

EVALUATION

Rate My Professor & Professors Strike Back

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Given that student evaluations of faculty remain one of the most written about and contentious areas of research in higher education, perhaps it's important to state at the outset that this article won't shed any new, scientifically valid light on the subject. This article looks at the popular website

www.ratemyprofessor.com and its sister site "Professors Strike Back," a feature of www.mtvu.com.

After viewing the videos on "Professors Strike Back," we wondered what those teachers actually thought about "Rate My Professor" and the experience of "striking back." In deference to busy schedules, we offered a half dozen the opportunity to reply via email to a set of questions or to speak with us by telephone. All but one preferred to speak on the phone, some at considerable length.

Eval As Entertainment

The online rating site began in 1999 as TeacherRatings.com, but changed its name to RateMyProfessor in 2001. The site says it now lists faculty from 6,000 schools and rates one million professors through approximately eight million ratings. All the ratings are anonymous and have no statistical validity since only those who feel like posting a review do so. The natural result is that the middle seldom finds a voice on the site; only those with strong negative or positive opinions generally post to the site. Whatever the original ambitions for the site may have been, it clearly became primarily an entertainment stream in 2007 when it was sold to MTVu, a subsidiary of

the Viacom Corporation. MTVu soon set up the "Professors Strike Back" feature where faculty can answer criticism, and at the same time contacted some faculty offering them the chance to be filmed responding to student comments on their teaching and to the idea of "RateMyProfessor" in general.

Frank Popper

In the highly edited videos that appear online, most faculty come across as quite emphatic and, at times, shockingly frank even when cloaked in an exaggerated persona. Frank Popper, who teaching land use planning at Rutgers and Princeton, clearly enjoyed making his over-the-top rebuttal to students. In response to a student comment that his course is a "rewarding experience if you have some

background in this field; if not you might get lost and



frustrated," Popper looks into the camera and says:

"Well, I do assume you have a fifth-grade background more or less from a mediocre school in a mediocre suburb in New Jersey. And I'm assuming you come from New Jersey because you go to Rutgers where 97% (God help us) of the undergraduate population are from the Garden State (as they call it). Find me the garden."

To the comment that he "doesn't cover the syllabus material," Popper retorts:

"The syllabus is just an excuse. You ought to know that. The point is to have interesting discussions, not to have interesting readings, because I know most of you people

can't read. Certainly can't read at the college level."

To the comment that he "loves to hear himself talk," Popper replies:

"Well, what I'm doing there is anti-filibustering you students who don't know what you're talking about, and take too long to say it and get all the details wrong or upside down anyway. Of course I anti-filibuster you. Who would want to listen to you? You're like the worst senator in the world times ten and you're paying for this (you think). I have to listen to you? Not in my class."

Popper, who drove over to MTV's studios in Greenwich Village to tape his reply, can't quite sustain his persona. What come across as a bit more seriousness begins to leak out in his comment on student ratings on the site in general:

"In general I think you are very young students who have problems—oh what would a psychiatrist say?—of impulse control. You may love me; you may hate me, but you tend to be inaccurate, illiterate, and inappropriate in your expression of how you do so. Not to say there aren't better students, more mature, smarter more literate students, students who don't smell as much as you guys do, but there tend to be a lot of people who, as I say, should probably be looking for other lines of work and certainly in the war for knowledge are confirmed conscientious objectors."

On the telephone Popper freely admits he wanted to be funny in his video reply, not to come across as flat and stiff. He's not impressed with almost any student evaluation system he's seen, though Princeton has recently set up a new one he thinks may turn out to be a good one. It's all done online and before final grades are issued, and has plenty of room for free responses. Like most student evaluations, however, it's a summative affair, not a formative one. Asked if he'd ever changed or improved his teaching in response to student evaluation, Popper said yes, but it wasn't summative. It was formative.

“A student at Princeton emailed me a very thoughtful critique of some things I was doing in class that he thought I might do differently, and, when I thought about it, I agreed with what he said and changed what I was doing.”

