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Evaluations and The Online Instructor

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Evaluations of faculty, both peer and student, can be a valuable part of the teaching landscape. Without doubt, faculty peers see strengths and weaknesses an individual instructor might not otherwise notice. Similarly, asking students about their experiences yields important insight into how learning happens--if one poses the right questions. Well-designed instruments interpreted with a critical eye by employers should be standard. For online instruction, however, particular downsides emerge that often prove dicey for faculty whose merit pay, tenure and promotion considerations, and, most especially, contract status depends, even if only in part, on the results. Online faculty must proactively design processes that handle the challenges of the online environment appropriately. While I have by no means mastered making evaluation of my online courses helpful, I do have observations about what I have tried and what I am planning to do to negotiate this required process more thoughtfully.

When a peer evaluator lacks experience with online learning, or does not have familiarity with best practices for creating, mounting, and running an online course, the utility of the evaluation can come into question. Too often an idealized imagination of the traditional classroom remains the model by which a course is judged, rather than looking at the online experience for what it offers. If a university employs a given standard, like Quality Matters, for online course development, having peer evaluators look through that prism can be useful (https://www.qualitymatters.org/qa-resources/rubric-standards/higher-ed-rubric). The elements outlined provide clear criteria for assessment.

Additionally, affording a faculty member the opportunity for peer evaluation from other online instructors or learning technology designers, even if they are not subject matter experts, can

also be valuable. My university is now doing “teaching squares” for online instructors where we get together and work through one another’s courses. Seeing how other online faculty structure learning, and hearing feedback about my course format and assignments generated new ideas and helped me see where I needed to improve. Indeed, I would welcome a combination for peer evaluation that blended the insights of other online instructors with respect to the medium and what departmental colleagues would note about content. In the end, these options all stress one thing: that the purpose of peer evaluations ought to be to improve student outcomes by focusing on pedagogical practice.

Regarding student evaluations, online instructors already know what studies demonstrate: online courses tend to yield lower ratings for faculty than face-to-face courses. This result likely stems, in part, from the lack of personal contact built up in weekly face-to-face meetings. Relationship mitigate against harshness in evaluation. But this also serves as a reminder that faculty presence, however it is accomplished in online classrooms, is important. While faculty members cannot completely alleviate the electronic remove, students still need to see faculty members in videos and engaged in discussion. They continue to want personal interactions, whether it be through email, text or video messaging, or phone calls. Structuring that contact into the course is vital. Returning work and inquiries promptly also proves important. The urgency of our online lives drives expectations here, so faculty must set up precise standards for communication and stick to them. Students might not be able to get an answer to a question posted at 2:00 a.m., for example, but it is not unreasonable to expect an answer to come within the next 12 hours in most cases.

Many students evaluate faculty based on expectations about online courses and they often anticipate online options will be easier than face-to-face classes. Institutional messaging around online options can plant that idea. “Learn anytime, anywhere” our promotions might say, as if students can successfully navigate a class while strolling the aisles of the grocery store or pausing briefly between serving customers on the job. Faculty, therefore, must establish detailed instructions for assignments and specific rubrics for grading that can help learners understand what they need to accomplish. Still, disappointments in this arena can lead to frustrations expressed via end of term evaluations. More helpful options might include evaluations geared to each assignment, perhaps even completed when the assignment is turned in. What did a student learn from completing that task? How did the assignment relate to the goals of the course? If faculty include these elements in their course design, it can alleviate problems along the way and serve to remind students at the close of a term about what they achieved.

Likewise, making students partners in their own learning asks for a higher level of reflective awareness. Foregrounding why a student enrolled in a course, what the student wants to gain by completing it, and how it might relate to overall academic goals can be a great starting exercise because it makes students clarify expectations. Instructors get a snapshot of why students show up and the opportunity to engage in discussion of where faculty expectations may correspond to those of students, where they may differ, and why. Modifications, even if only mental, can happen through this exercise and students can come to see faculty as

partners and guides in learning as opposed to obstacles.

In the end, we must acknowledge that evaluations will remain a fact of faculty life. How to make them less punitive–not focused on faculty shortcomings or "consumer satisfaction" measures–and more formative, aimed to achieving educational purpose, should always be a goal for faculty and administrators. Adapting the evaluation form to the delivery method of a course is a part of that process.

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