

The Veterinary Education II. Some Specific Problems in University Teaching

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SUMMARY

Teaching at all levels involves technicalities and in the present days University this includes the students questionnaires, and other methods of evaluation of the quality of teaching; visual aids and communicative skills; fashionable methodologies, the way of examining and the students responsibility for teaching themselves. All the above mentioned problems are discussed on the basis of the material already described.

INTRODUCTION

It has been stressed in the previous paper (Tucker, 1979) that the quality of University teaching depends essentially on the teacher's own knowledge and on understanding of the subject as well as on his personality and communicative skills. It has been also mentioned that because the lecturer can pour into teaching such a large infusion of his own talents his work can be best compared to that of the architect, who usually employs the same or similar building materials as his colleagues but may erect, on one hand, a drab or an innovative and striking structure, on the other.

Personal gifts of the teacher must be however considered on the background of teaching conditions and that of the prevalent practices and fashions. Here the demands of the curriculum and the teaching load are important. Has the teacher enough time to deal adequately with the material prescribed, to vary his approaches and presentations, to deliver his lectures in a slow pace? Are the classes overcrowded, or the basic facilities lacking? Is the scheduled contact with students in the auditoria and laboratories disturbed or not maintained?

Nowadays University Staff members are often confronted with problems related to the use of visual aids as well as to the evaluation of teaching by the students. These will be briefly discussed below.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Material and methods applied were described in the first paper (Tucker, 1979).

RESULTS

Student's contributions to the assessment of courses, their form and value

The Feed-back

Nowadays the students are often involved in appraisal of the courses. Such practices are quite common in U.S.A. and also applied in other countries, although often in a rather sporadic and in a less enthusiastic way. In some American Universities every teacher rates the students assessment twice a year, while, for instance, in Japan students are not drawn into this exercise at all. However, Universities, which involve students in the evaluation of courses, choose various methods of evaluation and it is not so much the principle itself as the way of putting

it into practices which forms the subject of this inquiry. Some of the formulas and questionnaires used were obviously influenced more by the political ideas, popular at the time of the first introduction of the students evaluation (such as students power abolishment or reversion or the authority, revolt against the establishment etc etc) and about the management of an unruly crowd, than by the educational considerations. But if the whole matter will be approached from the point of view of the transfer of knowledge than it will be reduced to the teaching so to the effect upon the teacher as well as on his actions, and to the learning, so to the effect upon the students. The University is the third party interested in both the teacher and the student.

For the teacher the observations of students, who are the recipients of the flow of information, on the process of teaching from a different angle create a feedback, and consequently an insight into the situation. For the students it should be an exercise in an objective (as far as possible) contribution to the analysis of the course. Unfortunately, in the questionnaires, the call for objectivity is seldom made. For the University the outcome of such an analysis may help in assessing the effect of the course or of its eventual defects.

The value of such a feedback depends on: 1) the ways in which informations are supplied; 2) the degree of objectivity of the views of the students; and 3) the evaluation of their answers:

The ways in which information are supplied

The easiest, the quickest, and the most direct form of feedback is the discussion in the class. Such a dialogue occurs more often than it is suspected, particularly so when the teacher is older and has some measure of confidence and authority. The smaller classes are more conducive to this type of consultation than the larger ones, and the existence of the mutual trust and tolerance is a helpful, and sometimes even a necessary factor in this. (There exist a body of opinion which admits only this type of feedback.)

A variant of this method is in use in various places for as long as 50 years. It is also in operation in Morogoro. Each class has a representative which brings to the notice of the teacher, or if necessary to the notice of other authorities also, the complaints, suggestions and the difficulties experienced by the class. In fact the class representative is a mediator, who secures anonymity of the views expressed and removes the always existing possibility of a direct clash of personalities.

The less direct way of gathering information is the use of the questionnaires. Here the points to consider are the labelling of the questionnaires its length, the form of answers required (by writing or by ticking) and the type of questions it contains.

The labelling

The labelling of the questionnaire may not be important in itself but it is indicative as well as suggestive. It conveys the intention in which way it should be interpreted. Thus the frequent heading "The teaching evaluation form" suggests to the teacher that he is in the accused box and to the students that they are in the position of authority and knowledge.

Such impressions give sometimes undesirable effects on both sides. In some cases the lecturers, anxious to secure a favourable judgement, become very lenient, give substandard courses, drop hints about examinations, give unreasonably high marks for continuous assessments, or make other similarly friendly gestures. On the other hand some students, or even whole classes, use it as an occasion to hit back at an unpopular teacher.