Popper feels more sympathetic to what he sees as the potential of RateMyProfessor than many. “I think RMP is on to something that could be very useful in getting dialogue about teaching going,” he says. “Certainly, it could be a way of letting students know a bit more about professors.”

Phoebe Gloeckner

How students smell comes up in Phoebe Gloeckner’s video as well. As with Popper’s, Gloeckner’s “strike back” seems a mixture of having fun with the experience and expressing some frank truths. For example, in response to the student comment that “from day one she gave off the impression that she didn’t want to be there,” Gloeckner replies:

“That makes me sad . . . for you. You know, it could have been true. I’m sorry that it was so obvious to you because teachers are like anyone else, like a parent. Sometimes you could almost say that you hate your kid. You wish you didn’t have to change another diaper or try to make them go to bed. It’s really true. You’d rather be anywhere but there at that moment. And that’s how I feel about teaching. I often feel like I just want to throw everything down and run out of the room screaming, but I stay there. Why? Because in general I do enjoy teaching you.”

Gloeckner teaches art at the University of Michigan. She’s a prominent graphic novelist and a Guggenheim Fellowship winner whose *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* have been controversial owing to their biologically frank depiction of sex. (Gloeckner was trained as a medical

illustrator.) On the telephone she elaborated on her response to students’ frustration with her teaching. “There are two ways to teach when it comes to art,” she says. “One focuses on skills, the techniques involved; the other has to do

with getting students to open up to whatever artistic vision they may have. That’s



hard to teach, if it can be taught at all, and it’s even harder to assess.” But the latter is the path Gloeckner follows. She refuses to teach the ins and outs of whatever graphic software is current because she says, “that stuff is always changing,” and students have to learn to learn it for themselves. “Artists have to learn to teach themselves a lot of things,” she says. But the “tough love” has frustrated her students and on RateMyProfessor some have complained at her refusal to act the part of an authority figure. To that in her video she responded:

“It’s true. I don’t want to give you a grade. I don’t give a <bleep> about your grade. And I get tired when you keep asking me, ‘How much is this worth?’ and ‘What is my grade?’ because what does it matter??”

“Grades are not everything and I’m a living example of that. In high school my average was a D. I did fairly well on those standardized tests, and I got into college. I did not earn a bachelor’s degree, but I did get a Master’s degree. And here I am now: I’m your professor at a major university, the University of Michigan, and I practically dropped out of high school. I don’t care about grades.”



Like Popper, Gloeckner finds a value in students and teachers being free to express hard truths about how they feel about each other or at least the roles and positions they find themselves in. In the video she concludes: “Sometimes we wish we could say ‘This student is a real ass<bleep>. They don’t smell good. I can’t understand a damn thing they’re saying and they are not college material.’ And we can’t say that, okay? . . . I kind of envy you students, because if I could, I’d say the type of things you’re saying about me, I’d say it about you too. And I think it’s all in the interest of truth and personal growth. Sometimes I think it’s important to know those things or at least to acknowledge them.”

Despite its many shortcomings, Gloeckner does say that student feedback has caused her to reflect on changing her teaching in at least one respect. In response to their frustrations with her refusal to be an authority figure about software and other matters she thinks they need to learn for themselves, she now recognizes the need to be more explicit and open with students about her reasons.

Natalie Jeremijenko

In addition to giving students places to rate their professors on Easiness, Helpfulness, and Clarity, RateMyProfessor also allows students to describe their teachers as “hot” or not. Natalie Jeremijenko, who teaches art, engineering, and robotics at New York University got a

“hot” rating from a student who wrote, “I find you magnetic and attractive; I want to be your slave. I will be your soldier boy.” In her video

Jeremijenko replied, “Thank you, Solider Boy. I think that was a strange compliment, although I’m not into slaves, and I’m interested in working with research assistants but I’m afraid you’re disqualified

because your motivation is not the correct one. Sorry.”

