

Readers' Forum Introduction

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WELCOME TO *ESC*'S READERS' FORUM on RateMyProfessors.com: our old-school attempt to reckon with new-school teaching evaluation in the age of the corporate university. RMP has been the subject of substantial debate in both the popular and academic presses, usually as an object of derision or a cause for hand-wringing. Aiming to join the debate, and hoping to push it in new and less predictable directions, *ESC* approached several potential contributors, distinctly positioned in the academic field yet all engaged in literary or cultural study of one kind or another, and invited them to write brief, polemical pieces on RMP. Although we suggested possible approaches (RMP and anonymity, RMP and social difference, RMP and the profession, the "surround" of RMP, RMP and/as satire, among many others), we deliberately left the invitation as open as possible, asking only that our invitees weigh in on this controversial cultural phenomenon. Seven agreed, and their provocative responses appear on the pages that follow.

By way of introduction, and in homage to the mocking spirit sometimes palpable on the RMP website, we offer you the *ESC* FAQ, low-tech in style but high-test in substance:

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What's the RMP story, anyway?

Likely the least frequently-asked of our FAQ: these days, RateMyProfessors is as ubiquitous as notorious in conversations about the state of higher education. Still, it makes sense to offer some background. Founded in 1999 by software developer John Swapceinski, sold in 2005 to SwitchTextbooks.com founders Patrick Nagle and William DeSantis, and now owned by Viacom's twenty-four-hour college network mtvU, RMP gives students the opportunity to rate and comment anonymously on their college and university instructors. Currently, the site offers a choice among five countries: the U.S., Canada, England, Scotland, and Wales. Cultivating an ethos of popular justice, it promises to enable its users to turn the tables on an otherwise untouchable, unaccountable professoriate. Evaluation of instructors and their courses involves four categories ("easiness," "helpfulness," "clarity," and "rater interest") and orbits around hotness as a test of appearance (the iconic chili pepper). If raters desire, they can also write brief commentary. Subscription, which is free, enables full access to and participation on the site.

Critics of RMP point to the evaluative structure, and to the kinds of response it tends to solicit, when skewering the site for distortion and bias. Tellingly, in its present incarnation RMP seems ambivalently attuned to the issues of interestedness at stake in such complaint: one of the site's newest (and most controversial) innovations allows users to post digital images of instructors, and its current homepage offers "hottest professors" and "highest rated professors" as its leading categories of user interest; yet RMP has always allowed users to flag suspect evaluations, and, in an apparent attempt to cultivate an image of balance, of responsiveness to negative as well as positive commentary, the current menu includes a link to "recent press." In view of RMP's unrelenting solicitation of advertisers, though, skeptics may well suppose that this growing sensitivity to controversy is just one more turn of the commercial screw.

Why RMP in *ESC*?

In introducing the redesigned *ESC* in 29.1-2, Jo-Ann Wallace envisioned "an expanded use of the Readers' Forum as a place for meditating on the state of our discipline" (2). The topics in that and subsequent Readers' Forums—"What's Left of English Studies?"; "Bill C-12/C-20"; "Always Indigenize!"; "Retro Keywords"; "Feminism: What Are We Supposed to Do Now?"—and the wonderful contributions they inspired have done robust work to materialize this vision. *ESC*'s editors felt, in making RMP the focus

for the latest forum, that the topic would serve to put pedagogy's complex dynamics front and centre. To some, RMP as a topic may seem more pop-cultural surface than literary-critical substance. For us, though, the issues raised in taking up RMP constellate in striking ways with concerns addressed in previous forums: representation and justice, recognition and refusal, learning and belief, knowing and feeling, education and capital (to name just a few). And as our contributors' pieces will demonstrate, whatever may seem suspect about RMP as an enterprise, as an occasion for critical engagement it evidently does enable new knowledge to happen.

Why should we care about RMP?

Teachers need to know and contemplate what students read, and students are reading RMP these days. Moreover, what can seem like the intrinsic dismissability of RMP is itself cause for suspicion and should inspire everyone involved in higher education to want to learn more, think more, and say more about the site. For many, RMP is a prime symptom of everything that's wrong with universities today: their corporate emulation; their embrace of the profit motive; their instrumentalization of knowledge; their exploitative treatment of casualized labour (see Johnson et al.). Yet in an era when students become consumers (are subject to consumption) and teachers become "content providers" (are subject to content provision), it remains imperative to engage with the signs of such becoming and to embrace analysis and critique, not rant or elegy, as the modes of our engagement (O'Brien and Szeman). Bear in mind Gilles Deleuze's argument about any mediator: the "capacity of falsity to produce truth is what mediators are all about" (286). Disbelief is all the more reason to keep reading.

What can RMP teach us about teaching and learning?

The answer depends on what it is we think we want to know. If we expect always to be right, clear, smart, hot, then ... not so much. If, though, we take breakdowns in communication—and more specifically those that indicate teacher-failure—as the chance to learn something new, and if we treat evaluation as the start not the end of pedagogical exchange, then ... perhaps something more. Failure, we might suspect, is pedagogy's necessary supplement. So what happens when educators stop feeling failure as intolerable and abject and start using failure as a spur to (our own) learning?

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Why do we love to hate, or hate to love, RMP?

“The process in question is seeing. A seeing of oneself. Specifically, a seeing of oneself as others see one” (47). Brian Massumi is writing about Ronald Reagan on acting, a topic that may seem, for some of us, exactly analogous to RMP on teaching. Such resonances aside, the prospect of seeing oneself as others see one is a major cause of the discomfort produced when teachers visit RMP. The shock at issue might entail disidentification (“That’s so not me!”), but it might as readily entail uneasy recognition (“What if that’s me?” or “It’s exactly as I feared!”). We could take these worries to indicate something about the fraught prospect of embodied knowledge and, against it, the pedagogical privilege of managing presence and absence—of self, of desire, of sensation, of belief—at the scene of teaching (although of course such privilege, if it exists, will never have been evenly distributed across the teaching field, necessarily cross-cut by gender, race, academic rank, job security, discipline, and so on). Or we could understand these worries otherwise. In any case, they seem to speak to the difficult question of affective labour that, as Rosemary Hennessy, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, among many others, have argued, matters deeply in the present global conjuncture.

But haven’t you missed the point? RMP is clearly about x ...

We at *ESC* believe—and we hope you’ll agree—that the reflections on RMP that appear in this forum are illuminating and provocative. Yet we also enjoy the fact that they’re resolutely partial: committed to consider pedagogy’s event through RMP, and disinterested in exhaustiveness as a critical ideal. Many other observations could be made about RMP, many other accounts given of the significance the site holds for post-secondary education in the present and the future. RMP makes clear that its FAQ stand in for, so as to preclude, communicative exchange between the site’s managers and its many users. *ESC*’s editorial team hopes that our FAQ and the forum they introduce will have exactly the opposite effect, invigorating debate on the state and the stakes of humanities education today. We invite, and look forward to, your responses.

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