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The reviews are in

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THE **REVIEWS** ARE IN

PROFESSOR

SCHOOL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

AMES, IOWA

NOTES:

WHAT FACULTY REALLY THINK OF ONLINE CRITICISM

BY **ZAC NEUENDORF** DESIGN & ILLUSTRATION **MACKENZIE GEARY**

SEARCH PROFESSOR

RATE THIS CAMPUS

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Since the early 2000s RateMyProfessors.com has given students an opportunity to turn the tables and review their professors with criteria ranging from class difficulty to hotness—important gauges certainly. Bringing a Yelp sensibility to academia is meant to service the students, but possibly at the expense of a professor's reputation, which is the point.

After speaking with a few professors, we found that they were overall cynical with the execution of the site, but sympathized with why students would flock there. “I cared more I didn’t get one of the spicy hot votes than what any of the comments said,” jokes Andrew Pritchard, a professor at the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication. He feels it is important for students who peruse RateMyProfessors.com to be skeptical of the reviews. “When I have a good experience with a business my first thought isn’t to run to Yelp to tell everyone how great they were. But as soon as something bad happens, then I’m going to write the negative Yelp review.”

DEBRA GIBSON, ALSO A PROFESSOR IN GREENLEE, BEARS SIMILAR SENTIMENTS, “IT’S LIKE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR. PEOPLE AREN’T GOING TO REACH OUT TO A PUBLICATION AND TELL THEM THEY ARE DOING A GOOD JOB, BUT IF THEY HAVE AN AXE TO GRIND THEY WILL PUBLISH THEIR OPINIONS THAT OFTEN AREN’T SUPPORTIVE.”

Going over to RateMyProfessors.com with the mindset of the professor, it is easy to see why the site’s format weighs on the side of pathetic rather than useful. Most professors have a few dozen ratings at the most, dating from before 2012. Professors’ overall conduct and approach to their classes are bound to change in a five-year period, especially when the mercurial nature of updating technology has pressured professors to reimagine how they blend their course with tech.

“A truism in graduate school, which is also probably mostly true for undergrads, is that students should pick courses based on the quality of the professor at least as much as on the subject matter,” Steve Kawaler, an Iowa State astronomy professor, notes, emphasizing the well-meaning mission of RateMyProfessors.com to be an aggregate of students’ experience with an instructor. Students receive most of the dirt about professors from real-life students who have taken the course and can impart their critiques complete with facial expressions and inflection.

Universally and unsurprisingly, professors rely on course evaluations to determine students’ opinions and how to adjust

their courses accordingly, and RateMyProfessors.com reviews gets ignored completely. “When there are critical comments, there are nuggets of very helpful information for us. They might not always be couched in the nicest language,” Gibson comments about the importance of the course evaluations professors are required to give us.

As you know, course evaluations are handed out annoyingly toward the end of the semester just when the brunt of projects and studying is piling up and threatening to topple over just in time for finals. So the evaluations, which are instrumental to professor’s perspective on themselves, are skirted around like a Salvation Army volunteer outside a Wal-mart with their bell, every ring being an email reminder to “Please fill out the course evaluation.”

“Now that we do online course evaluations versus filling in the bubble sheets in class, participation just went through the floor,” Pritchard says. “Faculty will take their teaching evaluations into account, at the same time filtering them through knowing those evaluations are written by fewer students with the strongest opinions, which means you’ll get people who absolutely hated or loved the class. But the professor is trying to teach to the middle.”

The anonymity of course evaluations permits students to unleash pent-up vehemence onto their professor. “There is an extra layer in there [with anonymity] that it is an entitlement just to cut loose and criticize this person on whatever terms they want,” Pritchard continues, focusing on how these evaluations can act as just another landing pad for misogyny “I think there is a skew with the ratings female faculty members get on this and course evaluations. There are more comments about appearance and threats that I haven’t experienced or that male faculty have had to deal with.”

But professors are able to filter through the muck in order to glean constructive feedback— they just wish more students took the time to fill them out earnestly. According to Gibson, “We definitely pay attention to them. The people who employ us see those numbers and see those responses.”