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Teaching evaluations & the tyranny of numbers

Abstract

I read with interest, and some concern, the article by Sylvia Huntley Moore and John Panter in the first issue of Overview: "Evaluating Teaching at the University of Wollongong" (Vol. 1. No.1, 1993). The authors were careful to point out differences between 'diagnostic' and 'assessment' evaluations, with only the latter evaluations to be used in promotion or appraisal processes. The use of the 'assessment' evaluations as evidence of teaching quality, not only in promotion or appraisal processes, but also in academic staff selection committees, is the issue I wish to address here.

Mary Day takes issue with use of student surveys as evidence in the evaluation of teaching, as elaborated by John Panter and Sylvia Huntley-Moore in the last issue of Overview. A response from the authors of the article on teaching evaluations follows.

Teaching Evaluations & The Tyranny of Numbers

Mary Day

I read with interest, and some concern, the article by Sylvia Huntley-Moore and John Panter in the first issue of *Overview*: "Evaluating Teaching at the University of Wollongong" (Vol. 1. No. 1, 1993). The authors were careful to point out differences between 'diagnostic' and 'assessment' evaluations, with only the latter evaluations to be used in promotion or appraisal processes. The use of the 'assessment' evaluations as evidence of teaching quality, not only in promotion or appraisal processes, but also in academic staff selection committees, is the issue I wish to address here.

I am meant to be reassured, I think, by the comment that "the research base on which good schemes of evaluation are developed is vast" (p 17). However, this does nothing to allay my concern about the methodological assumptions, in not only evaluation survey instruments, but also in this vast body of research. By methodological assumptions I am referring to the ontological and epistemological assumptions implied by their construction and use.

Various assumptions about reality exist. These range from an assumption that we, as thinking, feeling, sensing people, operating within particular social settings, construct our reality, to an assumption that reality exists "out there". Similarly, various assumptions exist about what it is that is valid knowledge. One assumption about valid knowledge is that it is constructed through the social interaction of particular human beings, in specific places at particular times. A quite different assumption about what constitutes valid knowledge is that knowledge is only valid, perhaps "discovered", when it is evidenced by a large number of observations supported by a barrage of statistical tests. I believe that the use of 'assessment evaluations' in this University are based on particular methodological assumptions encompassing reality existing "out there" and measurable only through a number of observations.

I do not see this as a problem, necessarily. However, I do see this as a problem, when the methodological assumptions made about what it is to teach, are substantially different. Of course, we all know what it is to teach, because we all do it, right? But this presupposes that we all have the same ideas about what teaching is all about. And I know that this is not the case, even within the Department of Accountancy. For example, there is a vast body of literature on constructivist pedagogy. The basic assumptions in much of this literature is that both reality and knowledge are constructed by particular learning communities. Similarly, there is a vast literature on critical pedagogy. In much of this literature, the focus is on teachers being students and students being teachers, with an explicit aim of transformation and emancipation for all parties. Although the methodological assumptions vary within this literature, certainly some assumptions are focussed on the social construction of both knowledge and reality.

In some of my teaching, I am adopting particular methodological assumptions that are radically different to those assumed by 'assessment evaluations' through the use of surveys. Of course, I still use these evaluations. I have no choice! However, I am troubled by how these results are privileged by various University committees. I am also troubled by how the results are interpreted.

The outcomes of these evaluations are reduced to a few numbers presented to committees, like the promotions committee. Attention is focussed on "the meaning" of, say, a 3.5 compared to a 4.0. Perhaps a 3.8 is not evidence of quality teaching but a 4.0 is! Sylvia Huntley-Moore and John Panter pointed out that comparisons should only be made between similar units, for example large classes (p 17). What is large? For some people, a large class is one with 30 people. For some others a large class is one with 300 people. What sort of sense is made out of a 3.5? It seems obvious that the higher the number, the better. But what does the number mean? Again, it seems obvious to me that it will mean different things to different people. Who has the power to determine what "the meaning" is? It certainly is not me, because I believe the number means very little, particular given the variety of teaching contexts and objectives possible. Yet decisions about people's careers are being made on these numbers, so they certainly are powerful.

I have particular difficulty in giving validity to these few numbers when I recall some of the desired outcomes of tertiary education. In the HEC 1992 paper entitled "Achieving Quality" a list of desirable outcomes was presented. These included:

- a capacity for critical thinking and appraisal
- intellectual curiosity
- well developed problem-solving abilities
- a capacity for logical and independent thought
- the ability to communicate effectively and to manage information
- intellectual rigour
- creativity and imagination
- sensitivity to ethical issues in practice
- integrity and tolerance

I was quite delighted to see this list, because it encompassed a lot of what I and several colleagues have been trying to achieve for some time. We believe the most appropriate way for us to achieve these outcomes is through constructivist and critical pedagogical practices. We are using our creativity and

imagination to promote intellectual curiosity and rigour. We are concerned about generating integrity and tolerance. Yet our teaching evaluations, just like every other academic's in the University, are reduced to a few numbers. A few de-contextualised scores out of 5. No words from the evaluations permitted in the promotions committee. Just a few numbers! Where is the intellectual tolerance of an enormous range of teaching processes, when these are reduced to a 3.5 out of 5; or was it a 3.8, perhaps a 4.0?