It seems therefore that the most neutral, and, at the same time, the most exact description of such questionnaires would be the "Feedback forms". It does not convey any additional meaning.

The writing versus ticking

The questionnaire not only expresses the views but also secures the anonymity of the author. Some students are afraid that their hand writing is known to the teachers, others seek safety in numbers all answering in a similar way. For these reasons answering by ticking and in isolation is sometimes preferred. It must be noted however that the ticking is a very inaccurate way of expressing one's views. Suppose, for instance, that the "general teaching ability" (a question taken from one of the questionnaires) is ticked in the negative column. What does it mean poor language, audible voice, a habit of fast speaking or anything else? To make it more accurate will require an increase in the number of questions. As far as the written answers are concerned anonymity may be secured by excluding the teacher from perusal of the questions. This point, as well as the number of questions, will be attended to on the subsequent pages.

The length of the questionnaire

As far as the length of the questionnaire is concerned the prevalent view is that the questions should be limited to the defined and circumspected areas of teaching only, and that it should be short (no more than 25 questions). However students should also be allowed to add an additional comment of their own choice. A good framework for the questionnaire could be formed by the topics which were discussed during the course. After all, the most important thing is to know how the presentation of them was assimilated and not the personal peculiarities of the teacher. The request of giving reasons to the answers provided, may, at the same time, make the answers more precise and reduce the number of careless and off the cuff comments.

The students must be able also to point out the deficiencies which lie beyond the lecturing procedures such as interruptions due to the lack of transport or reduction of the teaching hours caused by the absence of the lecturer. It must be realised that the students view the matters in a very limited way and that the best what they can offer is constructive criticism. Thus asking them for instance, about the relevance of the subjects, particularly in the professional courses, is in itself irrelevant.

How objective are the student's answers?

The degree of objectivity in the student's answers is often very different. The location and period in which the views were collected, the current moods, emotions and the political atmosphere play as great a role as inexperience and lack of perspective. The most eager supporters of the students' evaluation schemes agree that the students judgement is volatile, and is the poorest in the early periods of study improving slowly towards the postgraduate period.

The views of the postgraduates are of course based on the greater general experience and often given in retrospect. It is therefore important to consider some more frequent factors, which are part and parcel of the student's reactions. Firstly, they judge adversely everything what differs from their views on the society, or their experience. Thus if they think that democracy expresses itself in the carelessness of dress, of behavior and learning (as it happens sometimes) they will view with hostility a teacher who has a reputation of being a

disciplinarian or an authoritarian. Cases are known in which the same teacher in the same course, using the same methods, was praised in one and run down in another place.

In certain circumstances it is enough to proclaim a teacher a conservative, in others a racist and in still others an unjust person to provoke the group hostilities. Emotions can make students blind, malicious and destructive equally clearly in their judgements as well as in riots. One disgruntled person can form the opinion of the whole class. As far as the teaching itself is concerned the students views are moulded on their previous (as well as contemporary) experiences. If they become accustomed to handouts, dictations or piece meal treatment in the secondary school or in other courses they frown on the teacher who avoids such methods; if they are accustomed to lecturers who closely follow the book section by section and chapter by chapter, the lecturer who does not follow any of the textbooks will be invariably labelled illogical and difficult, and so on and so on.

This brings us to the other side of the coin, namely that it is the lecturer who makes the first impact, and who is giving the students a measure of comparison. In the University the lecturer is also important in forming the views about the subject itself. He is as much an approach as an opinion maker. This matter will be further discussed in relation to the quality of the teaching. For these and similar reasons many of the staff members do not favour questionnaires or their attitude to them is that of indifference, others, while recognising the difficulties, think that the benefits obtained may outweigh the drawbacks, and still others are prepared simply to go with the fashion. The very great majority is convinced that other forms of the feedback are much more reliable as well as more important. On the other hand the questionnaires related to the course itself, as indicated above, should perhaps alleviate many of the difficulties.

Evaluation and processing of the questionnaires

Two parties are, or should be, interested in obtaining the teaching feedback. They are the teacher himself and the University. Supplying the questionnaire to the lecturer in question provides direct information to the teacher, however, it inhibits the students through fear of antagonising the teacher, particularly so if the formular includes many questions about his own personality and habits.

The more preferable, therefore, is the deposition of the completed questionnaires with an experienced and impartial person. Although this is widely practised the selection of the valuator is often quite different. In some places it is an academic staff member of the Department or the Head of the Department, in others a lecturer outside the Department or an administrative officer. When the questioning of the students is organised on the large scale, and the answers are collected centrally the analysis of them must be carried out by the people working full time on this matter.

