

# The Better I Teach The Less My Students Learn

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## ABSTRACT

*Student evaluations are widely used to judge how well a professor is teaching. However, because students have little prior knowledge of the subject matter, their view of “good teaching” may be more tied to how well they like the teacher. Therefore, this paper suggests that the relationship between teaching and learning may actually be negative. By teaching “well”, do we rob our students of the opportunity to learn?*

## INTRODUCTION

Is there a direct relationship between teaching and learning? As faculty members we have been indoctrinated with the idea that we need to work harder to perfect our craft. We must learn not just our subject matter but better ways to present this material.

## DIFFERING GOALS - K-12 VERSUS UNIVERSITY TEACHING

There was a time when K-12 teachers were supposed to be experts in the field of teaching. Content knowledge was not stressed so, for example, a middle school math teacher did not have a separate degree in math. Teaching colleges and universities stressed the need for material presentation, classroom management, and a good learning environment as the necessary ingredients to successful instruction.

College and university professors, on the other hand, were expected to be experts in content knowledge and were not required to take any classes in teaching methods. The professor’s job was to expand and explain what the student had learned from their own reading of the subject matter. Professors were expected to do research and increase the body of knowledge. It was the students’ responsibility to grasp the concepts that the professors were lecturing upon.

This duality of missions has led to the divergence between the goals of K-12 teaching and the goals of college education. As a k-12 teacher you were required to see if the material could be broken down into small bite-sized portions which all students could understand and memorize. Teachers were not required to have a large knowledge base of the subject material, rather just enough to pick out the high points and pass it out in small segments. Alternately, as a college professor you were expected to have a vast knowledge of the subject matter and enhance the students’ knowledge of the material that they learned from completing the required out-of-class assignments.

## SLAVIN’S THEORY

The downfall of these two models began in the 1980s when public education, led by Dr. Robert Slavin and a group of liberal education professors, decided that all children could learn the same material at the same pace. Using some very questionable statistics to prove their point, they proclaimed that if teachers did not get equal results among all learners, then the fault must lay with the teachers. To group students according to their achievement levels became the equivalent of racial discrimination. Teachers were pressured to become better at teaching. Since there was no

longer the presumption that learning levels were unequal, it was concluded that any inequality of results must be the result of poor teaching.

Slavin's theory was debunked in the mid 1990s by researchers like Andrew Biemiller, who argued that current educational practices underestimated the magnitude of diversity in educational achievement and that disregarding diversity just widens the range of differences (Biemiller, 1993). While these researchers proposed changes in elementary education, educational institutions did not change. Instead, political correctness now dictated that all children had equal learning ability – it was simply up to the teacher to get the results.

Ignoring the advice of researchers like Biemiller has led to our current situation. We have gradually “dumbed down” the curriculum and teachers are now accused of “teaching to the test”. The generation of students that started in the 1980s and 1990s and are now the core of today's college population has been given the impression throughout their lives that education consists of having a teacher pick out important information, summarize this information, drill this information, and then test on this information. The current high-stakes testing and “No Child Left Behind” provisions have only exaggerated this situation.

### **WEAKNESSES OF STUDENT EVALUATION**

During the 1980s many colleges and universities started to consider the idea of evaluation of instruction. Since the standardized testing procedures used in K-12 education would not work with university faculty, who are renowned for their value of academic freedom, the idea of evaluation by students was born. The standard bearer for many years was to have student evaluations of teaching. Therefore, students with no knowledge of the subject matter were asked to pass judgment on the ability of professors to teach them the material. At no point was it ever considered that the obligation was on the students to learn the material.

Relying on their K-12 school experience as their only guide, students assumed the professor's job was the same as that of the teacher they had been accustomed to throughout elementary and high school. That is, they expected the professor to read, summarize, give examples, and test on the material. To ask questions in a different format or sequence became a “trick question”. To expect students to conduct independent research on a topic was considered unacceptable educational practice. The sole judge was that of the student who, although he had never had a course in the material before, was responsible for judging if he learned an adequate amount about the material. This is much like having a layman evaluate brain surgery.

