

Critical Analysis of the Practice of Students Grading Their Teachers

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Everyone knows that the very nature of the current educational system is that teachers are able to grade students on their academic and behavioral performance. A question that could be asked, though is: should students also be able to grade their teachers in return? The purpose of the present essay is to conduct a critical analysis based on this question. The essay will proceed across four main parts. The first part will consist of an overview of the basic concept under consideration itself. The second part will then consider the argument in favor of the practice of students grading their teachers, and the third part will consider the argument against that practice. Finally, the fourth part will consist of a critical reflection on the arguments, which will result in the conclusion that students should in fact be able to grade their teachers.

Overview of the Concept

To start with, then, it is worth noting that teachers are currently evaluated primarily on the basis of how well their students perform, which itself is generally measured through standardized tests—the use of which more or less went through the roof after the passage of the infamous No Child Left Behind Act in the year 2002 (Holmes, 2010). In this context, the idea of students grading their teachers could be understood as an additional metric for evaluating teachers, independent from the actual academic performance of the students themselves. This metric would clearly reflect a more concrete and subjective picture of how students perceive their experience within the classroom setting, which of course would be totally ignored by the numbers reported by standardized test scores. The students' grades would reflect strongly on how the teacher actually behaves as a teacher in everyday practice.

This is what Mooney has written about this matter: "With all the debate in New Jersey and elsewhere about evaluating teachers on how well their students perform, another idea is starting to surface that could prove equally provocative: judging teachers by what their students

think of them. . . . The idea is gaining popularity, at least among policy-makers" (paras. 1-2).

These two concepts could be said to be provocative in almost complementary ways. Evaluating teachers on student performance is provocative because it risks holding the teacher responsible for low student performance over which she has no control—if, for example, all the students are from backgrounds of broken homes and low socioeconomic status. On the other hand, evaluating teachers based on how students think about them is provocative because it may be too subjective, divorcing the evaluation of the teacher from her actual efficacy in producing real academic results. In any event, it will now be appropriate to turn to the arguments in favor of and against the practice of students grading their teachers.

Argument in Favor

The most obvious point in favor of the practice of students grading their teachers would consist of the fact that students, as a result of their extended long-term exposure to their teachers, are in fact actually in an ideal position to evaluate those teachers in an effective way. As Ripley has written, apropos of a discussion of an important survey that was administered regarding students' perceptions: "That research had shown something remarkable: if you asked kids the right questions, they could identify, with uncanny accuracy, their most—and least—effective teachers. The point was so obvious, it was almost embarrassing. Kids stared at their teachers for hundreds of hours a year, which might explain their expertise" (paras. 6-7). In short, if one were to think to ask anyone at all about how well a teacher performs, one should clearly think to first and foremost ask the students. The commonsensical notion has been confirmed by empirical researcher that shows remarkable validity and reliability in students' evaluations of their teachers across multiple schools and grade levels.

This point tends to negate concerns that exist regarding subjective student bias resulting in students' grades failing to capture the actual quality of the teacher's performance in an effective way. For example, concerns could be raised over whether a bad student would simply give his teacher a bad grade because she has always given him bad grades. The source cited above, however, would seem to indicate that if this dynamic does even exist, its impact is actually far less significant than one may be given to imagine. By and large, it would seem that students grading of their teachers, when reported through adequate survey tools, actually does reflect not their own personal grudges and grievances but rather the actual quality of the teacher's performance. Indeed, it could even be suggested that this distinction is a little circular, insofar a student who cultivates grudges and grievances in students and leaves them unresolved would in fact be exhibited poor performance at least in this regard.

Moreover, it is worth pointing out that several teachers may actually want to know what grades their students would give them, so that they could make the relevant improvements in the relevant areas. For example, Manjoo has written regarding one such student survey that "her [the teacher's] students did not believe she was connecting with them. Ninety-six percent of the students at Lionel Wilson are Hispanic, and 92 percent receive school lunch assistance" (para. 6). In the same article, it is also reported that the teacher was glad to actually know about these findings, so that she could attempt to work on her performance in such a way that her scores would go up in this area. In short, student grades could serve as constructive criticism for teachers, as long as teachers were mature enough to interpret the grades as such and not instead develop unfounded resentments toward their students.

