
TEACHERS ON TRIAL

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Engineering institutes in quest of academic excellence often find the educational standards and didactic norms in need of a sea change. The faculty member, it must be stressed, is the veritable pivot around which the entire institute revolves. Of late, however, teaching is easily the most neglected aspect of campus scene. A teacher is looked upon as an autonomous individual beyond the periphery of accountability. The assessment of the teaching faculty can be done either by the superiors, or peers but it is the taught, the student fraternity, who can gauge all the facets and dimensions of the "professional performance" both, on and off the field.

Should students evaluate teachers ? Sounds absurd or attractive depending on whether you are on the receiving end or otherwise. The controversial suggestions literally stir up the hornet's nest and the academia reacts with bewilderment and disbelief. Some however welcome this innovation in the educational system. And the debate on this sensitive issue continues unabated.

The very idea of putting a teacher on trial might seem repugnant to many orthodox believers in the sanctity of teacher taught relationship. Gone are the days when befitting the 'Guru-Shishya parampra', the teacher could say : "Shishyadichchhet paraajayam" (the ideal teacher should expect defeat at the hands of his student). Such sublime concepts have become an anachronism in the present milieu charac-

terized by mutual recrimination and distrust. Many students look upon their teachers as expendable appendages or necessary evils. In private comments, several teachers come in for a great deal of criticism and worse. But to date there is no meaningful or rational basis to channelise the private comment or opinion concerning their teachers' teaching and behaviour which borders on accuracy many a time. If there were an open and formally prescribed procedure to ascertain, scientifically and objectively, and to identify the shortcomings and deficiencies of the teaching community, the student opinion would have been received with at least cautious welcome. Teachers would have perhaps then tried to overcome their weaknesses and exerted more to live up to the student's expectations. Indeed, this precisely is what student evaluation is all about. Reactions vary from outright opposition and rejection to enthusiastic support and desire to try out this new educational innovation.

Teachers' evaluation is an intricate issue and needs to be tackled with care and circumspection. A multi-dimensional approach to reinforce the reliability of a fairly accurate assessment could employ the following techniques:

- a) self-appraisal by teachers.
- b) evaluation based on classroom visits by colleagues and administrators.

- c) critical examination of pedagogical material published by the teacher and also used in the class,
- d) student evaluation and
- e) evaluation by the alumni or the immediate past students. Of these, student evaluation of teachers is by far the most delicate one.

In USA where the teaching grading system is in vogue, many people seem to agree that student ratings on teacher appraisal can assist the teacher in identifying areas of improvements and the heads of institutions in recognising and rewarding teaching ability.

It is possible to identify the characteristics of effective teaching and the feedback from the responsive, responsible, critical and learning - oriented students can and should prove to be a welcome stimulus to enhance the teaching effectiveness. Unfortunately, when this system is sought to be introduced, the faculty feel that their dignity and professional status are being doubted or violated. Furthermore, many teachers apparently entertain misgivings or mistrust that this 'evaluation' by students might be used against them.

Not many perhaps know that in USA teacher's tenure depends on it (systematic student evaluation). In Canada, a senior professor had to quit following his poor (below 50 per cent) performance Index for three consecutive years. Perhaps our work culture, attitude towards teaching and general academic environment are not conducive for this measure, which is a pity. By all means, questionnaires can be constantly refined and modified to suit our conditions. In fact, there could be different questionnaires for students of different classes. But to question the very raison detre of the well-meaning proposal is unfortunate and counter-productive.

Critics point out that any schemes imported from abroad and transplanted on an alien soil is bound to fail for the simple reason that it is not tailored to our needs, ethos and culture. The same is true of this fashionable proposal of student evaluation of teachers. Says a colleges professor: "we don't have the relevant 'college culture' or proper infrastructure to implement this idea. Let us first involve a system and establish a learning atmosphere or else the very purpose will be defeated. "The point is how can a first year boy is going to evaluate my depth of understanding. By and large, students are not sincere or serious enough in responding to the questionnaire and their ratings are not a reliable indicator. In fact, those students who are not punctual and mature enough with a certain level of intelligence have no 'locus standi' to judge their teachers. Besides, the type and extent of assessment will differ from class to class. At any rate, I don't think the time is ripe to try with such an unusual measure with obvious limitations and potential pitfalls".

Feedback of information is essential for improvement of any medium of communication. Intelligent and unbiased evaluation of teachers by students in this context deserves to be given a trial, argue the proponents of the scheme. But what exactly should constitute the 'feedback mechanism' when the boot is on the other foot and the teacher is in the box ?

