Teaching assessment:
a subject worthy of reconsideration

Claudio Baccarani
Dipartimento di Economia Aziendale, Università degli Studi di Verona
E-mail: claudio.baccarani@univr.it

Summary: The process of teaching assessment on the part of university students has become a bureaucratic matter almost entirely devoid of substance. There are many reasons for this including the use of a single standard questionnaire, the lack of value attributed to the exercise by university management and the resulting limited use of the results obtained. This paper offers ways of breathing new life into the process with the aim of supporting the objective of continuous improvement in the services offered by universities.

Keywords: Teaching assessment, University students' opinion survey.

1. Foreword

I have been taking an active interest in the assessment of teaching and teaching methods since even before the submission of questionnaires surveying student opinions became mandatory.

I believed in this process. I believed in it so much that, dealing with the quality of services, I was one of the pioneers of this initiative at my place of work at the University of Verona, receiving for my trouble stern rebukes, accusations and more or less thinly veiled threats.

I persisted with this work and thought that I had won my case when the survey of student opinion became a legal requirement.

I could not have imagined at the time that this very achievement could spell the start of the possible end of the assessment process.

Despite this disappointment, I still believe in such assessment but where it is part of a process whereby such evaluations are used as a tool for improving the service. I absolutely do not believe in assessment carried out either as mere compliance with regulations or as a means for punishing those who come "bottom of the class".

I will try to explain exactly what I mean in the pages that follow.

The major points to be discussed here are the following:
- learning as the purpose of the teacher-student relationship
- trust and the need for a review process
- the need to look with new eyes at teaching assessment
- the mission of universities and their governance.

2. Learning as the purpose of the teacher-student relationship

In any classification of services, teaching must rank has one of those with the greatest intangible component (on the topic see: Zeithalm et al., 2006).

What is produced in a university teaching course? Not certainly a teaching method, which is just a tool used, together with private study, for the attaining of the real product of the teaching process, i.e. the spread of and the acquisition of knowledge, or learning and acquiring the abilities for the self-generation of knowledge.

It is clear from this viewpoint that a contribution from the student receiving the service is essential.

This contribution is not to be identified with mere presence at lectures or tutorials or the study of educational material.

The contribution consists above all in being able to actively participate in educational initiatives, and in study based on critical analysis rather than exercises in memory.

The student can in this way contribute with his or her awareness of the production of new knowledge, since "in the lesson there is not one side that teaches and another than learns, in a lesson everyone learns". This will only be true, however, provided all the available knowledge is put into circulation and will also only happen if there is pro-active participation of the student in the educational process.

Such a state of affairs can certainly not be taken for granted, reliant as it is on the ability of the lecturer to establish suitable levels of interaction with the student through the establishment of trust. Such trust must be able to overcome any natural fears inherent to a relationship where the parties are not equally balanced, where the roles played by the teacher and by the student in the educational process are different.

If the required condition is achieved, there is a basis for maximum benefits being derived from the course.

There are naturally various different ways in which this objective can be achieved. It is true that such interaction cannot be realised with all of the persons present in a hall, even only in physical terms, where the numbers filling the lecture theatre for example may be quite considerable.

I have however very little doubt that respect, enthusiasm, fun, critical skills and imagination are the components of a teaching service that will contribute to the objective of the spread of self-generation of knowledge. Clearly the teacher must be good at his or her job, for this to occur, a matter that should be assured by the staff selection process.

The limited space available here means it is not possible to enter fo into this in detail, but we can reflect a little, through some simple examples, on the meaning each of the above concepts has in the educational process.

Following the above order, and thus starting with the *respect,* this can be expressed above all in two ways: *respect for diversity,* an appreciation of which is needed for the establishment of possible synergies, and *respect for the time of others*, for the meaning time has for each of us, since it should not be forgotten that *time is life* and while one's own time should not be wasted, it is even less acceptable for other people's time to be wasted.

The second concept in our list is *enthusiasm*. It can be said in this regard that the passion that the teacher transmits in his approach to the teaching method is generally reciprocated by the student who may come to experience learning not only as a duty but also as a pleasure.

Sometimes the result will be that "time flies" (Baccarani, 2008; Mascherpa, 2001), where its passage is no longer felt, due to the person's complete absorption, a state leading to truly "magic moments" (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

The river of enthusiasm is fed by tributaries, one of which is fun generated in teacher-student interaction, where the teaching process unfolds through a series of innovative systems aimed at communicating a message in memorable ways, going beyond the immediate learning aspect to enter the cultural world of the student and form the backdrop to possible future inspiration.

Critical skills, for their part, teach the student not to unquestioningly accept an opinion for the simple reason that it is shared by many, or because it is expressed by someone in a position of power in the educational process.

Opinions, ideas and messages should only be accepted where they succeeded in passing the filter of critical faculties.

