

# 6.4.9 Education Dawn Grading teachers

By John Sutherland

**T**HE customer is always right. And the more the customer pays, the more right they are. American students (and their luckless parents) are paying ever more for their higher education. In 2003 the average annual tuition fee in private colleges has soared to \$18,273. You can add \$20,000 for living expenses. These costs have gone up 75 per cent in 10 years, and are rising at twice the annual rate of inflation. It's the same story in public institutions.

What happens to the teacher/student relationship when education is not something "given" and "taken" (in the sense that one "gives" a class or "takes" a course) but sold for the highest price the market will bear? What, to put it another way, happens when students see themselves not as apprentices in the world of learning but as consumers in the academic market place, with consumers' rights?

One can find out by clicking on to the *Bruin Daily Paper* at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). The paper's website posts (for anyone who cares to look) student feedback on every tenured and tenure-track professor in this massive and prestigious institution. There are 2,843 of them (and my guess is the professors, at least, all look in — regularly).

Undergraduate fees at UCLA run at around \$12,000 a year. Non-trivial, if not quite as exorbitant as what the Ivy leagues charge. And quite enough to make the average undergraduate feel they have customer rights.

Each UCLA professor is graded, out of 10, in four categories: 1. How would you rate this professor as an effective teacher? 2. How would you rate this professor as a difficult teacher? 3. How would you rate this professor's concern about student learning? 4. How would you rate this professor's availability outside of the classroom? The victims are invited to offer a 250-word statement of their own. Few do. Appended to the grades the professors receive are selections of free-ranging student "reviews". The newspaper filters out what it deems to be "malicious". But what remains can be fairly salty. Less feedback than acid vomit.

Take, for instance, the following about a famous scholar, known to most readers of this newspaper: "Oh yeah, if you want to see him in office hours, **FORGET IT!** He has no phone number or email, I've even heard rumors that he will pretend to not be in his office if someone starts knocking. If you have a question ask it **IN CLASS** or **IMMEDIATELY** following the end of lectures. This man is, **LITERALLY**, the first person out the door as soon as he finishes talking." Is that, do you

think, a grateful student? Or one who doesn't think he's getting his 12-grands' worth of tuition and is mad as hell about being short-changed?

Another professor, in the same department, gets the highest score in the institution and such encomiastic testimonials as: "Amazing person, amazing teacher. If you do not take her, you are surely missing out on a truly amazing academic experience at UCLA." Professor Amazing's classes (as one can discover elsewhere on the UCLA website) are packed out - standing room only.

Students orienting themselves at the beginning of an academic year will go straight to the summary tables of "10 best" and "10 worst" professors. The negative assessments are breathtakingly frank. Consider the following barbs, on one luckless low-scoring prof:

"This guy is really 'old' ... He is the worst professor not only in UCLA, but in any school (even kindergarten). He is very personal, meaning that if you don't go to his useless lectures, he will never give you an A. I hope I will be never forced to take him again for anything ... This man belongs at Disneyland as a lawn gnome. I hate this man, he single handedly destroyed my love of the subject. I wish I never attended UCLA because of him. My only pleasure is the fact that he is 130-years-old and that he will die soon, and stop torturing incoming students. But, then again, no one really knows the life span of a gnome, so he may continue torturing students for another 50 years. **RUN** from any class he teaches."

And they filter out the "malicious" comments? Imagine starting your teaching day with that slugging-off glowing, radioactively, on your screen (or, worse still, on the screen of the chair of the department who is deciding whether to renew your contract).

It is instructive to note what students rate highly and what royally pisses them off. They like younger professors, generally, not merely because they are closer to them in age, taste and style of dress (no garden gnome garb), but because younger professors try harder. They try harder because strong student reports will help with the promotion committee (it is not unknown at UCLA for students to rally for popular professors when they come up for tenure).

Above all, the younger instructors do not "condescend". Students dislike boring instructors; they avoid waffling instructors who don't know their stuff; but they loathe, with homicidal intensity, instructors who talk down to them — "diss" them in the language of the LA street. The following is a typical response to a professor guilty of the cardinal sin of professorial

condescension:

"While everyone else is mostly interested in discussing this guy's monotone voice or boring lectures, I would simply like to add that he is the most unorganized, unqualified and ignorant professor I have ever had. Taking his class was an insult to my intelligence, and his condescending attitude is absolutely unnecessary. If you are looking at this to decide whether or not to take his class, don't. Not even if it fits your schedule perfectly. It will ruin your entire quarter."

Skimming the 2,800 professorial review pages raises some awkward thoughts. On the whole, professors know more than a first year undergraduate. How can wisdom and learning "not" condescend when confronted with vacant ignorance? Should you flatter a know-nothing student — even if you know he/she has the right to poison you on a public website which other students, your colleagues, your superiors, your friends and even your family will see? Is the UCLA public-posting system of professorial reviews not a licence for libel?

The UCLA system demonstrably encourages crowd-pleasing. I have trawled through a few hundred of the review pages and the one criticism which is never made is: "This professor is just an entertainer - there is no substance in his/her class". Students will happily put up with bad teaching if it is "fun" bad teaching. "Amuse me!", orders Demos (Class of 2003). The professor duly puts on his cap and bells.

Does being hauled publicly over the cyber-coals improve teachers' performance? I very much doubt it. What this public flaying and flattering does is to bloat the classes of the top-10 professors and evacuate those of the bottom 10. And, more insidiously, corrodes the self-confidence of the mass of professors who get lukewarm feedback.

Over the past 15 years, British universities have, reluctantly, put in place systems by which students can comment on the quality of the teaching they have received. Universally these are confidential. In the British department in which I teach, a "digest" of the responses is published for public consumption. Everything else is kept close to the departmental chest. That, surely, is right.

But, one may be sure, as fees and maintenance costs go up in Britain the pressure for "transparent" and "public" student feedback will be overwhelming. The customer, after all, is always right and the customer's voice must always be heard, not buried close to the departmental chest. I have seen the future. It is [www.bruinwalk.com/professors/profile](http://www.bruinwalk.com/professors/profile). And it's horrible. Go look for yourself. — Dawn/Guardian Service ■