EDITOR’S NOTE: Squeezed.

The Reflective Teaching Essay, James Lang and Kenneth Bain, Northwestern University, p. 1. Where’s the wisdom?


STUDENTS: Running On Empty: Are College Freshmen Really So Stressed Out? David Cooper, Michigan State University, p. 6. Maybe the spin on freshmen ought to be that they’re a lot like the rest of us.

DEVELOPER’S DIARY: Idiosyncratic Profs and Proofs, Laura Border, University of Colorado - Boulder, p. 8. If organization lies in the eye of the beholder, does that mean chaos reigns?

TA FORUM: Teaching Assistants Until Now, Karron Lewis, University of Texas, p. 11. A synoptic paper on the history and current state of TA development in North America.

VIEWPOINT: Faculty Development From The Bottom Up, Steve Golin, Bloomfield College, p. 11. Have faculty developers begun to set themselves above faculty?

### RESEARCH WATCH

Test Your Assumptions about Student Evaluations: A Pop Quiz

T  F  1. More difficult courses, with a greater workload, receive slightly higher student evaluations than do easier/lower workload courses.

T  F  2. Male instructors generally receive higher evaluations than do female instructors.

T  F  3. In general, age and years of teaching are moderately, significantly, and negatively related to student evaluations.

T  F  4. Research productivity is negatively related to student ratings of teaching.

T  F  5. There is a very small negative relationship between class size and student evaluations.

T  F  6. The academic field or discipline is unrelated to student evaluations.

T  F  7. Generally, there is a small positive correlation between the expected grade in the class and student evaluations.

T  F  8. Signed ratings are more positive than anonymous ratings.

T  F  9. Research has found a slight same-gender preference: male students give higher ratings to male instructors, and female

students give higher ratings to female instructors.

T  F  10. Instructors’ warmth and enthusiasm are generally unrelated to ratings of teaching competence.

T  F  11. Ratings in lower-level courses tend to be slightly higher than ratings in upper-level courses.

T  F  12. The scores on many specific items provide better data for personnel (summative) decisions than do a couple of global items.

T  F  13. There are high positive correlations between student and alumni ratings of global teacher competence.

T  F  14. Student evaluations are better measures of satisfaction with, and the effectiveness of, the course than the instructor.

T  F  15. There are moderate positive relationships between student achievement and student ratings of several instructor skills.

Answer key

1) T; 2) F; 3) F; 4) F; 5) T; 6) F; 7) T; 8) T; 9) F; 10) F; 11) F; 12) F; 13) T; 14) F; 15) T
What Do Student Ratings Mean?

Kathleen McKinney, Coordinator
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How did you do on the true-false quiz about student evaluations? A great deal of research has been conducted over the last three decades on student ratings of teaching and of courses. The empirical findings from this research do not always conform to faculty members’ beliefs.

Much of the research focuses on correlates of student ratings of courses or instructors.

In addition, studies have assessed factors that account for the most variance in student ratings. The literature also contains discussion of bias in evaluations (what is bias and when should we control for it).

Finally, writers in this area discuss the practical implications of their research.

Factors that are significantly and positively associated with student ratings include the following: measures of student achievement; alumni, peer and administrative ratings; qualitative student comments; workload/difficulty level; energy and enthusiasm of the teacher; status as a regular faculty member (as opposed to a graduate assistant); faculty research productivity; student motivation; student expected grade; and course level. The size and practical significance of these relationships vary. For example, most agree that there is little practical significance to the small positive correlation between expected grade and student ratings, and between faculty research productivity and student ratings. Similarly, research shows a small and negative, but practically insignificant, relationship between class size and student ratings.

Factors generally found to be unrelated to student ratings include faculty age and teaching experience, instructor’s gender, most faculty personality traits, student’s age, class level of student, student’s GPA, student’s personality, and student’s gender (with the exception of a slight preference for same-sex instructors).

A variety of studies using several different methodologies have assessed which factors account for the most variance in student ratings. This research shows that it is the instructor and instructor variables, rather than course variables, that account for the most variance in student ratings. Researchers conclude that most student evaluations should be used to evaluate instructors, not courses.

Instructors may believe that student evaluations are unreliable. In general, the research does not support this belief.

Finally, what is bias in student evaluations? When should we be concerned with bias? Experts in this area do not agree. Some have suggested that anything not under the control of the teacher constitutes bias. Others have posited that all variables unrelated to teaching effectiveness be considered bias. Finally, in some writings the focus is on variables that correlate with student ratings but are unrelated to
Editor's Note:
Squeezed by an annual obligation to the government, I write reminded of the constraints on every action. Tension and release, action and reaction, utterance and understanding or misunderstanding. Teaching—like everything else—is a dance with possibility, bounded by an unfolding reality. We teach and then students say they didn’t learn. What’s up? Kathleen McKinney’s pop quiz on student ratings provides entre to the research on the meaning of student ratings. Laura Border’s DEVELOPER’S DIARY explores the same terrain, showing how processing styles can become dangerously exclusive teaching styles.

Do we really know our students? David Cooper says that official interpretations of UCLA’s famous freshman survey show some myopia. Could we have things in common with “Generation X?”

Speaking of dangers: Steve Golin wonders about dangers hidden in the faculty developer’s role. Does faculty resistance to “development” have a positive meaning? Where does real hope lie? Where does the strength from all this flexion and release reside? James Lang and Kenneth Bain have an idea. They call for “reflective teaching essays” which convey the wisdom that emerges from honest reflection on years of teaching experience. Three examples of the kind of reflective teaching essay Lang and Bain have in mind supplement this edition of the Forum. Find them on the Forum’s Web site (http://www.ntlf.com).

Traditionally, hope lies in the future, and the future of the professoriate lies in today’s graduate teaching assistants. Karron Lewis reviews the history and evolution of TA training in a comprehensive paper glimpsed briefly here and posted in full on the Forum’s Web site.

— James Rhem
development person, however, is
more likely to lead to improvement
of teaching.

- Ratings of a course based on
five or fewer student responses are
of questionable reliability and
ratings from an instructor’s other
courses should be used. Evaluation
judgments about a faculty member
are best made using ratings from at
least five courses with at least 15
student responses in each course.

Instructors may believe that
student course/teacher evaluations
are unreliable, invalid, biased, and
affected by many inappropriate
factors. In general, the research does
not support these beliefs. It is still
the case, however, that student
ratings, and their interpretation,
have limitations. Student ratings
should be only one source of
information used for the evaluation
of teaching, and the interpretation
and proper uses of student ratings
are at least as important as the
ratings themselves.

(Sources: Braskamp, L.A., and Ory, J.C.
Cashin, W.E. 1995. “Student ratings of
teaching: The research revisited.” Idea Paper
#32, Center for Faculty Evaluation and
Development, Kansas State University.)

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