

RISKY BUSINESS:
THE VALUE OF STUDENT INPUT

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This last summer I enrolled in an assessment course offered through the University of Idaho doctoral program. The experience was an odd one for me. The ups and downs were a backdrop to both the enlightenment and frustration I felt over issues of evaluation and assessment in higher education. I emerged with more than questions—I emerged with doubts. I've never been a fan of institutionalized education, and over the course of the term my concerns bordered on despair. There was one class session in particular when I wanted to simply give up on the idea of attempting to accurately evaluate and assess students while still trying to meet the demands of the institutional structure. To give you an example of what I was feeling, the following section is a polished version of what I wrote in my class journal:

I've been frustrated all term over what seems to me to be a dilemma between two paradigms in evaluation and assessment. I first saw this dilemma through the experiences of a friend who was at odds with his department chair because he "gave too many A's." My friend is a very dedicated teacher, an idealist who works as hard at being a good teacher as anyone I know. If his students didn't get it, he worked harder. He designed exercises, handouts, out-of-class tutoring sessions. At one point the "packet" for one of his classes, sold at the local copy center, was more than a hundred pages long—a hundred pages of materials he had written and collected for the students' benefit. Every help necessary was there for the students. The only way for a student to get a poor grade in his class was to not try. My friend operated under the paradigm that the goal of the class was to see that everyone attained a certain level of understanding of the material and acquired a certain skill level. Operating from that paradigm, he was almost always successful with each student. Most of his students earned "A's," and that created a problem with the administration.

In contrast, I've seen other teachers who simply don't do as much to help their students. Whether they do this consciously or not, I don't know. Their assignments and expectations are often a matter of guesswork; they're vague about tests and grading criteria; and they offer little out-of-class help to the students. The result is that a few students catch on and do well; most are in the middle; and a few never get a clue. When final grade time comes, these teachers have a nice GPA curve, and the administration had no problem with them.

One paradigm says this: "I will bring them all to a certain level of capability." The other paradigm says: "I will have a good curve at the end of the semester." One aims for skill mastery and the other aims for the curve. Which one is the

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appropriate paradigm? Does it simply depend on the institution? This problem opens doors to a number of other problems. For one thing, it assumes that the traditional grading system really is a trustworthy measurement of student learning. Another problem hidden in the above situation is grade inflation. If skill mastery is the goal, and all the students in a class master the skill, how can they all be “excellent”? “Excellent,” by definition, means “to excel.” If every student in a particular class mastered a skill, then each would be average in that class. This presents a third problem, does an “A” in a class mean that the student is excellent when compared to others in the classroom; others at the same level, for example, other college freshmen at the same institution; all college freshmen in America; or is the grade somehow an assessment of what is expected among professionals in that field, experts with years of experience? So much in the field of evaluating student performance is assumed and implied. Very little is questioned, explained, or made explicit. Teachers are not taught these things. They seem to be expected to know instinctively how to use a grade book the moment they are hired to teach their subject.

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I wrote those words on a particularly bad day, but they address some important questions. The bottom line is, I left the course with more questions than answers, but maybe that's part of what we were supposed to learn. Did I leave *only* with questions? No. The most valuable concept I learned is the importance of ill-defined questions in teaching. It's amazing to realize how tradition has shaped us to seek precise questions with exact answers when helping others learn. In a scientific paradigm, the goal is to end up with the most exact answer possible. But that's the result, not the process. The scientist begins with ill-defined questions and arrives at more precise answers. So, for the record, here's a list of some of my ill-defined questions:

- What is the value of GPAs and numerical grading systems?
- Do grading systems encourage better performance?
- Do grading systems inadvertently hinder student improvement by convincing students that they “belong” in a certain grade range?
- Do tests accurately measure student learning?
- Do tests that ask students to give the “one right answer” mislead students about the nature of real-life learning, where there's seldom only one, clear, “right” answer?
- When teachers learn to ask “ill-defined questions,” which are truer to real life, do they run the risk of losing the appearance of control and certitude that students and parents expect?

- Will student-centered learning ever be accepted by institutional entities that, by their very nature, prefer certainty, numbers, large class sizes, and measurable results?

Of course I don't have the answers to any of these questions, but if students are to learn, they, too, must begin with ill-defined questions. Of course it's a little frightening to think about fostering this in the classroom—especially for someone like me who prefers closure to an open-ended process—but if a teacher really is interested in student learning, this is an invaluable realization to have.

