

Are You as Good a Teacher as You Think?

by Paul C. Price

A survey of professors at the University of Nebraska a number of years ago showed that 94 percent of them thought they were better than average teachers at their own institution.¹ Assuming a reality that puts the true value at somewhere near 50 percent, this survey suggests a rather stunning lack of self-insight among the professoriate. If you're an experienced college teacher, you're probably having one of three reactions to this finding. One is indifference. You might shrug it off, attributing it to faulty survey methods, the ambiguity of the concept "average," or perhaps some peculiarity of our Cornhusker colleagues. A second is amusement. As one of the 50 percent who really are better than average, you might be reminded of some less competent co-worker who absolutely swears by a clearly ineffective teaching approach. A third is concern. You always thought you were better than average, but now you might start to wonder. Perhaps your teaching skills are not what you've always imagined them to be.

Unfortunately, the most appropriate reaction—concern—is also the least likely, because people's tendency to think of themselves as better than average extends to their ability to avoid such biases.² "Sure other people overestimate their traits and abilities, but I would never do that." See the problem? Concern is appropriate, however, because there is a great deal of evidence from social-cognitive psychology that pretty much anyone who isn't clinically depressed systematically overesti-

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mates his or her own traits and abilities in a wide variety of domains.³ Furthermore, the nature of college teaching makes it especially prone to such overestimation for reasons that I describe below. A second reason that we, as college teachers, should be concerned by this result is that recognizing our shortcomings is a prerequisite for improvement and, perhaps surprisingly, can be tremendously motivating.

There is plenty of evidence from my own area of research, social judgment, for the better-than-average effect mentioned above. People judge themselves to

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be friendlier, better drivers, and at lower risk for disease than their peers.⁴ One important reason for this is that people tend to get caught up in thinking about themselves and fail to think much, if at all, about their peers. When asked to judge their own level of friendliness, for example, most people think about the number of friends they have, occasions on which they behaved in a friendly manner, and so on. As a result, they conclude that they must be friendlier than average. The problem is that they've failed to consider the fact that most people have lots of friends and often behave in a friendly manner. So to be in, say, the 90th percentile of friendliness, you would have to be a lot friendlier than you probably realize. Interestingly, this kind of "excessive self-focus" is the same reason that people have a strong tendency to judge themselves to be worse than average at difficult skills.⁵ I have found that most of my students judge themselves to be below average at remembering people's names. Because they have difficulty remembering names, they conclude that they must be worse than average. They forget to consider, or are unaware, that most people have difficulty remembering names.

That excessive self-focus should be especially pronounced among college instructors evaluating their teaching skills should not be surprising. Despite the fact that many of us are literally surrounded by colleagues at work, college teaching is a fairly solitary profession. Many of us decide, by ourselves, what courses to teach, how to organize them, what materials to use, what assignments and exams to give. We lecture and consult with students by ourselves. We work long hours sequestered in our offices or at home, learning about our fields, preparing lectures, grading. As a result, when we think about how good we are, we tend to focus almost exclusively on our own efforts. The fact that many of our colleagues, perhaps most, are working just as hard escapes our notice.

As a corrective for excessive self-focus in the teaching realm, we should prob-

ably go to greater lengths to find out what our colleagues are doing. Check out their syllabi, talk to them about their courses, and even sit in occasionally. I also like to remind myself of my colleagues' accomplishments. By the time I finish this particular exercise, I find that my mental percentile rank among my peers has fallen considerably.

Another important reason that people tend to think they're better than average has to do with the fact that in many domains, goodness can be defined in a variety of ways, allowing people to choose whatever definition maximizes their

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own.⁶ Again, friendliness provides a good example. For the extrovert, friendliness might mean a willingness to start up a conversation at a party, so the extrovert is above average. For the introvert, it can mean the closeness of one's friendships, so the introvert is also above average. Not surprisingly, the better-than-average effect tends to be observed more for traits and skills with fuzzy definitions (friendliness, for example) than for traits and skills with obvious objective definitions and measures (running speed, for example).

What about teaching skill? There is no question that giving entertaining lectures is an important component of the definition—for entertaining lecturers. Establishing rapport with one's students is a key element—for those who are good at establishing rapport. In other words, teaching skill is fuzzy. Of course there's a lot to be said for playing to one's strengths, but strengths imply weaknesses. If you give extremely well organized lectures but are not especially good at giving usable feedback to students, it clearly isn't fair to weight the former more heavily than the latter in your self-evaluations. Even as your lecturing skill struggles to lift you above the 50th percentile, your inability to give usable feedback is dragging you back down by the ankles. Thus, we need to be ever mindful of the multi-dimensional nature of teaching skill and of our weaknesses as well as our strengths. For purposes of becoming better teachers, awareness of our weaknesses is probably more important because there's so much more room for improvement.

