

Assessment of Teaching Quality: A Personal Contribution to the Current Debate

Dr Pandeli Glavanis, Associate Director, CLT

The task of assessing the quality, quantity and effectiveness of teaching in higher education has preoccupied faculty, university administrators, students, assessment agencies and many more for several decades. What is widely accepted, however, by all involved in such activities is the complex nature of the task especially as it is acknowledged that teaching itself is a highly complex process. In fact some of the experts in assessing teaching quality have noted that “any good approach to evaluating teaching will reflect the complexity of teaching itself”. (Chism, 1977) The task is further compounded by two additional factors: First, there is an absence of a consensus of what constitutes effective and good teaching due to the tremendous variety in teaching itself given the different types of teaching required by the different subject areas and the respective teaching skills required. Second, the increasing pressure on higher education to demonstrate excellence in teaching quality from the general public, students, parents and of course the various assessment agencies that monitor quality in higher education. Furthermore, and if the above were not sufficient grounds for demonstrating the complexity of the task at hand, higher education is also caught up in what is accepted by all to be a major revolution in teaching and learning. Student-centred teaching paradigms are replacing traditional modes of teaching and learning technologies have dramatically affected the way students learn and interact with course material. Nevertheless, and despite the complexities involved every institution of higher education continues to implement its own respective teaching effectiveness methodology and seeks to improve it continuously. It is, of course, understandable why this is the case. On the one hand university administrations require a methodology by which to assess faculty performance for the purpose of promotion and tenure and on the other hand faculty also need to evaluate their respective teaching methods for the purpose of professional development and satisfaction. It is, of course, beyond the scope of a short essay to engage with all the different dimensions of the task of assessing teaching effectiveness, but it is possible to raise a couple of points which may be considered as a personal contribution to the current debate at AUC. Let me elaborate.

Despite the complexity of the issue and the plethora of academic contributions that highlight particular dimensions of the problem at hand there also appears to be a degree of generic consensus on what constitutes effective teaching. Among those factors that are consistently advanced are: subject matter competence, preparation and organization, clarity, enthusiasm, and interpersonal rapport. (Chism, 1999) In a different summative assessment of teaching quality Arreola (2007) also identifies five factors which are: content expertise, instructional design skills, instructional delivery skills, instructional assessment skills, and course management skills. Furthermore, Fink (2008) proposes four key elements in assessing teaching quality and they are: course design, interaction with students, overall quality of the student learning experience, and improvement over time. It is possible to suggest that although there are minor differences the three contributions cited above do present us with an overall approach that can be adapted to most teaching irrespective of its subject specialism. Disciplinary expertise emerges as one of the key elements alongside an in depth understanding of students and how they learn as well as generic pedagogic skills which include managing courses and classes.

Following from the above it is important to consider how these different factors which are seen as exemplifying teaching quality are actually evaluated and quantified in higher education institutions. Student feedback in the form of end of semester surveys is the most common form used by most institutions. It is, of course, easy to implement and if we want to be honest it is also a method that has gained considerable credibility despite its limitations. The survey is usually completed by large numbers of beneficiaries and as such is seen as a clear reflection of the effectiveness of teaching. Furthermore, institutions make use of student evaluations as a means of satisfying public accountability and for recruitment purposes. However, it is quite obvious immediately that this is not an adequate methodology despite its extensive use. The factors identified above cannot be evaluated via student surveys since it is also widely accepted that students are not competent to evaluate certain of these factors. For example students do not have the expertise to evaluate disciplinary competence, effective course design, curriculum development and appropriate assessment methods to name but a few. Furthermore, students are unable to evaluate other areas such as commitment to teaching enhancement, use of emerging learning technologies, and support for departmental efforts to develop curricula. Thus, the reliance on student feedback surveys, although important is severely limited in assessing teaching effectiveness.

The gap left by student feedback surveys of teaching can only be covered by faculty themselves. This however generates its own complex and controversial issues. Peer evaluations of teaching can be seen to incorporate bias, lack of expertise by faculty to carry out such evaluations and of course the considerable effort involved especially in large departments. It is for this reason that peer evaluations are not in themselves either a substitute for student feedback nor are they a sufficient complement. Individual faculty reflection of upon their own teaching is another strategy that many universities are using. Faculty are encouraged to generate their own teaching portfolios of tasks and developments and to engage in self-reflection. This activity, of course, also has its own limitations and demands a considerable effort on the part of faculty. Nevertheless, institutions which have adopted teaching portfolios indicate both faculty and administration satisfaction with the results when combined with other methodologies of assessment of teaching effectiveness.

In conclusion, therefore, it is possible to suggest that there is no single methodology which can capture the nature and quality of teaching effectiveness as such. Each methodology has its own limitations and most of them require considerable effort and time, especially those that involve faculty as peer-assessors or in producing their own teaching portfolios. Institutions need to recognize the complexity of assessing teaching effectiveness and rely on a methodology of triangulating methods in tandem to providing both time and resource for the different tasks to be carried out.

N.B. In the next issue Dr Mahmoud Farag will take up this issue in greater detail with regard to its implementation at AUC.

Sources

Arreola, R A (2007), **Developing a comprehensive faculty evaluation system: A guide to designing, building and operating large-scale faculty evaluation systems**, Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing

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