Jeremijenko has a low opinion of almost every student evaluation system she’s seen. None of them, she says, get at the heart of what good teaching is all about—student learning. She still feels disbelief and annoyance at the comments she received on evaluation forms when she taught at Yale about her clothes and how long it took her to set up a projector. She believes the best evaluation of teaching lies in looking at students’ work, what they can do as a result of taking a course. She believes strongly in the value of social networking, which is why she agreed to make a video (though has since asked that it be taken down). If you want to evaluate her teaching, she says, look at websites like howstuffismade.org and environmentalhealthclinic.net, websites reflecting her students’ original work. “Some of them continue to contribute to these projects years after they’ve completed the course,” she reports. “They’ve actually learned something, and they are still learning.”

Soldier Boy’s reaction notwithstanding, Jeremijenko’s “tough love” approach to teaching has caused some students to accuse her of being “too preoccupied with her own projects” or perhaps “scatter-brained.” She pulls no punches in responding to this kind of comment:

“I am not your mother, not your high school teacher, not responsible for you organizing your readings and getting your assignments and downloading them off the web or figuring out how to upload them. I’m sorry. I’m not that interested and it’s not a good use of my time.

“To the idea that I’m scatter-brained: I have a shield of business that I actually erect to mitigate students approaching me and thinking that I have a long time to talk about their particular problems or medical certificates, etc. So, it’s a shield I use instead of being rude.”

There may be value, as Frank Popper and Phoebe Gloeckner

suggest, in students and faculty having a way to speak frankly about each other. The real problem with student ratings seems to arise out of their one-size-fits-all design and the uses to which others outside of the dialogue between students and their teachers put these generic ratings.

Anna Gemrich

“What bugs me about rankings,” says Anna Gemrich, who teaches Spanish at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “are the things that cannot be included in the postings because the students don’t know or don’t understand, details like: 1) the course design for Spanish



325 is for a lower skilled student who has not studied abroad yet and needs the basic practice 2) I include LOTS of homework to try to shake the students who are too advanced for the course (kill them with tedium) and even with this 3) Spanish 325 has become the go-to course for students fresh off study abroad who don’t want to lose their Spanish and have senior standing (and of course they get dibs on registration times and occupy all the slots of the students for whom the course is intended—i.e., lower classpersons) 4) also often many of the students who end up in the course have good fluency but horribly poor accuracy in the language and they are required to do exercises to remove what we call “fossilized errors” but they see themselves as “advanced” language

students who do not need such remedial work (and they still get it wrong again and again on the tests) 5) native Spanish speakers sign up for this class too because they need the class for the Spanish major and what native speaker who lived in his/her home country until 18 needs a conversation class???”

Andrew Tomasello

Highly imperfect and often hurtful as they are (who doesn’t remember the one hateful comment out of dozens of positive ones?), summative student evaluations are seemingly here to stay. Teachers concerned with improving their teaching find little value in

them. Instead many concerned faculty have begun composing their own evaluative surveys tailored to their courses and questions about their particular teaching approaches. You might not guess it from Andrew Tomasello’s video famous for his liberal use of the “f-bomb” in responding to students, but Tomasello, who teaches music at Baruch College, takes student feedback very

seriously. To help him improve his courses he administers an online survey via zoomerang.com, a self-designed survey he creates for each course. “The college ratings summaries are too general,” he says. “Am I organized? I’m organized. I’ve been doing this for 27 years; of course I’m organized.”

Things like the feedback on RateMyProfessor aren’t helpful either. Tomasello took some heat for his video, though he laughs about it now. “[With those f-bombs] I was channeling my inner Joe Pesci,” he says. “I’m a narcissist, an old rock guitarist who’s now a medievalist. What can I say?” ■■■

For a serious review of the research literature on student ratings see: “Faculty Evaluation” by Michael Theall at <http://www.ntlf.com/pod/>, part of the NTLF/POD online resource library.