A well-drafted questionnaire should include items about the teacher's command of the subject, his ability to organise, explain and clarify, his ability to arouse and sustain interest, his willingness to entertain ideas other than his own and his ability to establish rapport with a class and with individual students. Conspicuous mannerisms which distract attention can be brought out. Also, planning, preparation and presentation of the lecture can be assessed.

The ratings by students can help an instructor to make his teaching more efficacious.

Teaching is best assessed by students. The fear that the results of such evaluation would be used by the managements to sack them or their colleagues is exaggerated, if not entirely unfounded. In fact, good rating by students would secure teachers against arbitrary assessment by managements. In any case, teachers must face up to the need for teacher assessment and suggest ways of ensuring a high degree of professional accountability instead of opposing proposals by others in the mistaken belief of shielding a fellow teacher who may be incompetent or indolent or both. If such is the case, he clearly belongs elsewhere and any effort to retain him in the teaching profession by opposing schemes for evaluation of his work is a disservice to that profession.

Opponents of this concept assert that if the students are supposed to be fit to sit over the judgement of our knowledge and capabilities, they no longer need to be taught. They feel this will only breed animosity between the teacher and the taught. It might turn out to be a popularity contest. Students are often immature and relatively uncritical. Younger teachers are rated higher and students give similar ratings to teachers with vastly different teaching effectiveness. The nature of the evidence (student rating) being anonymous is irresponsible and inadmissible in any just procedure and some of it might be coloured by the desire to shift the onus for students' own shortcomings while some of it confuses teaching with compassion or entertainment or gathered in a way to foment trouble. To this, one could add lack of motivation among most of the students, unscrupulous managements, heavy teaching loads, large-size classes, extraneous consideration in evaluation process, politicisation of the educational system etc.

It is also feared that teachers would be more 'soft' towards the students who would wield the weapon to settle scores with the disciplinarian and dignified teachers. There would be an unhealthy competition among teaching community to gain cheap popularity. The academic institutions will turn into hotbeds of politics. Already there is a lot of campus chaos. Why add to the miseries of teachers already trying to cope with the unruly and uninspired students on the one hand and hassles and harassments by the authorities on the other.

Much will of course depend on how the questionnaire is structured. Moreover the students evaluating their teachers must be perceptive, intelligent and dedicated. Their attitudes and consistency of thought are of vital importance. Common yardstick or a generalised standard is not possible for the responses are likely to be highly subjective. The student rating may prove rewarding to the teachers who might not be conscious of their lacunae. But students' identity shouldn't be disclosed and the results submitted only to the respective teachers and not to the heads of institutions lest they be misused for reprimand or dismissal. The need to provide the teacher with students' input cannot be brushed aside. Teacher evaluation by a students may be restricted to the post-graduate and final year undergraduate classes.

Skeptics opine that student evaluation might help in pinpointing the best and the worst teachers (who nearly get identified even otherwise) but for the mediocre majority the method is ineffective. Way back in 1945, writing in the Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors, Joel H. Hitterbrand aptly stated: How we may ask, may it (system of student evaluation) be expected to affect the teacher himself? We may expect that a capable, conscientious teacher, seeking to establish a cordial relation with his class,

will resent the intrusion of an outsider who presumes to question his competence or fairness. But how about the dull uninspiring teacher? The proposal seems to assume that dullness is voluntary, that a teacher who during the course of years, has been blind to the evidence of boredom in the faces before him will suddenly become brilliant upon learning his 'teaching index'. Any such optimism is most native".

So far no definite methods and techniques for implementing it are available with our educational institutions. But how useful, even if relevant, can student opinion be for providing the critic.

Be that as it may, essentially the concept of a student evaluation of teachers sounds sensible, if only hamstrung by certain objections and constraints. Designing an ingenious questionnaire calls for considerable care and thought. Several methods have been tried including the one at IIT. Bombay. By and large, the pattern remains the same and cardinal caution is exercised in that the students are advised not to indicate their names or write anything on the questionnaire. Four answers are usually provided against each of the 15-

odd questions, viz. strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The student is asked to mark one of these. The questions range from teacher's planning and preparation of the class lessons, his presentation of the subject matter, whether his mannerisms are distracting, examinations methods, rapport with students outside the class as also his ability to relate theory to practical situations.

As Kenneth Ebla, a celebrated educationist, aptly puts it: "A class room is not a professor's castle. Teaching is a public activity. It is neither a fragile art that it can be harmed by enquiry, nor is so complex a craft that most teachers' performance cannot be improved through attention to fundamentals."

All in all, the novel idea of putting teachers on trial by the students is still in a state of infancy and is yet to gain momentum and popular acceptance in our country. But its various implications and ramifications coupled with possible repercussions need to be looked into, discussed and debated and a workable scheme hammered out.
