

Here We Are Now, Entertain Us: Evaluating the Postmodern Student
Doug Mann, January 2006

College campus, Anytown, 1968....

Dr. Sunshine: This is really good acid man.

Professor Lovechild: Yeah man, really good. Say, I just had an idea... let's let our students evaluate us, instead of the other way around!

Dr. Sunshine: Groovy man, really groovy. Pass me another brownie.

The Present

Those not used to the ways of modern education are faced with a heavy dose of culture shock when they moving from a professional world that demands excellence to the hallowed halls of the postmodern university. Peter Sacks, a journalist who gave up his career to teach in a mid-Western college in the 1990s, tells the tale of his academic woes in his *Generation X Goes to College*. His name is a *nom de plume*, and he refers to the institution where he works as simply "The College." Yet his story is all too real.

The book is illuminating and funny since pretty well everything that happened to Sacks a decade or more ago has happened to me more recently (except for the travails of tenure). The list is one familiar to most teachers in higher education today. First of all, the rudeness of students who simply stand up and leave a class without any explanation, answer their cell phones, read *USA Today* (or in my case, the local student rag) and their e-mail, or form their own impromptu seminars groups during class. Sacks tells the story of one student who even brought a portable TV to class because he was bored!

His list goes on: harassment for extensions and higher marks, total absence of deference or any sense that a person with ten years or more of higher education could possibly know more about writing, philosophy, history or politics than an 18-year-old fresh out of high school, the relativistic claim that all marking is "just your opinion," and the willingness by "hand holders" to exploit a system that has grown too used to coddling students who aren't willing to work. I chuckled heartily at his description of the young men who sit in the back of his classes, their baseball caps turned backwards, a look of utter disdain for education on their faces. They gave Sacks "the Attitude", the aura that they would rather be anywhere else but where they are. We all know these ball-cap boys and their vacant stares.

As for the content of courses, over the last generation professors' expectations for student work had slid down as grades have slid up. I've had better-than-average students tell me that they can't understand at all 18th or 19th-century texts written in English, the same texts I worked through as an undergraduate. Even worse, Sacks reports that a textbook publisher representative told him that more and more required texts sit in the store unsold and unread: students today have less and less relation to the printed word, with many reading textbooks only when forced to in the weeks leading up to finals, if at all.

The bookstore at my university only orders texts for about 50% of the students in a given class, knowing this is all they need.

Interestingly, instead of sticking to his guns, Sacks played a devilish game. To become popular at The College he put into effect the “Sandbox Experiment.” He treated his classes like a kindergarten sandbox where the kids played lots of fun games, got good grades, and went home happy. He became a teddy-bear facilitator, doing almost anything to keep them happy “no matter how childish or rude their behavior, no matter how poorly they performed in the course, no matter how little effort they gave.” The experiment was a roaring success: his students adored him, and he was rewarded with tenure. Sacks concludes that faculty in postmodern colleges water down their courses in order to accommodate a generation of students “who have become increasingly disengaged from anything resembling intellectual life.”

There are two types of student in colleges and universities today. The type Sacks calls the “modernist” student, or which we might call more simply the “engaged” student, is that increasingly rare breed of person who has a work ethic unrelated to the doggy treats of marks, who values education in and of itself.

The postmodern student, dominant in many smaller colleges and in most of the mainstream programs at larger universities, is bored, anxious and restless in the classroom, and will work only for marks and (or so they believe) the promise of a well-paying job after they escape from higher learning. Here is the postmodern student’s credo:

- 1. “I expect to get a high grade in this course while doing as little work as possible.”
- 2. “Academic work unrelated to grades is a waste of time.”
- 3. “The purpose of a university degree is to get a job which will earn me lots of money.”
- 4. “Reading lists on course outlines are merely suggestions.”
- 5. “The best professors are those who entertain me the most. The worst are those who insist I read and study difficult material, and who give me a D or F if I don’t.”
- 6. “If I do get a low grade, it’s the professor or TA’s fault, not mine.”
- 7. “Universities and colleges provide students a service – they sell grades and degrees – for which I pay with my tuition. Part of this service is to make the experience of education as painless as possible, regardless of my starting skill level or willingness to work.”

If the problem were simply that students found a few classes here and there boring, this could be corrected. But far too many students find almost their entire higher education boring. I remember a couple of winters ago seeing a group of students huddled outside the Arts building engaged in an animated discussion. I assumed that it was kvetching about marks or a debate on their favorite TV show or bar. But as I got closer, I discovered to my shock and surprise that they were debating the causes of the First World War! Since then I have not heard a single passionate debate among students (outside the classroom that is) on the content of their education.

