Our Poor Teaching At Iowa State

Sketch Magazine∗
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Abstract

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At Iowa State

• General Complaints Against Instructors

• Report of AAUP

• Breakdown of Divisions, Departments

LAST YEAR an engineering instructor walked into the first meeting of his class, smiled and said, "Look fellows, I don’t know anything about this course — but we’ll try and learn it together. OK?

This incident, in which all student confidence and respect for the instructor were shattered — and likewise for the department and perhaps even for the division, represents what this article is to discuss: poor teaching at Iowa State.

You know, of course, that it is at classroom level that most complaints of instructors develop. Some of these complaints are peculiar to one division or one department — and we’ll discuss these later — but many are common to all your classes, no matter which department or division.

Instructors, for example, often cannot express themselves. Naturally you don’t expect every instructor to have a B.A. in English tacked to his name, but if an instructor is to communicate with his students he should pay some attention to his speaking. Some instructors speak too quietly, speak unclearly or speak toward a distant blackboard or classroom window.
Some instructors make poor use or no use of teaching aids. How often have you felt a class evolve into a film series or a blackboard drawing game? And at the other extreme, some instructors do not take advantage of teaching aids in courses where they would be particularly useful.

Some instructors lack interest in their work — a failing which is especially noticeable to students. If an instructor is teaching a course he should be interested in the material. Granted, some courses are not interesting to most people, yet if an instructor is teaching, students should feel *his* interest for the subject. And if the material being covered is not interesting, then explanation and orientation on its value should be stressed.

Some instructors set themselves above the class — probably no other attitude could more destroy and divert student interest. The fact that the instructor is up there at the head of your class implies that he knows more about it than you. Why then should he himself make this known to the class?

Some instructors give more attention to themselves than to the course material. We Iowa Staters are more-or-less normal, and most normal people are more interested in experience than in facts and procedures. Yet when we complete a course we don't want to feel the only thing we've learned is a list of an instructor's pet prejudices and experiences.

Other instructors are at fault because they do not capitalize on their experiences. Since personal experience is usually more interesting than class material, instructors should use experiences in their field as another teaching aid.

Many instructors place too much or too little emphasis on grading. True, our grading system is a subject tied in with our whole controversial educational philosophy. Yet instructors should remember that grades are only a convenient way to indicate a student's progress.

Some instructors *do* use good teaching practices, *do* show enthusiasm for the matter they are teaching, and in general *do* get good results from the class — and yet there is still something lacking. The failing here is not with the instructor, but rather the course organization and material are at fault.

Why is the whole course fouled-up, you ask. Perhaps it's because courses being taught today were designed not for your classes but for classes of twenty years ago. Or the
material in the courses is shoddily organized. Or there is overlapping and teaching of unimportant matter while valuable material is skipped. Also a course that has not been polished up for two or three decades, no matter how well it was thought out at its beginning, will become stale with teaching and re-teaching.

An example of a division giving itself a housecleaning is the Science Division’s revamping in 1949-1950. Why don’t the other divisions scrutinize, and reorganize? Even the fact that your instructors would be forced to think about changes would brighten-up courses, produce new slants, and new presentations.

Iowa State’s teaching has been kicked around before. In 1948 a panel, comprised of five students and two faculty members and sponsored by the Iowa State chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), talked over the kind of teaching which is done at Iowa State.

The panel stated that there are two types of teaching here at ISC—teaching to relay facts and teaching to stimulate thinking. Then the panel members reported “gripes” they had uncovered.

Briefly, the list of nine complaints pointed out that often students here are not told the objectives of a course, that required courses are not correlated to specific curriculums, that some instructors put themselves on an intellectual “pedestal” above the students, that slovenly personal appearance by instructors doesn’t generate confidence, that instructors fail to tell the students why material is taught, that often theory isn’t related to practice, that there are instances of too much or too little dependence on textbooks, and there is poor sectioning of classes and poor testing.

The panel members also stated the qualities they believed are essential for good instruction at Iowa State: an instructor’s interest in his subject, course organization so students feel they’re learning day-to-day, and a “good first impression” of the course—given of course by the instructor.

The panel decided three remedies would greatly help Iowa State teaching: instructor orientation courses, idea exchange among young instructors particularly, and teacher rating scales—a sore point with some students and instructors both.

If you glance at the general complaints at the first part of
this article and then at the gripes of the AAUP panel, you'll see a common characteristic: the complaints are mainly because of mechanical or organizational faults in teaching. Although there are cases of instructors having poor background, how much more often have you heard, "He knows it all right, but he sure can't get it across."

But let's look at Iowa State's specific divisions and departments.

The Division of Veterinary Medicine receives little ridicule, probably for several reasons. The division has selective student membership and requirements are stringent. When a student is accepted into the division he's thankful he's there and doesn't have to complain about how he's treated. And probably the division is doing such a good job of teaching that not many complaints arise.

