

Evaluations and Examinations For Professors Needed

Editor's note - the following article came to the Cadre via (God help us) the office of President Baker. We unfortunately have no idea where he obtained it from, although it was probably some British journal. It represents one of the most cogent arguments I have ever seen (although I would say that the measures it proposes are insufficient). As such we felt that it was worthy of publication.

Good teaching should be encouraged and rewarded. Unanimity in higher education is rare but this sentiment seems to commend it. There is perhaps almost as much agreement that bad teaching should be discouraged and penalized. Why do we do so little about it?

The common explanation of our inaction is that teaching is difficult, even impossible, to assess objectively. This is an excuse, not a reason. Some objective discrimination is only too easy and the reason for our reluctance to exercise it is that it would require a drastic change of current practices in tenure and promotion of teachers. If we were serious in our concern about the quality of teachers, many teachers would be sacked and many would be demoted.

It is paradoxical that we claim the ability to assess the competence of our students, often to an accuracy of 1 per cent, yet resist the idea that our competence in the classroom can be assessed at all. The recent suggestion of a salaries report that some assessment of teachers' performance should be made was ridiculed because it was accompanied by the idea that the opinion of students might be taken into account. Whilst not dismissing assessment by students I think that this was an unfortunate red herring. Certainly some simpler and more objective tests could be applied and would be relevant.

The first is that teachers should turn up for their classes as scheduled. Most people who have no experience of higher education would be astonished that this test could be significant. Those who are more familiar with our colleges and universities know that carelessness about this is quite common and that it is not always an obstacle to promotion.

Perhaps more exacting, and even more widely neglected, is that teachers should main-

tain accurate written records of their teaching and of the progress of their students. We require of our students coherent written work. Do we require it of ourselves?

Assessment of the quality of a teacher's records, his teaching schemes and his lecture notes could be a matter of controversy and adequacy of records is no sufficient condition for good teaching. But is it not a necessary condition for competence in a teacher that he should maintain such documentation, that he should be able to produce written evidence of effective planning, monitoring and recording of his work? The demand for this evidence is my second test.

The third is that it should be demonstrated that this documentation reasonably corresponds with the published prospectus of his course and with what actually happens in his lectures, seminars and tutorials.

Student assessments provide readily available material for a further test of competence. There could be controversy about an examiner's correctness in setting and assessing but there is one easy objective test of his consistency. The objectivity of examining can be assessed by requiring an examiner to mark afresh the papers he marked last year or the year before. Those who assume that this test is easily passed should try it.

We have not yet entered the classroom. How many will let us in? The immediate reaction of students to a lecture may not be a satisfactory assessment of the quality of teaching although it is surely relevant. Students can be swept along by charisma; they can be sulky about serious challenge. The fact that there are difficulties does not mean that no objective tests are possible.

Certain extremes of incompetence can be identified beyond any possibility of controversy and these, if we are to believe the comments of many students or assume that things have not completely changed since we were students, are of not infrequent occurrence.

The lecturer who cannot be heard at the back of the room, the lecturer who does not lecture but merely transfers his notes to the board is identifiable, with little room for doubt. And perhaps we can be fairly sure of incompetence in some cases in

which a lecturer loses the whole of his class, whether metaphorically or physically.

The competence of a teacher in the classroom must include a measure of awareness of himself and of his students which in some respects could be tested objectively. When he comes out of a classroom does the teacher know what he and his students have done?

For example, how many teachers are unaware that they have spent most of the hour of a so-called seminar in talking rather than listening? How many are aware after a lecture that they have been addressing only a half or a third of those present. Have lecturers any idea how many students have taken notes, how many have done "The Times crossword" and how many have written letters home during the lecture?

And if all these methods of testing competence and incompetence of teachers are deemed inadequate there is a further alternative of attractive simplicity. Why not place on each teacher the onus of proving his competence?

Too often the work of teachers is defined merely in terms of individual teaching and "administration", a word that covers a multitude of sins of omission and commission. Too little emphasis is placed on the collective responsibility of a section or department for the whole curriculum.

An assessment of competence in teaching should be made of the group as well as the individuals. Often the individual teacher passes on to an undefined authority the responsibility for some of the worst inadequacies of teaching.

A friend of mine last month started a degree course. When he asked for an explanation of the assessment system and an outline of the curriculum of the final year he was told that these were not yet decided. Incompetence and irresponsibility of this kind are not difficult to identify with objectivity.

That a course plan exists that the teachers involved are aware of it and that they work according to it can and should be easily ascertained. Obviously there must be freedom for teacher, and students, to follow their individual preferences.

Equally obviously, there must be limits to this freedom. If the students go beyond these limits examiners are quick to apply sanctions

and do not find this difficult. Sanctions could be applied to teachers who similarly go out of bounds.

The incompetence of teachers can be particularly damaging in the processes of the assessment and examination of students. I was recently told by the registrar of a university that the decisions of its examiners could be challenged only by appeal to the Privy Council. If this is true, and I do not doubt his word, it implies a heavy responsibility indeed upon the examiners.

From other professions that exercise authority and responsibility of this magnitude the public is usually protected by a professional code of conduct and the provision of severe penalties for those who act in contempt of it. I wonder what protection the public has from the possible operation of an academic conspiracy of mediocrity veiled by the secrecy that surrounds the proceedings of examining boards.

Some easily available tests can and should be applied to assess, albeit incompletely, the competence of teacher, departments and examiners. The failure and the unwillingness to apply them could fairly be ascribed to a conspiracy of academics. "We will ask no awkward questions about your work if you ask none about ours" is a popular formula. Its use is an abuse of academic freedom and it invites external intervention in academic matters.

In British education, indeed in British society generally, our tolerance of incompetence is a greater weakness than our neglect of excellent. Wrong priorities within our institutions reflect wrong priorities at the top. Lip service is often paid to the need to encourage good teaching in colleges and universities. It generally remains no more than lip service because the University Grants Committee and the Department of Education and Science offer to institutions no tangible encouragement or reward for competence.

If we are to engage in the fascinating exercise of selecting universities, polytechnics or colleges to be closed what criteria shall we use? Do we wipe out those at the foot of the league table for Nobel Prizes or research publications? Or do we seek out the incompetent? I think I know the answer the general public would give and I believe it would be right.