If you press students on the boredom issue, asking them “Well, why did you come to this institution? Why are you majoring in this discipline?” they either don’t know, or argue they feel economic pressure to study something they don’t find interesting. The notion that they have the existential power to simply drop out of a program or higher education as a whole is lost on them.

This attitude is a cop out. The problem is that the postmodern student, more at home with video games, cable TV, cell phones, iPods, the Internet, at the shopping mall or in “Da Club,” finds *all* serious intellectual endeavors boring. The consumer culture with its ethic of entitlement is largely to blame for his. The way teachers get around this boredom isn’t by altering the content in their courses. It’s by altering the *difficulty* of this content, and the way this content is presented.

If you want to appeal to the postmodern student, you must entertain them with stories, jokes, singing, jumping around, videos, Power Point presentations, samurai sword displays, boxes of donuts on evaluation day, snazzy web pages, or drinks at the bar (these are all real examples by the way). The successful postmodern classroom is a stage where professors are but poor players competing with *Final Fantasy*, MTV, MSN, ADD and Nokia. “Max Clio,” a history professor at an American public university, tells the story in the May 2003 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of a boisterous Spanish teacher who plied her students with nacho parties, backrubs, shameless flirtations and margaritas at the local Mexican eatery in order to win their school’s “Outstanding Teacher of the Year” award. ¡Madre de dios, pero los nachos están muy buenos!

Proof of the dominance of the entertainment-boredom dialectic in the postmodern classroom can be found in evaluations for a large class. I remember the last time I taught a class with over two hundred students. Some of my students wrote that they found the class “interesting”, “fascinating”, and so on. Yet others found it “boring”, and chastised me for not being stimulating enough. Naturally, such a critique can be both depressing and confusing: were these groups of students attending two different classes? The solution to this mystery didn’t occur to me until a couple of years later: I was dealing with two distinct breeds of student, the engaged and postmodern types. They live in different universes.

The problem with student evaluations is that they don’t do what they’re intended to do: evaluate the content of a course or the teacher’s real teaching ability. All questions on modern evaluations can be reduced to one: “Is the professor entertaining?” Proof of this was offered by Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci in the September 1997 issue of *Change*. Ceci, a psychologist at Cornell, did a little Skinnerian experiment. He taught the fall and spring sections of the same course in distinct ways. In the first he spoke in a flat voice without much emotion; in the second he varied his pitch and used more hand gestures. His score for the evaluation question “How much did you learn in this course?” rose from 2.93 to 4.05 on a 5-scale. To make things worse, the students’ rating of the textbook also soared, though it was the same in both classes. In the end there was no “real improvement” in the exam grades from fall to spring, proving that at least in this case student evaluations were based purely on the number of entertainment utiles per lecture hour.

I've looked at many evaluations over the last ten years, both my own and those of other teachers, and one thing is crystal clear: individual ratings for unrelated issues such as "is the professor on time?", "was the marking fair?", "were the lectures interesting?", and "was the workload reasonable?" rise and fall in unison from course to course and instructor to instructor. It's almost impossible for a professor to get an "A" for the fairness of his or her marking and a "D" for not showing up to class on time. This suggests that students start with an overall *gestalt* of their instructor based on his or her entertainment value, willingness to give out high marks, and flexibility on essay extensions, and then apply this *gestalt* to specific questions. Again, no objectivity whatsoever.

Then there's the problem of the touchy-feely questions that try to turn professors into social workers. Real examples include "Does the professor show concern for student progress?", "Has the professor motivated me to increase my knowledge and competence?", and "Is the professor available outside of class?" These sorts of questions make one reach for one's metaphorical Luger. In the February 4, 2005 issue of the *Chronicle* Stanley Fish complains that such questions turn teaching into either a form of therapy based on pop psychology or retail merchandising based on the desire for customer satisfaction. And they are blatantly unfair to sessional lecturers. The tenured professor might teach only two courses a term, and have plenty of time to sit in his or her office and thus be more "available" to his her students for therapy sessions. Part-time professors might teach twice as many courses in three or four different departments or colleges in the same year, having precious little time to sit for hours in an office that they might not have access to in the first place since they share it with other part-timers.

