students by name.

We had never before gathered with a group of colleagues interested in teaching, to seriously

discuss a colleague's instructional practices. Although we have attended countless lectures and colloquia, the focus in subsequent conversation had been primarily on content. If delivery were considered, it generally was in relation to an advanced specialized audience. The Lecture Club was our first opportunity to observe student-faculty interaction in the classroom and discuss it afterward, without the instructor present and without any connection to a merit review system. Focusing upon award-winning instructors reduced anxiety about negative evaluation both on the instructor's part and that of the visitors.

We learned to withhold judgment as to student response to instructors. In most cases the reasons why the faculty member won a teaching award were obvious. Listening to the lecture, we were excited by the material, wanted to learn more about the subject, and envied students enrolled in the class. In one instance the instructor seemed lethargic and the presentation spotty. During our discussion, we considered the lecture to be satisfactory but not knock-your-socks-off outstanding (it was not poor). However our lukewarm evaluation was not mirrored in student ratings. Even when the instructor "talked to the blackboard," showed overheads of images too small to be read from the back of the room, or jumped from one topic to another without warning, students paid attention and were responsive.

The Lecture Club helped to create a community of teacher scholars. The observations were of more benefit in suggesting ways to improve our own teaching, than as formative or summative evaluations of instructors already considered excellent. In our discussions we tended to return to the old stalwarts of knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject, organization and clarity of presentation, and respect for the students as criteria of good teaching; but now have a much better appreciation of the breadth and scope of the art of instruction.