In some American Universities the questioning of the students is arranged by the administration. The questions are filled and the information, when considered necessary passed to the Dean and subsequently to the Head of the Department. The passing of questions to the Head of the Department is criticized on the ground of the transfer of the adverse information from the Head to the confidential report. This is considered giving to the students too much power over the teacher. Another problem raised was that as often the Head of the Department is young and inexperienced and with an academic status not much different from that of the other members of the Department the element of the unfair competition cannot be completely excluded.

In the Morogoro campus there exists a system of directing the complaints to the Director of the undergraduate studies. These however are not written questionnaires but verbal reports and when passed to the Head of the Department are seldom acted upon, especially when they are referring to the Head himself. This in great part, is due to the lack of an official recognition for this position which is located within one of the existing departments. However, the general consensus favours rather a person who would be outside the Department and also outside the administrative staff, as the latter is not qualified to handle such matters, perhaps an academic coordinator. When student's views are adverse to the teacher, he should have the right to present his case also.

Evaluation of the quality of teaching

Which methods, then, can be used to secure a reliable teaching feedback for the University? Some staff members think that the feedback supplied by the examination is sufficient. However, the best, and most reliable, assessment is that done by an experienced and knowledgeable teacher. It is much superior to the evaluation by the students. In rare cases the departmental staff is requested to attend all lectures in the Department, but this can prove to be time consuming or even impracticable. In the Department in which the practicals are conducted or attended by many teachers they usually have a good opportunity to see each other's work.

Many staff members are not keen, though, to leave their assessments in the hands of the Head of the Department, the reasons being the same as that already advanced above: inexperience, lack of eminence and therefore also of authority, direct involvement in the promotion procedures, friendships within the Departments etc.

A coordinator or a similar officer (inspector) not directly involved in the Departmental affairs is generally favoured. Similar schemes are, of course, operating in many educational institutions usually on the secondary level. It seems that the actions taken by such an officer should vary in accordance with the character of each case. Advice, instructions and discussions could be the first step. Other channels of consultation such as those with the Dean, Chief Officer or the Head of the Department should be established. Such contacts should not be restricted to the teaching performance but must also include the general teaching conditions as well as the teaching facilities.

Visual aids and contemporary methodologies

Visual aids are presently a fashionable trend, and as it often happens with such trends, it is worked over and over so much that in the end it becomes more a hindrance than a help. Such aids certainly should be used but only in moderation.

Let's introduce the problem by quoting a real and a very recent example. It happened that, only a short time ago, I was invited to the baptism ceremony of a young boy. There was also a sermon on the old topic that everyone at the end of his life will meet with a sort of judgement. But as the person was obviously well schooled in modern communicative skills, as well as in visual aids, there was no question of dismissing it with a sentence or two. Instead, we were presented with a series of pictures, all carefully covered and unveiled in a well-executed sequence. The first picture showed us a child walking along the road, the second an adolescent also walking along the road, the third a grown man on the cross roads, and the final picture an old man passing through a gate, shaped in the form of a church, obviously on his way to heaven. Demonstration of the pictures and the accompanying explanations took some thirty minutes and the preparation of the pictures themselves, all

handmade, must have taken not less than three hours. But in effect most of the people present were bored.

This is not an isolated case and many similar ones happen all the time in the contemporary schools and Universities. Many a bright student feel that they lose time, others thus coast along without a thought and without any kind of intellectual challenge, I know about University courses comprising nothing else but BBC and TV films and others packed with films borrowed from embassies. Many slides, projections, diagrams and pictures are often set for the benefit of the lecturer not that of the students. They carry the lecture, and often the lecturer as well.

The same is with the other contemporary methodologies. The following examples taken from procedures I have witnessed myself may illustrate this point adequately. The first of them was applied in the secondary school, the second in the final years of an undergraduate course and the third as an exercise during the study for a postgraduate degree,

The lesson in ancient history for the secondary school students, which forms the first case, has started with a lengthy description of some 20 minutes, of the Kennedy family, This was followed by a short statement that "you must realize that in old Greece there were also important families" and a switch to a discourse about the Sydney Opera which likewise has ended with a brief reference to the Partenon, as a similarly outstanding building in antiquity.

When the teacher, proud of himself that he so ably has connected antiquity with the modern times has finished the lesson I could not help thinking that the knowledge gained by students in some 40 minutes did not amount to more than a few sentences and also about my younger days when we, of similar age to these students, would consider such a teacher a time waster. We certainly did not need lengthy explanations what an important building or important family is.

