

Anti-SET

Much like Mary Gray and Barbara Bergmann, I view student evaluations with dislike and embarrassment. Dislike because my experience, talent, and good will are subjected to the scrutiny of nonpeers who might judge me on anything and everything other than my teaching skills. Embarrassment because I now play along with a system in which that sort of evaluation is deemed a valid measure of ability and professionalism. Peer evaluations are possibly less "inaccurate, misleading, and demeaning." Even those, however, can be influenced by turf issues, differences in ideology or teaching philosophy, or simply personality conflicts. Yet most academics agree that some method to measure teaching effectiveness is necessary.

Having taught in French universities over a period of fifteen years, I can relate how the situation is handled in that system. Instead of student and peer evaluations, the Ministry of Higher Education relies on in-class inspections by professionals who have received special training and whose entire careers are devoted to that one task. These inspectors are not personally acquainted with the teachers they evaluate; consequently, they are unlikely to have agendas that go beyond their professional duties. A professor is rarely evaluated twice in a row by the same inspector, and one unfavorable rating does not affect promotion or tenure. It takes at least two consecutive negative reports to call attention to a teacher's possible lacunae. Before any sanction is even considered, the teacher is offered professional or personal counseling, further training, and even peer guidance as the situation may demand. On the other hand, two consecutive evaluations above the baseline of "competent" are rewarded by accelerated promotion and corresponding pay raises. The bottom line is that nobody enjoys performance scrutiny, and in-class inspections by professionals can be excruciating to the point of nausea. However, having experienced both ends of the spectrum-reports by professionals and evaluations by students for whom the process might be nothing more substantial than a popularity contest-I vastly prefer the former.

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