

# A Case Against the Use of Course Questionnaires

WALTER BOSSERT\*

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Distributing this document is an attempt to exercise my academic freedom (a concept that may soon be a thing of the past—enjoy the sensation of being exposed to it while you can) and speak out against an absurdity which I am being forced to participate in.

Against my will and against my better judgment, I have to hand out course questionnaires. This requirement applies not only to myself, but to all of my colleagues in this department. One declared objective of this exercise is to use the results of those questionnaires as inputs for promotion decisions and performance assessments at the end of probationary periods.

Achieving and maintaining high standards in teaching is of great importance, not only for the benefit of the students but for the academic community in general. Therefore, I am in support of measures to improve teaching quality. However, as demonstrated below, course questionnaires have nothing to do with the quality of teaching. The practice of making teaching-quality judgments on the basis of anonymous student questionnaires leads to unacceptable consequences and often forces instructors to sacrifice the quality of their teaching in favor of popularity. In addition to having to suffer from a lowering of the quality of their education, another disadvantage for students is that they have a task imposed on them which they cannot have the expertise and information to perform properly.

I consider it my academic responsibility to oppose procedures that I can demonstrate to be flawed. This is why the questionnaires (which I am handing out under protest) are accompanied by this document. You have every right to be exposed to views that do not conform to current doctrine, just as I am entitled to express my views on the matter. Here is my case against the use of course questionnaires.

Teaching at a university is a task that differs significantly from teaching at other institutions. One of the most important aspects of a university education is that students learn to think and work on their own without having to be monitored and motivated. The role of a university instructor is therefore very different from that of, for example, a high-school teacher. This position is reflected unambiguously in the criteria that are being used in hiring academics. Academic staff members are appointed on the grounds of their expertise and their ability to communicate knowledge to others. They are neither

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\*Except for the title, this is the document I distributed to my students at the University of Nottingham in December 1998. Much of the material is taken from my earlier piece “Why there will be no questionnaires in this course,” circulated at the University of Waterloo in April 1997. Some of the arguments used here first appeared in M. Kubara’s article “Interpretation of student evaluations,” *CAUT Bulletin* Nov. 1993, p. 16.

trained nor hired as specialists in pedagogical matters, which clearly distinguishes them from instructors at institutions such as elementary schools or high schools. Therefore, it seems to be generally understood and recognized that university instruction is based on criteria that are very different from those that can be found in pre-university education.

The basic purpose of a university is to seek and disseminate knowledge rather than provide students with ‘recipe books’ that tell them how to perform specific tasks. It is of great importance at the university level to educate people in critical and rigorous thinking, which will enable them to approach complex issues and problems in a competent way. As a consequence, evaluating university instruction ought to be based on criteria that reflect this purpose.

Given the above definition of the role of a university, the main criteria for evaluating teaching performance should be competence and the ability to communicate knowledge in a comprehensible way. Student questionnaires cannot possibly reflect these criteria adequately for a number of reasons, some of which I want to elaborate on below.

To illustrate that the problems associated with using teaching questionnaires are rather deep and fundamental, let us assume for the moment that there is agreement regarding the definition of ‘good teaching’ (that is, there is agreement on what is to be measured), and that the students are willing and able to complete the questionnaires adequately. Therefore, we suppose that the students filling out the forms have the expertise and information necessary to do so. These assumptions are extremely favorable toward the use of student questionnaires—more on that later. However, even under these assumptions, the questionnaires do not carry any reliable information concerning the quality of teaching.

One does not have to examine the completed questionnaires very closely to discover that there is a considerable amount of variation within classes, even though all students in a given class have access to the same evidence—namely, the teaching performance of the respective instructor. But if all these students are experts in judging teaching performance (as we assume for now), this variation indicates that they must have different standards for making these judgments. What is a ‘3’ to one student is considered a ‘4’ by another, and still others call the same performance a ‘2,’ for example. Clearly, standards cannot be assumed to be equal across students, let alone being what the powers that be would consider the ‘right’ standards (my conjecture is that there would be a fair amount of disagreement among staff members and administrators as to what these standards ought to be, assuming that people have put much thought into this issue in the first place). This being the case, what meaning can possibly be attached to those numbers? It is evident that it cannot seriously be claimed that they reflect some supposedly objective criterion to measure the quality of teaching.

In addition to mistakenly attaching meaning to those numbers within a given class and within a given item on the form, comparisons across heterogeneous items, across different students, and across different instructors are being made. For example, a ‘4’ given by one student for one item to one instructor is treated in the same way a ‘4’ given by another student for another item to another instructor. Clearly, this can only make sense if it is assumed that a ‘4’ means the same thing for each student, for each item, and for each instructor. In light of the above discussion, such an assumption must be described as rather inappropriate.

Hence, even under extremely favorable assumptions, the questionnaires cannot possibly provide an objective indicator of teaching quality—all they reflect are the students’

subjective opinions, formed by applying diverse standards. Therefore, the data provided by the questionnaires reveal, at best, information about the characteristics of the respondents. They are not evaluations that are based on some common standards. Note that the students filling out the questionnaires do not have to give any reason for their choices and, therefore, it is not even known what their (different) standards might be.

The above argument demonstrates that even if expertise on the part of the students is assumed, the questionnaires fail to provide reliable data for the purposes of evaluating teaching quality. However, matters are much worse than that because the assumption that students have the expertise and the information necessary to make competent judgments cannot be justified.

For example, if one considers it the responsibility of the instructor to motivate students to work hard and to stimulate student interest (a commonly-held view that I myself do not endorse—more on that below), the questionnaires will not be of much help in obtaining reliable data. Students cannot be expected to be able to tell which portion of their motivation (or lack thereof) can be attributed to the instructor's efforts. Furthermore, there is considerable variation across individuals with respect to how they respond to various forms of motivation and, again, the questionnaires will, at best, allow one to collect information concerning the characteristics of the respondents.