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Some of the challenges of asking questions—even seemingly simple ones—are illustrated by a questionnaire experiment I tried with students in a Creative Writing class in the summer of 2003. While I had taught this course several times before, this was the first time the English Department offered the course during one of the shorter summer terms. The class was scheduled Monday through Friday for fifty minutes. During the fall and winter semesters, the course is scheduled for two 75-minute sessions per week. This change in the “packaging” of class time not only forced me to adjust my teaching but also created a natural opportunity for me to incorporate more in-class student peer evaluation into the syllabus. Since the summer class was scheduled to meet Monday through Friday, every Thursday became a “peer” day, a day in which students read their writing to each other in face-to-face peer groups of three students each. Every Friday of the term became a “workshop” day in which students from one side of the classroom evaluate—again, in groups of three—the anonymous work of students from the other side.

Another issue drove my organizational decisions—teaching load. The typical class load for English teachers at Ricks College, before the transition to BYU–Idaho, was five, three-credit classes per semester. Each English teacher taught three writing classes and two literature classes, a nice mix for a two-year college, considering that many community colleges load English teachers with *four* writing classes and *one* literature class. This is an issue for English teachers because the workload of grading papers in a writing class is significantly higher than the workload of covering literature in a literature course. When I started teaching creative writing courses at Ricks College, English 218 was seen as a “perk” class; and, therefore, as the saying went, it “loaded as a lit class” for the teacher’s workload. In other words, I had to sacrifice a literature class to teach creative writing.

Now that Ricks College has become BYU–Idaho, the distinctions between writing and literature classes aren't so clear. We now offer three creative writing classes—Creative Writing (218), Advanced Creative Writing (318), and Creative Writing and Publishing (418). All three of these classes “load” as literature classes. Therefore, each semester I have to

decide how much student writing I will read, how I can best balance what the students need with what I can do. The decision to dedicate two days a week to student peer work was partially influenced by that factor. As I designed the course, students shared their writing with each other fourteen times during the term. By contrast, each student was assigned to bring his or her writings to my office three times during the term. Consequently, I do not “take home” any student writings from the course. Enthusiastic students may meet with me beyond the three-meeting requirement, but, generally, my reading of student writing is limited to three 20-minute sessions per student. This computes to a minimum of twenty-four hours of total consultation time over the course of eight weeks.

I don’t believe this method is detrimental to the students. Student creative writers should write as much as they can—but the teacher does not necessarily need to read everything a student produces. As an avocational writer, I know that only a small percentage of my writing is worth showing to others. Requiring teachers to read all the creative writing from each student in the class could be likened to requiring television networks to broadcast every practice session of every NBA basketball team. Most of the behind-the-scenes work is simply not interesting. The same goes for the work of fiction writers, poets, and playwrights. The reading public sees only a small percentage of the work the writer puts forth, with good reason.

After having designed my course with the lion’s share of writing feedback on the shoulders of the students, however, I was concerned about how this approach was working for them. I received some feedback from a few outspoken students, but I suspected that not everyone agreed with them. So I devised an anonymous questionnaire for the whole class (see Figure 1). The purpose of my questionnaire was to receive answers I might not have in a public setting dominated by bolder class members. My questions made distinctions between the face-to-face “peer” days and the more anonymous “workshop” days. I asked the students if they enjoyed the assignments, whether they found their peers’ feedback to be reliable, and whether they thought the responses from other students on their writings were helpful. Finally, I asked them if they thought the time taken on peer and workshop days might be better used on more lecture time from the professor.

For the most part, the results of the questionnaire confirmed my estimation about the peer process, with some small surprises. For example, I assumed that the students would consider themselves, in the words of the questionnaire, “not qualified to respond to the writings of others.” The average answer to that question was close to the “disagree” indicator. This is good news because I believe students are more qualified than most people think—at least when responding in a holistic manner or as one

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of my colleagues at BYU–Idaho stated, “responding like a consumer of the writing.”

In another question the students gave weight to the opinions of other students. The question read, “I’m not interested in what other students think of my writing. The teacher’s opinion—and my own—are the only voices in the class that I truly value.” The average answer to that question was “Disagree.” Had I judged that issue only by the views expressed by the outspoken members of the class, I would have concluded that the students didn’t put much stock in the opinions of other class members, which would have caused me to doubt the value of the process. The results of the questionnaire changed my view on that, assuring me that they trust the process.

Finally, regarding my role in the classroom, the results of the questionnaire provided another valuable insight. Remember the class meets five days a week, and two of those five days are dedicated to student peer work. The final question grew from a concern that some might think they had been short-changed by not having the teacher in the front of the room doing the talking during every class period. The question said: “I’m glad we spend two days out of every week sharing our writing. If the teacher lectured from the book every day of the week, we wouldn’t learn as much.” The average answer was, “Agree.” Before the questionnaire, I felt that dedicating 40 percent of the class time to student peer work was a good idea. After calculating the results of the questionnaire, I sensed the students believed that idea as well.

