Student Interviews: A Vital Role in the Scholarship of Teaching

Jere W. Morehead and Peter J. Shedd

ABSTRACT: Participation in a national study, sponsored by the American Association of Higher Education, on the use of "Peer Review of Teaching Effectiveness," allowed us to engage in several nontraditional methods of peer collaboration. The method having the greatest value for us involved a faculty peer interviewing the students in another faculty member's classes. Through these student interviews, we obtained insights into how to enhance the learning environment created inside and outside the classroom. In this article, we present a summary of how we conducted student interviews, why such interactions with students are worthwhile, and what the implications of these interviews are.
Introduction

During 1993, our department, which is made up of faculty from four disciplines,\(^1\) began discussing in earnest how we could best encourage an increased emphasis on teaching and the educational opportunities made available to our students. Serious conversations occurred about each faculty member’s responsibility for providing evidence of effective teaching. Like so many other units in higher education, our department traditionally relies on end-of-the-term written student evaluations as the primary source of information to determine a faculty member’s contribution and dedication to teaching. As a way to change our reliance on traditional evaluation techniques, there were those in our department that advocated the abolition of all traditional notions of evaluation, as requirements.\(^2\) In particular, the abolition of mandatory end-of-the-term written student evaluations caused significant controversy.\(^3\)

In 1994, when the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) announced its plan to conduct a national study on “Peer Review of Teaching Effectiveness,” our department was particularly interested in being a part of this project. Fortunately, the University of Georgia was among the twelve universities chosen to explore new methods for evaluating and improving college teaching. With funding from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, the focus of this AAHE national study is on the utilization of peer review to encourage “faculty to take more active responsibility for the quality of their work as teachers” (Hutchings, 1994).

---

\(^1\)Our unit within the Terry College of Business is officially named the Department of Insurance, Legal Studies, Real Estate, and Management Science. We have five Insurance, six Legal Studies, four Real Estate, and three Management Science faculty members.

\(^2\)Indeed, a proposal was drafted that incorporated the idea that each faculty member would have to document his or her contribution in such a way that reflected that individual’s creativity. Because no particular method of evaluation was to be required, it was hoped the faculty would engage in a greater amount and at a higher level than before of discourse about the role of teaching.

\(^3\)After discussing this proposal during two meetings of our departmental faculty, it was defeated. Although we continued to rely heavily on the traditional student evaluations, our department did not stop discussing how best to encourage a more appropriate documentation of instructional activities.