Finally, the use of the *imagination* enables us to see possible developments beyond those of the given. Imagination has its roots in knowledge but reaches beyond it because, in the words of Einstein, "the imagination embraces the world". The more we live in an uncertain and unpredictable world, the greater the need to exercise the faculties of the imagination.

Put even more briefly, it can be said that the teacher should act with respect and with enthusiasm, that is to say with generosity, to inform the student with critical skills and the ability to use his imagination, by the spread of knowledge inspired by enthusiasm in a way that is fun.

I think it is now even more clear how important it is for trust to be an integral part of the teacher-student relationship.

I believe that this gives us a picture that helps to explain the limitations referred to in the foreword with regard to the assessment of teaching by students, as detailed in the next part. These limits are the result of the great levels of distrust that weigh heavily over the university education system.

3. Distrust and the need for control

As I hope is evident from what has been said above, the attaining of the conditions needed for the spread of knowledge in the educational system depends essentially one thing above all, i.e. the degree of trust that exists in the teacher-student relationship[1].

Trust is a two-way street, one perceptual, the other cognitive. The former springs from first impressions and is fundamental. "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression". The latter flows from experience, from events, and may or not confirm the former (Baccarani, 2005).

We are well aware how important the first lecture or lesson to winning the trust of those present.

We also all know how difficult it is to maintain this trust and even more difficult to regain it once it has been lost or simply not won on the first occasion.

Once again all of this comes within the sphere of the teacher's decision-making process and his or her conduct.

In such a process some sort of device or tool capable of measuring the audience's perception would certainly come in very handy, such that the lecturer could read the students' perceptions and see where there was room for improvement. If study shows us anything it is that there is always room for improvement.

The assessment of educational methods could thus be an invaluable tool for continuous improvement, where the way forward would be illuminated by an understanding of the teacher-student relationship.

The evaluation of educational methods can also however be used for the sorry objectives of control, capable as few other tools of destroying any available resources of enthusiasm and dedication.

We now come to the nub of the issue: surveys of student assessments of teaching methods were introduced in universities to meet a pure, simple and abstract desire for control, founded on distrust with which the work of university teachers is viewed, not so much on the part of the students themselves, as by the public at large, frequently not well informed or suitably misinformed by the mass media.

---

[1] On trust see, Luhmann (1979), Winchester (1979) and Gambetta (1989).

Distrust hangs like a dark veil over teachers, students and naturally over their relationship.

The questionnaire has thus become a means of "constraining" those "professors who are little inclined to act in accordance with their duty" to conduct themselves differently or risk a negative assessment which will affect incentives and credibility in the faculty.

Such assessment may be conducted according to nationwide schemes to provide unlikely, useless and misleading comparisons between universities that could in the end affect university funding.

The questionnaire has thus fallen on the heads of teachers and of students without their involvement and has gradually become a mere bureaucratic task, a "statistical nuisance", that may have some residual utility for the distribution of incentives but certainly fails to realise its potential as a tool for continuous improvement.

It has also been dropped on the universities in standardised forms, flying in the face of all declarations of autonomy.

In short, since it is an area that inspires no faith or trust, all that remains is to exercise control as a damage limitation exercise.

That such a perception is rooted in an objective state of fact cannot be denied.

What is certain is that an opportunity to support the production of value in our university educational processes has been almost entirely lost.

Almost but not entirely lost because if we choose to look back at the errors committed with the aim of recognising them and using them to guide us, it will still be possible to embark on correct usage of teaching methods assessment with the purpose of improving them.

4. An opportunity to look with fresh eyes at teaching assessment.

The obvious errors that have led to the currently stalled educational evaluation process open the way to possible changes so that we can move in the direction of continuous improvement.

I shall try to present a range of possible paths, even though not all will be directly applicable to individual universities even where the principle is shared.

The first of these belongs to the category of possible choices.

It is my view that certain cultural tensions can be removed by ceasing to make such assessments mandatory, while rewarding universities that nevertheless move in this direction with new ideas.

Even if such an option is considered as being one day feasible, but it is still thought necessary to spoon feed the universities, the question of national standardisation of questionnaires should at least be addressed with the aim of safeguarding a recognition of the fundamental diversity in the historical experience of individual universities.

In this context a questionnaire could be drafted based on the needs felt by students at the university, according to the expected quality vis a vis perceived quality model (Gronroos, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1985).

From the outset such an approach would involve students by asking them to define their expectations and then allow them to express a quality judgement not on aspects that are presumed by some central office to be important to the student, but on matters that the student has already identified in the local university setting. It will still be possible preserve some of content that is of obvious value to universities viewed collectively.

This approach would also profoundly involve the university itself, which should seek to measure its ability to obtain the mission it has set itself as regards the educational process and the communication of learning.

In all of this there is another important aspect of a statistical nature, i.e. the need to specify what it is that is actually being assessed, so as to avoid the accumulation of redundant and misleading data.

Statistics should help discovering the more appropriate ordinal scale to be implemented in order to improve the assessment and evaluation of items and to facilitate the users' understanding of the final results.