There are many ways of evaluating teaching, and the use of 'assessment evaluations' is only one. What I am objecting to is the very idea that it is appropriate to use a standard questionnaire across all teaching in the University, irrespective of the methodological assumptions inherent in the teaching.

Mary Day is a senior lecturer in the Department of Accountancy at the University of Wollongong.

Response from John Panter and Sylvia Huntley-Moore

Editor's note: Overview encourages debate and articles such as the one above. Normally, authors can expect that there will be no editorial comment and that any further debate will be conducted in the next issue. Occasionally, however, there may be issues raised in a paper which should not wait. In this instance, the editor has asked Sylvia Huntley-Moore and John Panter to comment on points made by Mary Day as a matter of clarification of current practice.

We agree with the author that survey systems should not stifle innovation in teaching. Nor should they be based on a preference for a particular pedagogical style or set of assumptions despite how widespread or accepted these may be in a given institution. We should have made clear in our original paper that there is a simple mechanism for dealing with this problem. Where staff believe that the standard survey instrument is unsuitable, they should approach the Centre and negotiate appropriate changes. Once these changes are approved by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the new survey becomes part of the standard system for the purposes of the regulations relating to appraisal and the granting of tenure or promotion. Several such instruments are used regularly.

There is not total freedom. Staff, for example, are expected to meet certain requirements regardless of pedagogical assumptions or style. Students have a

right to know what the aims and content of a subject are. Those who lecture should speak clearly and any visuals they use should be visible from the back of the room. Adequate assignment feedback should be given. And so on. We do not think that such requirements stifle innovation.

There is a wide range of opinion across campus concerning the use of quantitative indicators in personnel decision making. At one extreme, there is the view that only numbers count. Mary Day has expressed the opposite view.

All members of the Promotions Committee must attend a workshop on the evaluation of teaching. A number of points are made at that workshop. They include the following:

1. Evaluation of teaching is ultimately a matter of informed professional **judgement**. It cannot be reduced to comparing numbers on survey results, tables of pass rates or whatever. Quantitative data are indicators which should be commented on by the applicant and explored by the Committee.

2. Student surveys must not be the only source of evidence. Students are not capable of providing valid comments about the curriculum. Applicants should supply evidence according to the guidelines in the application forms and other relevant documents and the Committee members should take that evidence into account when making their judgment.

Promotion procedures and the guidance given to applicants has improved considerably during the past few years, particularly in relation to teaching. No system of personnel decision making is perfect or ever will be, but we have come a long way.

Dr John Panter is Head of the Centre for Staff Development (CSD), University of Wollongong. Sylvia Huntley-Moore is a staff development officer at the CSD.

You probably need help with Statistics.

Whether you conduct quantitative research yourself, or are supervising a student, you will find that the service courses in statistics which you did years ago have left you ill-prepared for the task before you. There is nothing shameful about this; would one or two courses in your discipline make someone else as expert in it as you are?

However, the Statistical Consulting Service, based in the Department of Applied Statistics, is here to assist you. We will advise on:

- planning an investigation so that your research hypotheses are formulated clearly, the data you collect are appropriate, and the variability in the data is minimised;
- how to collect the data, and to prepare them for analysis in a computer;
- the most appropriate form of analysis, and which statistical package to use;
- how to interpret the output from the package; and
- how best to present the conclusions you draw from the analysis.

The service is funded principally by the Graduate Faculty. As a consequence, if your research (or that of a student you supervise) does not have external funding, you will receive up to ten hours of FREE advice per calendar year. If you receive external funds, the advice is still available, but you have to meet the cost. Naturally, there are some conditions attached. For information about these, ring Ken Russell on extn 3815. To make an appointment, please ring Kerrie Gamble on extn 4308.

The service is available throughout the year, including the Summer Session when most researchers are hard at work. You should take advantage of it. Some points to consider:

- we don't expect you to be a statistical genius;
- we won't talk down to you or use lots of statistical jargon;
- we won't use a complicated analysis if something simple will do the job.

And one final point ... Many people think that you only seek advice when it is time to analyse your data. This is WRONG!!! No amount of statistical sophistication can salvage a poor investigation. You should see the consultant at the very beginning of your research, so that s/he can help ensure that it is properly planned.

In summary:

If you need a statistical mate
'Cause quantitative worries are great,
Then come to Consulting,
We won't be insulting
(Not even if you've left it too late).

Statistical Consulting Service
Dept. of Applied Statistics
For an appointment: Kerrie Gamble, extn 4308
For further information: Dr Ken Russell, extn 3815