Tied to the touchy-feely quality of evaluations are the punishments doled out by students for their professor's violations of a few simple rules. Here they are (attention new faculty - get your highlighters out):

- 1. Don't be "boring."
- 2. Don't give out more work than is typical for a course at this level, and use simplistic textbooks instead of primary readings wherever possible.
- 3. Don't demand rigor in your students' work, and don't give out grades lower than the imaginary average grade for your institution (Sacks found that at The College this was a B, up a full grade from his school days in the 1970s).
- 4. Accommodate your students' rudeness (e.g. walking out of class early without explanation or reading a newspaper in class), dubious explanations for late work, and refusal to read the course outline or buy the course texts.
- 5. Never criticize the shoddy or non-existent quality of a student's work in front of his or her peers.

A few examples. In a sociological theory course a few years ago I assigned essays in a course where there usually weren't any. I had to listen to endless whining from students about their "extra" work once they realized that other courses with similar content had no essays assigned. Needless to say, my evaluations were about 15% lower than usual, and all but one student mentioned the onerous workload I had imposed on them on the written section of the evaluation.

Another example was a first-year philosophy course where I had four teaching assistants. I assigned four tests, giving each TA one to mark. The first test, marked by a TA obviously used to dealing with the “postmodern” student, came in with a 75% average. Everyone was happy. But the second test, marked by another TA, came in with 58% average. Foolishly, I defended my TA, and let the grade stand. After all, the average of the two tests was about right for a first-year class. But a minor revolt broke out led by a very emotional young woman who wasn’t used to getting D’s in high school and who saw herself as a bush-league Spartacus. It simmered all term. The class was ruined, and once again my evaluations dropped by about 15% thanks to this minor dollop of marking rigour. Since then I have applied for both part-time and full-time work at least a half dozen times to this department and been consistently rejected, being told a year ago that this mediocre evaluation was a major reason for the rejections.

A third example comes from a January 20, 2006 CBC television report on the University of Prince Edward Island. Part-time professor David Weale, tired of dealing with indifferent students and large classes, offered his History class an interesting option: he’d give them a 68% if they paid their tuition and stayed away from his classes, whether or not they handed in any assignments. They bargained him up to a 70%, at which point about twenty students accepted his offer and left. To be fair, most stayed, though to be even fairer, some of those who stayed told reporters because they weren’t happy with the B-. This reminds me of the joke about the man who goes up to a woman in a bar. “Will you sleep with me for a million dollars?” he asks. “OK, sure.” “How about for fifty dollars?” “I’m outraged! What do you think I am?” she replies. “We all know what you are, madam, we’re just negotiating the price.” UPEI nixed the social experiment very quickly. Yet it speaks volumes about the attitude of the postmodern student.

The odd thing about student evaluations today is that they’re anonymous and don’t hold students responsible for anything they say. This is strange and out of step with the culture of work outside the university. An office worker would never think of insulting their boss and being able to get away with it. A waiter at a restaurant wouldn’t mock the clothes or hair style of his patrons and expect to get a tip. Yet student evaluations do such things in a consequence-free environment. This is hardly a good lesson to be teaching young people.

What is to be done? Firstly, immediately scrap student evaluations in their present form. Secondly, don’t hire faculty based on old-style evaluations. Thirdly, create a new, streamlined type of evaluation where the student is held responsible for their comments. These would be pre-printed with the name of the course and instructor on them, and have only one numerical question: “Do you think the instructor taught this course effectively?” The rest of the page would be a blank space inviting written comments from the student on relevant pedagogical issues. The student would be asked to print their name and student number on the form and return it to a centrally located box. Unsigned evaluations, or those which offered demeaning comments on the instructor’s personal appearance, race, sexuality or physical handicaps, would be shredded.

In addition, each department would set a minimum grade for evaluators to avoid the problem of “sour grapes”: a B- or C+ would seem appropriate. Students not meeting this grade would have their evaluations placed in the recycle bin. Then those remaining –

and since this would be relatively few, it would reduce the workload of those who prepare summaries of evaluations – would be typed up and presented to instructors.

We need more engaged students, fewer of the postmodern type. We need more faculty who teach according to reasonably rigorous standards, not to their evaluations. Universities are not fast-food restaurants. They are educational institutions. It's time administrators, department heads and students understood the difference.

Doug Mann is an adjunct professor at UWO and King's College who has received lots of positive evaluations during his teaching career, and likes most of his students.

PS if you want a good laugh, go on "Rate My Professor.com" and make up silly comments for classes you haven't actually taken. It's lots of fun. Don't forget to give your friends a few "hot" ratings to cheer them up.