Talking Teaching Evals Picnic Controversy Blues

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f I felt a little bit like bob dylan must have felt that day when ...

I saw it advertised one day,
That the Bear Mountain picnic was comin' my way.
"Come along 'n take a trip,
We'll bring you up there on a ship.
Bring the wife and family
Bring the whole kids."
Yippee!

So, I run right down 'n bought a ticket
To this thing called the Bear Mountain Picnic.
But little did I realize
I was in for a pleasant funny surprise.
Had nothin' to do with picnics,
Didn't come close to a mountain.
And I hate bears.

Bob Dylan, "Talkin' Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues," 1962

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... that day when I agreed to weigh in on the "controversial phenomenon" that RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) has no doubt become. I admit I had never heard of the site, and was surprised to find so many other students who had, and so as I am a student who will someday be a teacher I felt caught in the middle of this controversy surrounding systems of teacher evaluation, and so ...

I click on the link, and then on the "RMP Canada" button. I "choose my province" and the name of my university—surprised, really, to find it there. I accept the invitation to re-organize the list of teachers by department and hit E for English. I scroll down past Economics and Education to where—surprise again— I find all of my professors listed. Each has at least a few assessments, as well as an icon—either a yellow smiley face, a green ambivalent face, or a blue worried face—signifying an "Overall Quality" rating compiled from the average of "Helpfulness and Clarity" scores. If some have more ratings than others, no one in my department has more than ten—whereas the most rated English professors at the most rated schools in Canada have as many as eighty ratings. Some have even been awarded a chili pepper—are thought more "hot" than not—which may or may not have much to do with how accomplished they are as teachers.

I click on my thesis supervisor's name to see her four ratings. I read through the comments made about the other professors I know at the department, including the ones I have only heard about. I check on the professors I had as an undergraduate, elsewhere, and on the few of my friends who have recently started teaching. (I even check the ratings of professors I don't know and haven't heard about—as a kind of control—but notice no obvious differences.) Most of the ratings seem pretty fair, all told, at least plausible, and even potentially helpful to a student needing to decide about a professor, a section, or a school. There are of course also a few comments—incoherent, vitriolic, embarrassing—that I can't imagine being of much help to anyone and that probably say more about the persons who posted the comments than they do about the professors being reviewed.¹

I do, though, find it exciting to see myself represented out there on the web—*my* school, *my* professors, *my* class. I recognize ratings ostensibly from fellow graduate students. I circulate an e-mail around the department looking for people who know about the site and would talk to me

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¹ In an earlier incarnation of the site, the response to FAQ 14 ("Who can rate?") was "We have no way of knowing who is doing the rating—students, the teacher, other teachers, parents, dogs, cats, etc." (accessed 13 February 2006).

about why they would go to the internet to rate teachers that each of us has already rated on paper. I would love to buy a body a beer in exchange for a conversation. I don't, I add, intend to reveal any personal information about anyone other than myself. I'm just curious, eager. Naïve, maybe. Of course, no one responds.

So, I click on one of the four "respond to this rating" buttons on my supervisor's page and start a "feedback" thread, hoping to be in touch with someone this way—anonymously, face-and-body-lessly, as is the custom here. Weeks later, that thread remains untouched. Without a response. A party of one. Vraiment pas un picnic, c't'affaire là, j'te dirais, I can almost hear my mom say—or Dylan, "had nothing to do with picnics." I wade through pages and pages of likewise lonesome threads. Hundreds of thousands of them. No more than 10 percent, it seems, have generated any reply, and most of these appear to come from the same person who posted the "feedback" in the first place. The feeling here is decidedly unlike the feeling engendered by other, perhaps more ephemeral and less costly systems of teacher evaluation (systems that don't have quite as many banners of advertising attached to them as RMP does): the occasional conversation in the hallway with an older student, for instance, or those beginning, mid-, or end of term parties that student associations and departments tend to host at which are gathered a whole bunch of people to ask about this professor or that. Here, the relative silence, the failure to engage, seems sad. Lonely. Which is to say, I am troubled, and troubled particularly about the point of all this.