I was pleased with the questionnaire and the students’ responses. However, after scoring it, two concerns came to light that I had not anticipated. The choices given to the students were a numerical scale of 1 through 5, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” with the alternative of “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” in the center as a 3. Perhaps this did not represent a true continuum.

The second scoring concern came while averaging the scores. The average of Question 1 from among the 22 students in the class was a 4.04, which is close to the number indicated for “Agree.” As the range of individual selections give way to one score, I felt a sense of misrepresentation because, after all, an average of the class’s scores does not really represent any one person’s score: it’s a construct drawn from all the scores.

If nothing else scoring the questionnaire gave me a new respect for professionals who are schooled in the creation of tests and evaluations, who know much more about the complexities of the evaluation process.

A few days after giving the questionnaire, I selected five students for a focus group. These students were bright but also willing to express their own opinion, even if it might differ from my own. When the students came, I gave them a photocopy of the questionnaire with the average

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class scores written on it and asked them to identify questions that “didn’t work for them,” as well as questions that did. Some questions, I explained, might not align with the questions they would naturally have asked about the class if they had created the questionnaire themselves.

One student wished for a “No Opinion” category, rather than the “Neither Agree Nor Disagree” choice. He suggested that he had no opinion about some questions, and he felt that the options he was given did not allow him to express that view. The group agreed that using the word “enjoy” in Question 2 was too vague. They suggested that it be replaced with the words “found it helpful.” They liked the question about whether the overhead instructions were too strict. In Question 8 the questionnaire used the word “vague.” Again, the students thought the question would be better if it said “not helpful.” Question 10, referenced above, consisted of two sentences. The focus group felt that the two questions were different enough that choosing one number to answer both questions was difficult. Despite these specific criticisms, all of the students agreed that giving the questionnaire was a good idea.

In retrospect, the results of the questionnaire should have been returned earlier to the students. Two weeks elapsed between giving the questionnaire and showing the averages to the class. Feedback from students, if it is to be useful for everyone, must be shared with the students in a timely manner so that course adjustments can be made—for both the instructor and the students.

The most obvious lesson I learned by doing this exercise is the realization that creating a trustworthy questionnaire is not the job of an amateur. A question can open a door to feedback, but it can also inadvertently close doors. The kind of questionnaire I gave is especially problematic. Giving students a limited number of questions and limiting the feedback they can give by using a numerical scale create problems. Those problems are only compounded when the evaluator averages all the results and arrives at a conclusion that represents the group’s average rather than one real person’s perspective. Clearly, evaluating the classroom experience is an undertaking just as difficult as teaching itself. ☺

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FIGURE 1.
QUESTIONNAIRE AND STUDENT RESPONSES
(22 STUDENTS SURVEYED).

ANONYMOUS QUESTIONNAIRE

Respond to the following ten statements by circling a number.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = disagree

3 = neither agree nor disagree

4 = agree

5 = strongly agree

1. *I enjoy sharing my writing face-to-face with others in the class.* Average answer: 4.04, "Agree."
2. *I enjoy reading and critiquing the writings of others on the more anonymous Friday "workshop" days.* Average answer: 4.09, "Agree."
3. *The written responses I've received on workshop days have not been helpful.*
Average answer: 3.59, "Agree."
4. *I feel I am not qualified to respond to the writings of others—face-to-face or in workshop groups.*
Average answer: 1.9, "Disagree."
5. *The instructions the teacher gives on the overhead on responding to student writings are too strict. They don't allow me to respond the way I'd really like to.*
Average answer: 1.9, "Disagree."
6. *When people respond in face-to-face peer groups, I think the temptation to "just be nice" is very strong. Therefore, I don't think I get a completely honest response on "peer" days.*
Average answer: 3.04, "Neither Agree nor Disagree."
7. *Our responses would be better if each person were able to take the writing home and spend more time with it before responding.*
Average answer: 3.13, "Neither Agree nor Disagree."
8. *The written responses on workshop days are usually too vague to be of any use when revising.*
Average answer: 2.68, "Neither Agree nor Disagree."
9. *I'm not interested in what other students think of my writing. The teacher's opinion—and my own—are the only voices in the class that I truly value.*
Average answer: 2.45, "Disagree."
10. *I'm glad we spend two days out of every week sharing our writing. If the teacher lectured from the book every day of the week, we wouldn't learn as much.*
Average answer: 4.45 "Agree."