If one acknowledges that the competence of the instructor is at least of some importance (a claim that I find hard to dispute), it becomes clear that the students cannot be expected to judge whether an instructor is familiar with the course material and teaches what would generally be considered a good (or 'up-to-date') course. Most students do not know very much about the subject matter of a course at the time they take it (which is, of course, perfectly natural—after all, they supposedly take the course to learn something). But then they cannot seriously be expected to make a well-informed and qualified judgment concerning the competence of the instructor.

Similarly, students cannot be expected to assess the communication skills of an instructor properly. Again, it is very difficult for them to judge which part of their understanding (or lack of it) is due to the instructor. From statements that I have heard frequently, it seems that many students who have difficulties understanding the material are all too willing to simply blame their instructor, no matter whether or not this view is justified.

The problems are even more evident if one examines the responses to questions to which there exists an objective answer. Some institutions have a category labelled 'instructor's attendance to classes' on the forms. It has happened to me every time I taught a course at such a university that some students gave poor scores for that question even though I didn't miss a single class. I am by no means an exception in that regard—all of the colleagues I asked about that at those institutions had the same experience.

In addition to the ability of the students to complete the questionnaires appropriately, their willingness to do so can be questioned as well. I do not mean to claim that most students deliberately behave in a questionable fashion in that respect, but irresponsible behavior clearly can be observed. Many people I know (myself included) have experienced situations where students simply check the '5' column throughout the questionnaire, which can hardly be described as sensible behavior. The anonymity of the students allows them to behave in the most outrageous way if they choose to do so, and the instructor does not even have the opportunity to respond to such behavior. How can one make an argument against a box that has been checked anonymously on a form? A student has the power

to decrease an instructor's rating simply because he or she does not like the course or the instructor for some reason, or because of disagreements in which the instructor might not be at fault at all. That the word of the instructor has a weight of zero (he or she is not even told what the nature of the possible disagreement is), whereas a student, no matter how irresponsible and unreasonable he or she might be, has the privilege to reduce teaching ratings without having to give any justification whatsoever is a rather disturbing feature of this practice and is unacceptable.

A lot could be said about specific items that appear on the forms (although there are some—such as ‘the teacher always started and finished on time’—that I refuse to dignify with a comment). However, I do not want to spend much time discussing individual items because the very notion of using questionnaires is conceptually flawed, no matter what specific questions are being asked. Suffice it to say that questionnaires of that kind appear to be a symptom of a general (and rather alarming) move towards an academic environment that has very little to do with what universities used to be (and, in my opinion, should be) about. Underlying many of the statements on the form is the view that it is to be considered the instructor's responsibility to present the material in a way such that students immediately understand everything that is being introduced. However, much of the material that should be taught at a university is of a rather advanced and complex nature, and pretending that it isn't is academically irresponsible. It is to be expected that students have to work on their own and, if they are to develop a sound understanding of the material, they have to go through the (by no means easy) process of working carefully through lecture notes, readings, and assignments. It is a rather disturbing observation that nowadays (this is perhaps unique in the history of higher education), even though the body of knowledge continues to increase, there is more and more pressure to impart less and less of it to students (and, therefore, to future generations of academics). By designing and using questionnaires of that kind, universities are providing clear disincentives for instructors (especially those who are in the process of moving through the ranks) to teach courses that are considered ‘too’ demanding.

The very notion of conducting a performance evaluation on the basis of anonymous questionnaires must be considered anti-intellectual in a fundamental way. One of the important things to be learned (and taught) at a university is the necessity to provide arguments and reasons for one's views. An opinion is not a valid opinion just because somebody states it. Anonymous questionnaires do not constitute well-founded arguments. To get an appreciation of the methodology that is being used here, imagine your course grades were determined by an anonymous vote among first-year undergraduate students. Universities are setting a rather poor example by making quality judgments on the basis of criteria that are opposed to basic academic values.

Using anonymous questionnaires to measure teaching quality means that one is willing to accuse and convict instructors of ‘bad teaching’ without anything that could be considered a proof, and without anything like a due process. This violates even the most rudimentary notion of natural justice and clearly is unacceptable. If instructors are being told that they should attempt to achieve ‘good’ results in the questionnaires, the response that is to be expected is that they sacrifice the quality of their teaching in favor of popularity. This is not what a university education is about.

It is true that instructors differ in the way they teach. But this is, to a large extent, a difference in style rather than in quality. One of the valuable intellectual experiences

as a university student is being exposed to different styles of instruction and academic interaction. This very important diversity is being stifled by forcing an unnatural conformity on instructors. If it is attempted to differentiate instructors on the basis of these questionnaires, they are not distinguished in terms of the quality of their teaching but, rather, styles of teaching that are more popular than others are being rewarded. It is one of the fundamental aspects of academic freedom that people ought not to be put at a disadvantage on the basis of lack of popularity and, therefore, using student questionnaires (worse—anonymous questionnaires) for the purposes of teaching evaluation conflicts with the very principles that an institution with intellectual ambitions has a duty to uphold.

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills that should be acquired at a university. Use it to make well-founded judgments about what you observe, not only in the classroom. It is my duty as an intellectual to speak out against what I consider (with good reasons) to be unacceptable procedures, and I hope to thereby set an example for you as well. Don't take practices for granted just because they exist—analyze, question, and challenge them.

As far as the questionnaires I have to hand out today are concerned: Remember that I am forced to make them available, but you are under no obligation to complete and return them.