Whereas every semester students are asked to invest time and care into answering a greater or lesser number of standard and departmentally specific questions—that is, we are asked to evaluate our professors' performances—and whereas this investment is an essential part of the process of hiring and tenure committees in schools across Canada and the United States, nevertheless students are not normally given (or have not taken?) the opportunity likewise to profit from this labour of ours that is collected and amassed over time. (Perhaps because we do not own the means of collection?) With very few (though no doubt remarkable) exceptions, students' end-of-term teacher evaluations remain the private property of faculty and administrations. Rather than ask or fight to share in the profit presumably generated by these evaluations, we have en masse resorted instead to re-investing in yet another system of evaluation—ostensibly a "resource for students" (FAQ)—but funded in this case by the capital investment of corporate advertisers, which presumably serves primarily to increase corporate profits.

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Rather than work to organize ourselves and articulate our demands to school administrations that we have as much right as our professors to profit from those evaluations—which without our investments would not exist—that is, rather than learn how to work with faculty and administrations to produce some sort of useful access for new and returning students to the years' worth of evaluations that already exists, students in significant numbers (I think regrettably) are being seduced by the impossible promise of a free, quick, and easy fix and, as such, are wasting the pedagogical promise of student-teacher proximity, wasting the occasion to engage with the institutional structures that we inhabit and that shape us, and wasting the chance to profit from the differences of opinion that such a process of negotiation would surely involve. (And all of this says nothing about how much more seriously and sincerely students would engage with the evaluation process if we were actually invested in its production!)

The situation is unquestionably sad, but it isn't terminal. It can be otherwise. In fact, in some places it already is. As one of the respondents to the "revenge' ratings—why these sites are useless" post says, "an institutional policy that makes *all* course evaluation data public ... would certainly preclude the need for RMP and give students better data on which to base their decisions when choosing which courses/professors to take" (DrJimmy). Or as Kenneth Westhues, Professor of Sociology at the University of Waterloo, suggests, the "unyielding presence of rate-myprofessors may also induce universities and colleges to publish the results of in-class questionnaires on their own websites. The University of Western Ontario already does this with numerical ratings, but without any comments." Likewise, the "Student Instructional Rating Survey" at Rutgers University provides a searchable database of teaching evaluations for registered users.

The closest thing to a proper picnic I've encountered so far is the *ANTICALENDAR* published annually by the University of Toronto's Arts and Science Student Association (ASSU). A "compilation of course evaluations [that] has proven itself to be a valuable resource [both] *for students* who may be unsure of the courses in which they are registering *and for instructors* to review their teaching abilities," this resource is easily accessible, both in hardcopy and on the web (*ANTI-CALENDAR*). Most important for my purposes here, it is the product of a great deal of student labour and interaction with faculty and administration, from which students continue to profit. As its current editor, Terry Buckland, observes, "[E]valuations at U of T date back to the 1960s and have slowly evolved into what we have today. About ten years ago we entered into an agreement with the Dean

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of the Faculty of Arts to jointly do the evaluations. ASSU does, however, have complete editorial control over what is published."

So RMP's claims notwithstanding, the process of teaching evaluations and the profits generated from them—like the pedagogical process generally—are neither "free" nor "quick and easy" (FAQ). There are costs, for instance, to the dozens of members in dozens of student unions who are "responsible for taking all the English course surveys and providing a general summary of all the students' comments for each course" twice a year (Choi). And there are costs likewise that attend the sort of institutional negotiation undertaken by the ASSU and the U of T administration to produce its ANTI-CALENDAR. However, and here's the rub, rather than be siphoned off into private pockets by increasingly corporate-owned systems (as it seems to me must happen at RMP), the return on this investment of labour and responsibility provides students as well as teachers with the kind of pedagogical experience—more collective and communicative, engaged and engaging—that really cannot be bought.

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