Argument Against

One of the main points of the argument against the practice of students grading their students consists of the notion that students are not in fact actually mature enough to carry out an effective evaluation of their own teachers. This has how Futterman has phrased the matter: "In the perfect world, students would maturely construct fair and sensible evaluations of their teachers in order to ensure their teachers create an environment that fosters learning. But we do not live in a perfect world, and most students are too immature to objectively execute an evaluation of teachers" (Gonchar, 2014, para. 11). In other words, it could be suggested that no matter how much time students spend with their teachers, many students may still lack the capacity to separate their own subjective biases from an actual evaluation of the teacher's performance as a professional educator. Such biased responses clearly could not and should not serve as foundational for any actions regarding the teachers themselves.

Other forms of bias could also enter into the picture. For instance, students grading their teachers probably would not even work at the methodological level unless every student were required to submit a thorough and completed response. This is because in evaluational surveys of this kind, people with extreme feelings—and especially extremely negative feelings—will be considerably more likely to respond in a voluntary fashion than will others. One could make an analogy to Yelp here, for example: most of the reviews for most establishments are either very good or very bad, because people who are content but not over-the-top excited by their experiences will likely just not bother submitting a review at all (Jacobs, 2015). If student grading were to be implemented, then, it would need to be done with considerably more rigor than one may imagine, and it is not clear that this would be feasible or cost-effective relative to the quality of the results that would be produced.

Finally, a criticism of the practice of students grading their teachers can also be made from a sociological angle. From this perspective, the main point would be that the teacher is supposed to be an authority figure who is responsible for socializing her students into society and culture, and that the practice of students grading their teachers would subvert this basic hierarchy and imply that students are equal with the teacher in terms of social authority, with each being given the privilege of grading (or judging) the other. One could perhaps argue that there is nothing the matter with such mutuality within the context of a democratic society. Nevertheless, the argument could still be made that there is something inherently perverse about children grading an adult authority figure—something that fundamentally undermines the relationship of respect upon which the entire learning situation is premised. This could be understood as the ideological criticism against the practice of students grading their teachers, irrespective of whatever pragmatic value may be produced by such metrics.

Critical Reflection

On the basis of the above discussion of the arguments in favor of and against the practice of students grading their teachers, the conclusion can be reached here that the argument in favor has greater merit, and that students should thus be allowed to grade their teachers. This conclusion is primarily based on the fact that students actually are in an excellent position to evaluate their teachers, and that it is thus simply absurd to not take advantage of this crucial perspective and data set when engaging in such evaluation. Moreover, the notion that students are too immature to evaluate their teachers does not really hold water, if one bears in mind that the way that a given teacher makes students subjectively feel is in fact an essential dimension of her performance as a whole. That is, a teacher who cultivates a subjectively hostile atmosphere

within the classroom actually would be an objectively poor teacher, irrespective of whatever further academic results she is or is not able to produce.

A word of caution perhaps is in order here, however, regarding how it would be terrible if the practice of students grading teachers were to result either students or teachers or both using this mutual power as a kind of weapon when it comes to evaluation of either side from the other. Ideally, student grading of teachers, like teacher grading of students itself, should be understood as a form of constructive criticism that can be used in order for both sides to improve their performances to an optimal level. This can probably be addressed through methodological improvements in how student grading surveys are developed and administered. Long, for example, has pointed out that "students can be fickle, and the comments reflect that—one day a teacher is loved, and on the next, reviled, maybe because of a pop quiz or a poor grade" (para. 2). Surveys should be designed in such a way that they bypass these transient feelings and get at something more fundamental about the students' long-term experience with their teachers, week after week and month after month.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a critical analysis of the practice of students grading their teachers. After introducing the concept and considering the argument in favor of and the argument against the practice, the essay reached the conclusion that students should in fact be allowed to grade their teachers, given that students are in fact in the perfect position to provide valuable evaluations of their teachers' performances. The reservations against the practice, including ideological objections and the potentials for subjective bias, have been duly noted. However, the evidence would seem to indicate that these concerns are by and large overblown, and that students do have a good sense of how good or bad their teachers are.

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