Another weakness of student evaluations is that they are centered on the student's perspective of “good teaching” rather than on strategies resulting in effect learning. For example, “active learning” is a proven teaching technique for increasing student involvement and learning. In the report, “Evaluation of the ‘Learning by Doing’ Faculty Development Program for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) Center for Teaching and Learning. Final Report Summary” (Schmitz and Luxenberg, 2002), faculty members defined active learning in the following terms:

- *Providing an environment and creating a method that allows students to test or exercise the ideas to which they are being exposed.*
- *When learning is more than memorization; it is relating new knowledge to existing knowledge and sharing this understanding with others.*
- *Reality based; working on real problems to help real people.*
- *When students participate with hands-on activities that elicit critical thinking skills and reinforce real-life experiences.*
- *It is redundant. If the student is not actively participating, learning does not take place. Active learning means learning.*

Defined broadly, active learning is anything that involves students doing something and thinking about what they are doing, (Bonwell and Eison, 1991).

In the Schmitz and Luxenberg study on the effect of active learning, student surveys revealed that students attending classes where faculty used active learning strategies reported that they spent more time preparing for class and felt more motivated by other students in the class than students attending control classes (where active learning was not used). Students in active-learning classrooms were also *less* likely to report examples of disengagement in class, e.g., feeling bored, falling asleep, or skipping class. Unfortunately the student evaluations also revealed that those faculty members who used the most active learning strategies were the least likely to get good evaluations from the students. According to Schmitz and Luxenberg, students were no more satisfied where the professor used some active learning than they were in a normal class. In fact, this study found that students were significantly *less* satisfied with classrooms that employed higher levels of active learning than they were with the faculty at large. The authors speculate that the students' dissatisfaction may stem from the fact that active learning requires the students to work harder!

Recently colleges and universities have begun to require faculty to maintain Teaching Portfolios. John Murray (1997) describes teaching portfolios as follows:

Teaching portfolios can be defined in at least four ways by focusing on their purpose.

- First, teaching portfolios are vehicles for documenting teaching, with the emphasis on demonstrating excellence (see, e.g., O'Neil and Wright 1992).
- Second, teaching portfolios are vehicles that empower professors to gain dominion over their professional lives (see, e.g., Seldin 1991).
- Third, teaching portfolios are vehicles to provide institutions of higher learning with the means to demonstrate that teaching is an institutional priority (see, e.g., Braskamp and Ory 1994).
- Fourth, teaching portfolios are vehicles for individualizing faculty development (see, e.g., Seldin 1993b; Shore et al., 1986).

Notice one vital factor that is missing from these teaching portfolios. Of the four uses mentioned for teaching portfolios, not a single one is directed toward students' learning.

Were student learning not so critical, our handling of the issue may be comical. The focus seems to be for students to do less and less work and independent thinking rather than more learning. Students assume good teachers are those professors whose class is the easiest to pass. This, of course, has led to the other symptom of our educational problems over the past 20 years -- grade inflation. Following the student's logic, "if this is a good professor I will learn a lot, and because I am learning a lot, I will make a good grade. If on the other hand I am making a poor grade, the professor must not be doing a very good job of teaching me the material." In their minds, the less work the student has to do, the better the professor is teaching them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It appears from the proceeding discussion that our current methods of teaching at the expense of learning are doomed to failure. This trend is accelerated by the fact that using student evaluations only increases the pressure on faculty to do more "teaching" so the students can do less "learning". The latest AACSB accreditation standards refer to learning outcomes, and perhaps this is the key to better student learning. The authors would suggest the following steps to obtain more student learning.

First, scrap the student evaluations of teaching. Let's face reality – we've given the job of evaluating faculty members to people who are unfamiliar with the material. They have no idea if the length and breath of content are sufficient for the course. What other positions require the "Quality Control Inspector" to have no prior knowledge of the subject?

Second, bring in active-learning strategies. Each class should have a writing component and an application component. While students may hate projects that have excess or incomplete data, they would be well served if they learned to determine what data is important to solving a problem, what data is missing, and how to best estimate or get

around the missing data. The current generation of students generally asks two questions: “Is this on the test?” and “What is the right answer?” Unfortunately, in most real business situations the problem solver needs to determine what data is relevant and how much faith should they put in an answer based on the data available. Dealing with uncertainty is a part of all business decisions.

Third and most important is the separation of administrative function and student learning. As DelFavero (2005) states, “Administrative behaviors that hinder faculty work and create barriers to the development of stimulating intellectual and social climates have the potential for negative impact on student learning outcomes.”

When the proposition is that students are the customer, and we must please the customer, then learning is badly damaged. To base faculty tenure and promotion decisions on student evaluations is to directly link how well students are pleased with whether a faculty member is successful in his career. Administrators must take the time and effort to do a more meaningful evaluation of faculty based on real learning rather than taking the shortcut of listening to student perceptions.

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