

From "Teaching First"
by Thomas Rishel

What Does An Evaluator Evaluate, Anyway?

I have been called on a number of times over the years to sit in on classes for the purposes of evaluating T.A.s and faculty. At first, I had no real idea of how to do this; I sat and listened, made a note or two and at the end said, "Thanks, nice class." I felt mildly uneasy about the whole system, but there didn't seem to be any role models for me to learn from or compare myself to. Only after a while did I start to develop my own techniques for dealing with the process.

Now when I am asked to evaluate a graduate student or faculty member, I first find out whether the evaluation is to be **formative** or **summative**.

A formative evaluation is one designed mainly to give the instructor and me a snapshot from that day. "How am I doing? What seems solid? What should I work on?" Then he or she can work toward the summative evaluation, the one that sometimes ends up in a letter of recommendation or a file in the deans' office.

I never consider a formative evaluation invasive. In fact, I like to invite colleagues to my class so as to get their opinion of how I'm doing, and because it makes summative evaluations of my own work easier to handle.

When I am asked to observe someone else's class, how do I begin? First, I make sure to ask the individual which day is best. There is no reason for me to show up on an exam day, for instance. On the other hand, there is good reason to attend when the lecturer is giving a lesson he or she is particularly enthusiastic about.

I come to class early, ask the instructor if it is still all right if I sit in (just in case plans have changed at the last minute), and then take a seat toward the back of the room. Although I prefer to be unobtrusive, students usually notice that I am in there, and I am aware that that fact sometimes changes the dynamic of the class.

I take notes as the class proceeds, recording the topic, the instructor's approach to it, and especially the dialogue that takes place:

Student: "I didn't get that last step." Instructor: "OK, I'll go back." When I see what might have been a missed opportunity for the instructor, I put a comment in brackets in the margin of the paper for later mention. I also record seemingly trivial facts, such as the time the class starts and the number of students the instructor has. If class starts late, that is a point to discuss later; if it is because of a late bus, that's one thing, but if it is part of a pattern that comes from the instructor's nervousness or dislike of teaching, then we have a matter for further discussion. If there are too

few students in class, it may be because today is the day before semester break, or perhaps students are generally not coming to class because they see it as "useless."

After class, I ask the instructor if he or she would like to have some coffee and talk. I like to chat right after class, if possible, because the material is still fresh in our common memories. I always start with what I liked about the class, and I begin with the trivialities. "You speak loudly enough, and I like the way you wrote everything on the board so that students could take notes more easily." Many of the people I observe are better teachers than I was when I began, and I tell them so.

Then I move on to more serious issues. If students asked lots of questions, I consider that to be a real plus, because it shows that they are not cowed by the instructor even if he or she couldn't answer all the questions. I tell the instructor this fact; "It's good to see how you encourage the students to respond to the material by letting them ask you questions. I really liked the way that you were willing to field that question about [something you messed up]. It showed the students how you were thinking, even though you still need to work on the answer for next time."

If the instructor has done a good job with "mechanical skills," I then feel free to discuss deeper issues of teaching. Referring to my notes, I sometimes offer suggestions as to how to approach the classroom material from a more sophisticated perspective.

Here are some points that I have come to over time:

I classify teaching into three levels. At the first level, the instructor has an awareness of and an ability to handle the most basic aspects of teaching. He or she writes clearly, doesn't stand in front of the board, speaks loudly enough, comes to class fully prepared to discuss the assignments, treats students in a courteous manner, and understands and gives basic responses to questions asked in class. A new instructor should be able to learn these skills through a decent T.A. training program and to perfect them during the first semester of teaching.

A level two instructor is able to motivate the material being taught, perhaps by bringing in some relevant additional material, thinks well on his or her feet, is able to answer simple questions on lecture material and homework without difficulty, and is willing to spend some additional time with individual students.

At the third level, the instructor now knows what the student is "really asking" when he or she asks a particular question. This instructor can also say "where the course is going," and can give solid, coherent responses to questions of the "what's it all good for" variety. He or she acts professionally in all classroom situations.

