



In its most recent Faculty Survey (2007–08), the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) reports that 97.7 percent of faculty members rate their role as a teacher as personally very important or essential to them, and that faculty spend significantly more time teaching and preparing for their teaching responsibilities than they do on research or committee work. As many education leaders focus on broad goals for learning, students' success in reaching these goals depends significantly on effective teaching. How do faculty members measure their effectiveness in the classroom? And what makes certain professors stand out as exceptionally effective teachers?

Looking back at my own professors, two are particularly memorable. The first, a young professor who taught Caribbean History, comes to mind for the distance—more figurative than literal—that he put between himself and his students. One day, midway through the semester, I found myself sitting alone in front of him. I was the only one of fifteen students registered for the class to show up that morning. Instead of taking the opportunity to draw me into the subject with a conversation, he proceeded to lecture from memory for an hour while I struggled to keep from yawning. The professor who sat at the opposite end of that spectrum for me was Caribbean poet Andrew Salkey, who taught creative writing at my college. As he reviewed my work, Andrew would capture his reactions on notes that he pasted at the bottom of each manuscript page. His comments on my short story writing were constructive and honest; they ranged from “I’m disappointed ... I thought I’d learn more about your protagonist here” to “Good job of pacing ... the suspense is gripping.” Andrew’s thoughtful feedback guided my learning. Thirty years later, I still have the notes that challenged and inspired me to become a better writer.

These, of course, are my reflective evaluations many years later. How do today’s students share feedback on their learning with peers while the experience is fresh? Several college students and recent graduates I polled on this question said that they relied on RateMyProfessor.com to learn about professors and to choose classes. RateMyProfessor (RMP), an independent Web site, allows students to anonymously rate and write comments about their college professors. Founded in 1999, the site now contains more than six million ratings for more than half a million professors. On the

site, students praise the “top ten professors” with comments such as: “You really learn a lot and his stories are awesome,” “He is a cool dude!” and “She made boring topics very fun and interesting.”

While many students use this site, faculty reaction to RMP, not surprisingly, is mixed. Michael Arnzen, who writes *Pedablogue*, a blog about higher education topics, likens the ratings site to the television show *American Idol*: “Teaching is not a popularity contest, but if you are interested in student feedback on your own teaching, [RMP] is but one of many ways to look for it ... I think it is important to separate evaluation from the politics of judgment whenever possible and instead turn evaluation into a method of inquiry.”

Others find some value in RMP. In the August 2009 edition of *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Otto, Sanford, and Ross conclude their article “Does RateMyProfessor Really Rate My Professor?” with the following point: “To the extent that online ratings can be demonstrated as valid measures of instructors’ abilities to inspire learning, online ratings have potential value.” In addition to online student ratings, nearly every college uses course evaluation forms filled out by students, but few professors believe these are adequate measures of teaching effectiveness.

This issue of *Peer Review* explores the topic of good teaching, not in terms of popularity or students’ own assessments, but in terms of research and practice? In a range of articles, from a report on establishing a new teaching center to insightful advice on effective teaching methods, the journal addresses the challenges faculty face in the classroom today. The stakes are high. As Ross Miller states in his Analysis article, “It is especially important for both teachers and students to believe that all students can learn at high levels, because—from setting expectations and goals, to choosing and responding to assignments, to shaping assessments—believing otherwise will trigger decisions and actions that result in lower achievement.” However beautifully designed our curricula, the proof is really in our classrooms and on our campuses, and in whether what today’s students learn in these places prepares them to make good decisions for an ever-evolving and complex world.

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