If the management has the task of having the teaching staff fall in love with the assessments, the statistical process has the task of feeding the hunger for knowledge of those who are called upon to use the data.

In this way the choice of questionnaire drafted according to the reality of an individual university would reward individuality, escaping from the paralysing mechanism of standardisation.

To ensure, however, the coherence and quality of local projects, a national or, why not? even international "assessment" of university assessment procedure" could be put in place, using certification mechanisms employed by independent bodies.

Beside all of this, concrete initiatives are possible even in the current evaluation organisation situation so as to further involve teachers in the assessment process and to ensure care in the collection of data and the use of results.

The involvement of the lecturer comes into play principally at three stages:

- in the explanation to the students of the importance of the assessment process at the time that the data gathering process is started up;
- through possible, and desirable, self-assessment using the same questionnaire submitted to the students, to provide a comparative view of any differences in perception;
- in the presentation of the results of the previous year, with reasons provided for the choices made at the start of the following year's lessons.

All of this however depends on a direct campaign to bring about consensus among the teaching staff of the usefulness of this assessment process.

The other two aspects referred to are the care taken at the time of gathering the data and the analysis of the way the results are used in relation to the faculty and to the degree course.

In the former case it is necessary to ensure that the moment the questionnaire is issued, and when it is filled in, are imbued with a suitable solemnity and sense of meaningfulness, not being viewed as mere interruptions in the educational process. This serves only to emphasise how inappropriate it is to think in terms of an on-line alternative which, despite certain advantages in terms of efficiency, is wholly incapable of communicating the solemnity that the direct teacher-student relationship can provided at any moment in the lecture theatre or classroom context.

The way the questionnaire is used at faculty level, or for the degree course, could be certified in an annual report to the university chancellor, outlining the processes of improvement set in motion and discussed with representatives of the students in the faculty and degree course councils.

It can be readily understood how wholly useless, destructive and misleading it would be to think that a process of improvement may develop through the publication of teacher assessment tables.

5. The mission and the governance of the university

Lastly, and briefly, I feel it should be stressed that one great piece in the improvement process jigsaw is defining the objectives it is intended to pursue.

By its very nature the university belongs to that category of loosely bonded organisations with somewhat split personalities that comport themselves by caring for their own little plots, with the assistance of full professors with prima donna tendencies (see Raanan , 1998).

There are many disadvantages to such a setup, but it is also fertile ground for advantages where creative tensions and innovative ideas may be activated through enterprising individualism. The university really needs a multi-cellular organisational model capable of living alongside a system that is analogous to that of a network of companies.

To grasp all of the opportunities afforded by an organisation "brimming with knowledge" that it has to tilt, "spill" and spread, it must first be possessed of clear, simple and shared objectives.

These objectives spring from the "entrepreneurial dream", from the "vision of the future" typical of top management (in this case the chancellor, the core senate and the administrative heads) and from the mission consequently entrusted to the university.

These issues have not only to be clarified and determined but also shared.

There is no point in thinking of an assessment the aim of which is to improve a service if all of this is not in place. As we know this is an inescapable truth.

Indeed, if we examine the articles of association of the universities, or if we study the budgets in search of signs of a mission, we find only banal utterances that are the same for everyone and do not fit with the realities of governing the organisation, as is also the case for the greater part of business enterprises (see Kawasaki, 2004).

We find only "a hint of smoke" and no more.

The crisis of teaching methods assessment thus underscores the real crisis in universities, which is to be found in the issue of governance and an inability to move in the direction of real interaction, at least of osmosis, in relation to the stakeholders.

References

Baccarani C. (2005), *Diario di viaggio sul treno che non va in nessun posto. Riflessioni per chi vive l'impresa*, Giappichelli, Torino.

Baccarani C. (a cura di) (2008), *Giocare con il tempo in azienda ed essere più competitivi*, Giappichelli, Torino.

Csikszentmihalyi M.(1999), If we are so rich, why aren't we happy?, *The American Psycologist*, 54, 821-827.

Gambetta D. (a cura di) (1989), *Le strategie della fiducia,* Einaudi, Torino.

Gronroos C. G., (1980) Designing a Long Range Marketing Strategy for Service, *Long Range Planning*, 13, 36-42.

Kawasaki G. (2004), *The Art to Start*, Portfolio, New York.

Luhmann N. (1979), *Trust*, John Wiley & Sons, Winchester.

Mascherpa V. (2001), *Il centro del movimento è un punto immobile*, Positive Press, Verona.

Parasuraman A., Zeithaml V. A., Berry L. L. (1985), A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research, *Journal of Marketing*, 49, 41-50.

Raanan J. (1998), What does quality mean in higher education?, *Proceedings of Toulon-Verona Conference in Higher Education*, Toulon.

Zeithalm V. A., Bitner M. J., Gremler D. D. (2006), *Service Marketing: Integratory Customer*, McGraw-Hill Company, New York.