Also these professionals are so gregarious that complaints are not voiced outside the clan. Another reason is the number of Vet Med students — there aren't nearly so many students to complain.

The Division of Engineering isn't so lucky. According to upperclass engineering students here, the division has been shakily resting on its laurels for many years. The rumor circulating at one time, report the same engineering students, ranked Iowa State's engineering division as third in the nation. It followed only M.I.T. and Cal Tech. The criteria used as the basis for this rumored rating were never circulated with the rumor. Recently, say the engineers, the tendency has been to soft-pedal the rating because it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify.

Although the whole apple isn't rotten, some parts are pretty badly decayed. Aeronautical Engineering is staffers with good instructors — but with far too few of them. Consequently the department, of necessity, leans on other departments that are not much stronger.

All engineering departments have a few professors who at one time were able teachers. Now, due to repetitive teaching of the same material, they've lost enthusiasm. Due to this and other purely physical failings they're no longer top-notch instructors. They apparently lack industrial experience or have been away from industry so long they've lost sight of the practical aspects.

Ex-research men are common in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. These former researchers were pressed
into teaching or have been retained from year-to-year because of the present shortage of engineering instructors. These men seem to have no desire to teach. Such weak points must be as obvious to the faculty as to the students. So say Iowa State engineering students.

The Division of Home Economics is the subject of complaints and, although much of the fault-finding is directed toward individuals, co-eds do give complaints about departments.

The Child Development Department is mentioned for instances of unreasonably low-grading — with no later explanations for the low marks. Also this department is accused of spending much time in detailed study of what students call superfluous material. The Department of Textiles and Clothing is also accused of teaching unimportant (at least to the students) details.

The Foods and Nutrition Department keeps students in something akin to terror, report Iowa State women who have taken meal planning courses. In some of the classes students are afraid to ask questions — because the instructors get angry when the students reveal that they don't know some material covered in the course.

Although criticism of Home Economics does single out individuals, women students explain that often one or two individuals in a department represent a trait of the department. This is true because the particular instructors have been leaders of the department for many years.

The Division of Agriculture, according to a student in that division, seems to be a "catch-all" for Iowa State students looking for an easy bachelor's degree.

An offender in the Division of Agriculture is, paradoxically enough, the department teaching teaching: the Department of Vocational Education. Iowa Staters say that many courses overlap and that what seem to be unimportant details are studied.

A complaint against the Department of Animal Husbandry is that a student from a city — a so-called "city slicker" — can graduate with a degree in AH without having the solid foundation which is a practical knowledge of farms and farm life. Another complaint is that some AH 400 courses are "elementary" and should be shifted down to the 100 or 200 level.

The Science Division's recent overhauling was a great im-
provement, but instances of poor instruction still exist.

Freshman chemistry for Iowa State students is taught this way: a Ph.D. chemist gives a one-hour lecture once each week to a large section. Twice a week students are in recitation led by a graduate student who holds a teaching fellowship. The four hours of lab work each week are proctored by graduate students. In other words, the major part of the teaching burden belongs to the graduate students. Usually grad students have no teaching experience before they come to Iowa State, and they're primarily interested in graduating—not in their students. Often they are occupied with research and feel justified in doing a poor job of teaching.

A similar situation exists in the Mathematics Department, except here teaching assignments are given to students who don't even have a bachelor's degree! These undergraduate mathematics majors teach some elementary math courses. Does any undergraduate have the maturity and experience to teach? What is worse is that these undergrads are teaching new students who are attempting to gain fundamental knowledge—they need the best instructors available.

The Physics Department, until recently, had a comparable problem. Now that instruction has been reorganized, there are small lecture sections where students ask and answer questions. Better instruction results.

The English Department instruction could be improved by frequent shuffling of teacher talent. Also some English instructors, perhaps because of the subjective nature of the material, expound on their private attitudes and ideas.

Military Department instruction is, with few exceptions, extremely poor. The problem here is that the teachers are officers or enlisted men, not teachers at all. To them Iowa State is just another duty assignment—yesterday a ROTC instructor may have had Officer-of-the-Day duty at Fort Leonard Wood; tomorrow he may command a motor pool at Okinawa. Today he's teaching in college. Probably first and second year ROTC courses are especially bad.

The preceding criticisms perhaps attack some groups too severely and leave others, which deserve fault-finding, untouched. But the criticisms seem to be generally held true by many Iowa State students. Any good which results from cri-
tism comes not from the criticisms itself, but from the changes which result.

And in many cases the faults mentioned could be corrected. One professor, when told that instruction in his particular engineering department was poor, retorted, "Well, we can't have all All-Americans on the team." We should, however, be able to raise the complete set of standards. If we can't have all All-Americans we at least should be able to join a "better league."

—the editors