

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

March 1, 2013 by Spurgeon Thompson

The Unnecessary Agony of Student Evaluations

Student evaluations can be either the most painful or falsely ego-boosting things we faculty members read. Sadly, they're becoming more and more important as American universities veer toward private-enterprise models of educational management. Based on the concept of the customer survey, they have been taken public by a range of Web sites, most famously Rate My Professors.

Now that I've returned from a decade teaching in Europe, where the culture around student evaluations is entirely different, it has been eye-opening, if not alarming, to witness American higher education's shifts toward consumerist assumptions. The impulse behind this shift is understandable. We've all done it—written a negative review of a product we were unhappy with on Amazon, or complained about a bad experience with an airline that lost our bag or a hotel whose bedsheets weren't changed.

There's a certain liberating power that comes with such ratings, a sense of "I'll get them for what they did to me" or "I'll reward them for that extra effort they made." The problem is when we mistake our money for power, as if buying a service gives us control over its manufacture or production. It doesn't. "Consumer power" is a myth invented to get us to buy more.

But university students aren't strictly consumers purchasing a product. To understand why not, try this thought experiment. If the Apple Store made us apply to buy a new iPhone, and accepted only, say, 30 percent of us who wanted to buy one, and then told us we had to study and master the phone's operation manual for several years before we could actually hold it in our hands—and even then only three-quarters of us would actually get a phone—would we still regard ourselves as customers after all those years? We would be something else. We would resemble more those "pre-employees" we hear about who have to pay for their own training than we would customers just buying things.

But there are several more basic reasons why students are not customers. First, most of them have been forced by law to attend school for 12 years before they arrive in a college classroom. If they went to public schools, they did not buy that schooling. In any case, they had no power over whether they went to school or not (even home-schooling is regulated). And when they enter universities, students are so conditioned by the feelings involved in being forcibly educated that they can hardly be said to feel free. (I don't mean about *which* university they are in; I mean about being in a university at all.)

To say that an American university student has freely chosen to be educated is a bit like saying they have freely chosen to buy food to eat.

Further, they are graded. Customers are not. With rampant grade inflation in this country, effectively students are told whether they are suitable or not (given an A or a B). Over and over, they are told whether they are good enough to continue being told whether they are good enough. Even the most rigorous professions don't require the kind of extensive, multifaceted performance-review structure that five graded courses a semester constitutes.

Now, to be asked to evaluate the performance of the person evaluating yours—that is psychologically complex. In the business world, my friends tell me that this is called the "360-degree performance review," where bosses evaluate employees, and employees, in turn, evaluate bosses. But eventually, of course, you run out of bosses, and the "circle" closes. In universities, it doesn't work that way. Students come and go, and professors generally remain.

In Europe generally, where universities are mostly free (though increasingly less so) and very difficult to get into, students are regarded not as consumers but as subjects needing either training or enlightenment. The life of the mind is valued and nurtured, or, alternatively, technical skills are passed on, depending on what kind of institution you go to. Grades are nowhere near as inflated, and student evaluations are regarded as formalities, like a form filled out for bureaucrats. Value is placed not on how students regard their professors but how professors regard their colleagues.

Teachers should evaluate the teaching skills of other teachers, regularly, as part of life, as part of what we do in our classrooms. Leaving it to amateurs doesn't make sense. Leaving it to students is almost absurd.

I liked European attitudes toward student evaluations. But I wouldn't want to live with them. They were dismayingly unhelpful. Still, students are not customers, and professors are not service providers. American universities use the myth of consumer power to sell themselves. Few professors are fired because of student evaluations—except those who are most vulnerable, that is, adjuncts at the very lowest rungs of the academic industry.

But all of us internalize the responses we get; we're told to be tough inside when they are negative. We somehow believe them, as if they are truths objectively obtained. Students once ourselves, we hunger for grades and approval. Regardless of how many times our colleagues tell us not to worry over the bad evaluations, and not to let the good ones go to our heads, we are still very much students inside, seeking grades.

I think student evaluations should be done away with. They mislead students into thinking their money gives them power. And increasingly, as evaluations move online, and in an age when students feel less constrained by social conventions, student evaluations have become more blunt, sharp-edged, and consequently more meaningless. They have become either as bland as a cheerful status update or as cruel as online bullying.

Let the professionals handle quality control. Let the teachers evaluate each other, and create an environment of trust and humanity, honesty with consequences, intellectual growth, and improved institutional values.

Spurgeon Thompson is an adjunct instructor of English at Fordham University.

[Return to Top](#) ↑

[Bookmark the permalink](#)

Comments for this thread are now closed.