Now let me return to the topic at hand. When I observe an instructor, I try to get an idea of which of the three levels he or she is on. My goal is then to reinforce good habits by complimenting this person on having attained the appropriate level (I don't say it this way, of course), and then to suggest one or two ways in which he or she can continue to get to the next level. I always use positive reinforcement and make suggestions built from what I have seen in the classroom. "I really like the way you were able to do all the problems the students asked. You were obviously prepared. By the way, remember that question twelve, the one about integrating the trigonometric function? I was noticing how you had a chance there to tell the students that they'd see those kinds of problems again if they take next semester's course."

I have occasionally had situations where the person I have evaluated has been, well, less than stellar. Each of these was different, and of course I need to preserve confidentiality, but I will try to describe some of these because they are relevant. In each of the stories below, I am going to describe the individual as a male.

One instructor reacted so much to my presence in his classroom that he basically stopped trying to teach the students and instead spent most of his time convincing me that he knew the proofs behind the material he was covering. In this case, I told him after class what I thought he had done — he agreed — and suggested that I “forget this one” and come back in a couple of weeks to see a more typical class. That later lesson went much better and I was able to write a nice recommendation for him.

A second case involved a first-semester instructor from another country. Although he knew how to do the homework problems that had been assigned, when the students asked for further details, he would launch again into the previous explanation, thus making the students upset. I broke my rule of noninterference and actually stopped the class in the last few minutes. I then explained to the students that I thought the instructor was just a little nervous. “He really does know the answers — see, he’s doing the problems very well [this comment relaxed the instructor a bit], he’s simply having some problem getting used to the American accent.” This, too, turned out to be true. I said that the students’ frustrations should not be with the instructor, they should be with me, the person who put him into the class right after he had arrived from another culture. I then asked the students to speak more slowly, and to ask more focused questions; e.g., “I followed you until you got to the step about factoring, and then I lost you.” This worked so well that by the end of the semester the instructor’s evaluations were near the top of the scale. Further, that instructor later blossomed into one of my best.

Yet the previous solution did not work in a similar situation. The instructor was so confused by being in front of a class of “standard Americans” that I had to remove him from the classroom for further language training. I did assure him, however, that there would come a day when he would reenter “and you will be much more prepared then than you were today.” He was, to say the least, relieved. Although his abilities did not increase markedly over the course of his career, at least we had tried to help him in his teaching.

I had a case some years ago where the instructor was belligerent. If students asked him questions, he would belittle them: “You’re supposed to know this; don’t ask me how to solve the problem, how did **you** do it?” Meanwhile, he would not necessarily solve the homework problems correctly himself. I took him to my office to discuss the situation with him, explaining that he needed to work harder on his own assignments, on his method of answering questions, and especially on his attitude. Then, when I observed him a few weeks later and found that he had not improved in any of the above categories, I was able to issue him a warning that “...if I don’t see substantive improvement this semester” in the aforementioned ways, he would not be rehired. Unfortunately, he did not improve, and unfortunately, he was not rehired. Thus I learned again, if I didn’t know already, that not every

person is cut out for teaching, and not every case leads on to success. But I also kept that instructor from making the next semester's class miserable.

The vast majority of the instructors I have evaluated have not been of this last type, however. Most want to make teaching an integral part of their life's work, and they accept formative evaluation as a significant means of improvement in their careers.

I'd like to point out that some people strongly dislike being evaluated, and most people have problems with some aspects of evaluation (see the Course Evaluation section for some of my own complaints), yet the process can be constructed so as to be a helpful one. Since more and more schools are requesting accountability from their faculty, there is a reasonably high possibility that you will be asked to go through an evaluation. You can help make this a more salutary one by realizing that it is ultimately designed to help you. After all, your students are watching you all the time, and their critical faculties are not turned off; why not let a colleague watch you, too? He or she may be able to say just what you need to improve your teaching to level three — and beyond.