

What Makes a Good IR Course?

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, SEP 22 2014

Over at *College Ready Writing* – one of *Inside Higher Ed*'s great blogs – Lee Skallerup Bessette recounts an in-class exercise where she asked students to explain what made a good course:

I'm teaching a one-credit class this semester in the Preparing Future Faculty program called College Teaching. In it, we are talking about, well, unsurprisingly, college teaching. Last week was our first class and we started by discussing what makes a good professor or teacher...

The students quickly identified what they thought made a good professor. We used Think-Pair-Share and the students happily debated the artificial ranking I had asked them to produce (most fun: listening to the table of humanist and science graduate students parse word choice). Knowledgeable was up there for everyone, as was approachability, and passion. Good communication skills, engaging, humble positive...it was a good list.

Once we had discussed the list, I then asked them to do another Think-Pair-Share but this time I wanted them to identify the qualities that make a good course. The students were stumped. They sat there in silence for a few minutes looking confusedly at their little index cards. When they finally got through the exercise, they clearly identified some important elements of a good course, including organization, level-appropriateness, fair and relevant assessments, and engaging activities.

Bessette explored with the students the reasons why they had trouble identifying what makes a good course and yet were able to determine what makes a good professor with relative ease:

I asked them why they had so much more difficulty coming up with the qualities of a good course, and one of the students rightly commented: "We don't have rate my course, we have Rate My Professor." If I had asked them to think about what makes a good course before asking them what makes a good teacher, I inevitably would have heard "a good teacher" for the top choice. But, once we remove the human factor (which is not insignificant), there are clearly elements that are necessary to make a good course. But it's something they (we) haven't often thought about.

Bessette is right to add the 'we' to her commentary. Students might focus on the place of the professor, particularly first-year undergraduates who are only just transitioning from high school where the role of the teacher is central to the lives of the students in their classes. The focus on the person delivering the course, though, does allow us to dismiss the quality of the course itself. We don't rate courses or knowledge or the design by which that knowledge is transferred to the students; instead, we rate as wonderful or not-so-wonderful the person delivering the course.

When IR courses are designed the professor puts many hours into constructing a program of study that will deliver knowledge and learning, encourage critical thinking, and allow students to explore their own ideas in a positive, encouraging, and self-aware environment. The course design takes a long time because IR is so difficult to compartmentalize – the global, interconnected world does not lend itself to easy distinctions. A course on Africa cannot ignore Europe, a course on theory cannot ignore practical policy making, and a course on China cannot ignore any of its more than a dozen neighbors without providing something that is a little less than complete, a little less than an entire overview of the re-emerging dragon of the East.

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This course design, though, is later relegated to a secondary position behind the success of the person charged with delivering the course. Students and university administrators judge the value of the course on the feedback gathered from students and faculty, but much of this is focused on the delivery of the course, not its design, components, and content. It is difficult for a university to know whether the course is a good one or a bad one, while in contrast it is fairly easy to determine whether someone is a successful teacher or not.

Back in 2010 in the *Harvard Business Review* Dan Ariely argued that we value only what we measure:

When I was at MIT, I was measured on my ability to handle my yearly teaching load, using a complex equation of teaching points. The rating, devised to track performance on a variety of dimensions, quickly became an end in itself. Even though I enjoyed teaching, I found myself spending less time with students because I could earn more points doing other things. I began to scrutinize opportunities according to how many points were at stake. In optimizing this measure, I was not striving to gain more wealth or happiness. Nor did I believe that earning the most points would result in more effective learning. It was merely the standard of measurement given to me, so I tried to do well against it (and I admit that I was rather good at it).

Ariely argues that if we want to change what we care about – for example, if we want to care about having good courses *and* good teaching, instead of just good teachers – then we need to change what we measure. As Bessette's class suggests, though, we might lack some specific and measurable metrics on how to assess the quality of courses at the present. We cannot really know if we have 'good courses' because we have not yet determined what a 'good' IR course consists of or how to separate it from an average IR course with an exceptional teacher.

Thinking back to my time as a student I can recall some wonderful IR courses with some exceptional professors at the University of South Australia. But thinking a little harder, I cannot clearly determine which of those wonderful courses were wonderful because of the course content and design, and which ones were wonderful because of the passionate person standing at the front of the room or leading the seminar group.

A focus on improving course quality is laudable but, as Bessette challenged her students to do, we first need to determine what makes a good course for ourselves. Once we know this, we can measure it, assess it, and then seek continual improvement in our course design – but we have to start by asking the right sorts of questions, the sorts of questions that Rate My Professor and many of our universities are not asking right now.

About the author:

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