The happenings which form our second example occurred during the teaching of medicine. specifically of the lung disorders. The lecturer was discussing auscultation and supplemented it with a film showing half filled bottle, and the fluid shifting in it. On the sound track there was an explanation about fluids always gathering at the lower half of the bottle and statements about similarity in this respect of the bottle and lungs. Again I thought about my studies, and about that in those days we would be insulted even by a supposition that any of us is so ignorant as not to know the simplest laws of physics, and about that what will the graduates of such a class do if confronted with a problem without films or examples taken from the elementary grades.

But, perhaps the most striking example of methods used is the exercise designed for PhD students in one of the Economics Departments. The students were told to divide into groups and were seated at the table with a number of wooden blocks on it. No instruction was advanced and they were left in the room for a practical period. The students were playing rather aimlessly with blocks, some of them putting the pieces together one way or the other. After some time the lecturer entered again and asked "what did you find?" As nobody was clear what he was supposed to find, the teacher wrote on the blackboard "Leadership", and leaving the class indicated that the lesson has ended. No word was uttered about the nature of leadership or even about that fools rush often first without knowing what they are doing.

It is needless to add that although this particular University holds a good opinion about itself, little is known about outstanding intellectuals or leaders among its graduates.

Many of such approaches (and this include so called communicative skills) are in fact attempts of individuals to obtain recognition by innovators, modernizers or teaching specialists. They are further supported by notions which mistake the narrow technology for a high standard and by professional educationists which are bent on facilitating the acquisition of some knowledge by as many pupils as only possible. In consequence a number of those techniques are rather more suitable for special schools than for the University.

It is the duty of a conscientious and industrious University teacher to be critical and choosy not only with respect to research and professional information but also with respect to the multiplicity of "skills" and "aids" offered. He must be selective, and never abandon his own synthesis to become thus a distributor of the readymade or popular gimmicks.

In some Universities (for instance British) there is an attempt to make the transition from the secondary school to the University as easy as possible. In results of these some University teaching often resembles more the school than the University. It must be remembered that the transfer of knowledge depends on the content of the course, which at the University level is more extensive, on methods applied, which must be closely related to the subject taught, and time, which at the University is more limited than in secondary schools. Finally many teaching and visual aids are expensive and it would be extravagant to buy the aids which are not necessary, and which would be seldom used.

Student's responsibility for teaching themselves

To accept some responsibility by the students themselves for their own education and to participate in the self-educational activities would be in unison with accepted in Tanzania policy of self-reliance. A good revision of the subject can be obtained by drawing the students into tutoring their colleagues. Learning in the solitude of the college room often results in the loss of concentration and in weariness. On the other hand, when a group of students explains to each other the problems encountered, their solutions, and the answers expected they repeat the material of the course themselves or listen to repetitions by others. They also think about the solutions and discuss them. I have seen the usage of this method of repetition and its effects in many places, including Morogoro. This method has, for all practical purposes, vanished from the Universities of the Commonwealth, because the notion of competition has killed that of collaboration, but it would be perhaps worthwhile to revive it.

Students also could be given, as a home work, a certain number of small problems to solve. This they can prepare in the form of essays, say one or two per term. Naturally, such an exercise must be well planned and students must have time for individual work. They will be forced to think about problems themselves and develop initiative. The drawback of such method is an additional work for the teacher, who must correct and discuss the essays, or the other results, submitted.

The examination problems

Nothing unnerves the students more than uncertainty. Therefore an organised course, the meaningful practical classes and the examinations which are related to the field covered in the course are the corner stones of an efficient teaching set up on the campus.

There are a number of approaches to examinations. In many Commonwealth Universities the questions given for the final (annual) examination papers are published each year after examinations are completed. The volumes covering many years are available to the students who study the previous topics when preparing themselves for examination. Recently in some

European Universities, which do not use written papers the list of some 180-200 questions which will be asked during examinations are given to the students.

Naturally these questions cover the whole course. Certain American Colleges apply the method of model answers. Such answers are handed to the students after every examination which may occur during the year so that the students can see for themselves how well they have travelled. This method puts on additional burden on the teacher (and of course requires more typing). More, such methods by requesting conformity restrict the imagination and initiative of the students. Sometimes in Morogoro the model answers are given also to the external examiners. This informs them about the course as well as about the teacher. Other roles of the external examiners are generally known.

It is probable in view of the presently discussed approach to the teaching for self-reliance, that the examination procedures should be examined. This however must be done together with the new curricula. The views were expressed that this whole complex should be redesigned and that more collaborations between students and staff should be introduced into the University. No attempt is made to examine such a complex in the present paper.

REFERENCES

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