Our Teaching At Iowa State

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Abstract

THE controversial article on teaching at Iowa State in the winter quarter Sketch caused a great amount of comment over the campus. The present editors have chosen to accept this comment as a challenge for another article, based on the comment itself and on further inquiry...
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PART TWO

- mandatory teacher rating
- student apathy
- present evaluation

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The comment ranged from severe criticism to serious praise, some of both coming from both students and faculty. In several instances some of both came from the same person.

Those who praised asserted, first, that Sketch, acting as a sounding board for campus opinion, was performing a needed service; and second, that students are the most accurate evaluators of teaching. Those who criticized asserted, first, that Sketch was not the place for publishing controversy, especially student criticism of teachers; second, that students are not always qualified critics of teaching, and third, that the methods of inference and faulty sampling of opinion used in the article were misleading.

As for the third criticism, the editors are not able to set up machinery for scientific sampling of opinion. But they
can record a range of recently gathered opinion—a qualitative report. They do not attempt a quantitative report.

Since the comment has been brought to us, we have asked many questions of students and faculty, and we are recording some of their opinions in this article. We wish to make it clear, however, that the responsibility lies wholly with the editors. Since Sketch is not an organ of the Department of English, though it is sponsored by that department, its editorial attempts are not inspired by any faculty members. As one of our student critics pointed out, "Sketch is comparatively independent of both student and faculty pressure."

Here are some views emphasized in our recent interviews:

One faculty spokesman believed that students are not the best judges of teachers. For instance, engineering division alumni often return and remark that the T&AM professors who, they thought, were giving them the hardest time in college seem to them now to have been their more valuable teachers. He thought the principal object of college education is to teach students to think for themselves and to be able to apply certain basic facts to continuously new problems. He said that a student's evaluation is likely to be based on a teacher's "personality" in the colloquial sense, and his ability to "deliver the goods" painlessly—yet this is not the acid test of how much a teacher has impelled the student to equip himself for problems beyond his graduation.

At the same time another faculty spokesman was sure that the student must be the best evaluator of teaching. He granted that at the lower end of a bell-shaped curve there are students whose immaturity would prevent them from seeing teacher values clearly but that the rest of the curve represents capable or very capable evaluators. Students, after all, are the consumers of the product. He, with some other students and faculty, recommends mandatory teacher rating.

Iowa State operates under a budget from the state legislature, which this year was no greater than the year before. This is a cold, hard, recurrent fact that appeared in almost every contributor's views. Some students argued that eliminating ineffective instructors should leave money to attract more effective ones. Some faculty members see many practical difficulties in such an elimination; they also point out
that to engage professors, instead of graduate students, for all freshman sections in many basic courses would be impossible in the light of an inflexible budget.

How much responsibility does the teacher have for stimulating the student to “get” the material of a course? How much responsibility does the student have? Some teachers as well as students point to a student apathy at Iowa State. Students expect to be educated by some mechanical process of exposure. Those who express this view suggest that the will to “dig” on one’s own is necessary to learning, and without this, any teaching is doomed to be unsuccessful.

Others feel that a greater share of the responsibility for creating a vital motivating interest lies with the instructor who knows the subject. Thereafter the student’s responsibility is assumed.

It may be enlightening for some students to know that in every division some organ of teacher and curriculum evaluation is operating right now, showing that the faculty is concerned with its own teaching.

The Division of Science has a revamping project which was mentioned in the winter quarter article. In the last year the Division of Engineering held a series of staff meetings in Memorial Union to discuss teaching problems. The American Society of Engineering Education has a program on an evaluation of engineering education and improvement in teaching on this campus as well as on many others.

Teaching seminars in the Division of Agriculture were re-initiated three years ago; attendance is consistently good. Students serve on departmental and divisional curriculum committees. An executive member of Agriculture Council says that students are on several standing committees for the express purpose of giving them ample opportunity to express their views about any resident teaching problems. The Core Curriculum Committee in Home Economics is a well-known student setup which does some advising to the faculty.

How well these organs work in turning student “gripes” into constructive action may depend on at least two things: first, how their actual setup facilitates grass-roots advice or representative student advice, and second, how much students use them as opportunities to make their criticisms amount to more than just “gripes.”
The editors observed this recurrent fact: that at Iowa State a great interest exists in the quality of the teaching, and that it is significant enough to be recognized by more action. These are suggestions that have come to us—once again, from among both students and faculty:

1. Initiating mandatory teacher rating on present Cardinal Guild forms.
2. Using a revised class-discussion form of teacher-rating.
3. Not relying on teacher rating at all but on constructive criticism volunteered by students to their teachers.
4. Making students more aware of what the faculty is doing to better its own teaching.
5. Recreating a fresher student attitude in place of student apathy.
6. Using existent faculty-student organs more effectively to make all grass-roots opinions available to higher-ups.

We wish to thank those faculty members and students who nobly took the initiative in putting their views on paper. We also thank those who gave their experience and their opinions in interviews. They have contributed, we hope, to a larger and more useful objective consideration of teaching at Iowa State.


20th Anniversary Dedication

The Sketch staff is proud to dedicate this 20th anniversary issue to Dr. Pearl Hogrefe, our faculty literary advisor. Dr. Hogrefe recognized the need for a literary magazine when she came to Iowa State in 1931 and it was through her efforts that Sketch was first printed in May 1934. Our very best wishes to you, Dr. Hogrefe, and many thanks for your guidance.