Some college teachers try to avoid a real analysis of their strengths and weaknesses—and working on the weaknesses—by deciding that they play a particular role within their department, and that only some dimensions of good teaching are relevant to that role. A veteran professor might decide that because other faculty in the department use cooperative learning techniques and provide a variety of pedagogical activities for their students, it is in his students' interest for him to teach a

“good old-fashioned college course,” featuring nothing but heavy doses of lecture, textbook reading, and traditional exams. Alternatively, in a department full of such veteran professors, a freewheeling young assistant professor might decide that her primary role should be to “model critical thinking in the classroom” by doing little other than discussing controversial issues.

One problem here is that, as discussed above, college teachers often don’t have a clear idea of what’s going on in their colleagues’ classrooms and therefore have little basis (beyond their own preferences) for choosing their roles. A more fundamental problem is that there’s no obvious justification for the idea that teaching courses that ignore important pedagogical elements (active student participation, structured activities) is better for students than teaching courses that include those elements, regardless of the departmental context. I fear that the adoption of such roles—especially when undertaken by individual faculty without consideration at the department level—is often nothing more than a sophisticated way to avoid confronting our weaknesses.

A different kind of problem that also contributes to college teachers’ rose-colored views of their own teaching skills is the lack of unambiguous, unbiased feedback on the quality of those skills. But, you might ask, how can this be, given that college teachers must be among the most thoroughly evaluated professionals there are? For example, my teaching is observed by a colleague in my department twice per semester and is also formally evaluated by my students on 18 separate dimensions. My students evaluate me informally, too, and I receive feedback in the form of direct comments from them and indirect ones through the grapevine, and also via outlets like ratemyprofessors.com. Finally, my students’ performance on



assignments, quizzes, and exams provide an important kind of information about whether or not I am actually getting through to them. Shouldn't all this feedback give me an excellent sense of exactly how my teaching stacks up? Sadly, it doesn't.

As psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated, social feedback tends to be incredibly misleading. Social psychologist David Sears has studied what he calls the "person-positivity bias"—people's tendency to evaluate other people positively in the absence of any good reason not to.⁷ In an examination of student evaluations of their professors at UCLA, comprising literally hundreds of thousands of ratings, Sears found that the average was 7.22 on a nine-point scale. This is well

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above the midpoint of five, which was designated "average" on the evaluation forms. Undoubtedly, the person-positivity bias is reflected in peer evaluations of teaching too. On my department's five-point rating scale, receiving anything less than a five from a colleague is a rarity. Thus, the better-than-average effect extends beyond judgments about the self to judgments about almost any individual. As a result, these kinds of student and peer evaluations tend to confirm our inflated views of our own abilities. A better interpretation of your rating of six on a seven-point scale, then, is that you have no extremely obvious shortcomings. That's a long way from being a superstar.

A related issue is that positive feedback is much more likely to come to our attention than negative feedback. When you were a college student, you might have told a professor how interesting his or her lectures were, but you almost certainly never told one that he or she bored you senseless. Likewise, you probably raised your hand when you were pretty sure you were about to say something correct or insightful, but you kept it down when you were unsure, confused, or just zoning out. Even when negative feedback comes along, we have a tendency to ignore it, discount it, or even explain it away.⁸ The student who understands a new concept seems to justify our teaching methods, but the one who is confused does not call those methods into doubt. Similarly, while we take positive student comments as accurate reflections of our teaching ability, we tend to take the negative comments—those that do manage to come to our attention—as the misguided ramblings of a few malcontents. For me, and I suspect many others, such negative student reactions are among the most upsetting experiences in college teaching, which may explain why I would prefer to ignore or explain them away. But there is a cost to doing so, because those negative reactions just might indicate

where I can improve the most.

What about the feedback provided by student performance? Surely this is more objective? Yes, but another thing that I've learned in 10 years of teaching is that college students are incredibly good at seeming to have learned stuff. Their strategy for doing so generally involves dealing with difficult concepts by developing stereotyped responses based on the surface features of the questions and problems we pose to them. In psychology, for instance, most students learn the basics of null hypothesis testing in a data analysis or research methods course. They dutifully learn to identify the null hypothesis, compute a test statistic, and check it


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against a critical value—declaring results statistically significant or not. This gives the appearance that they actually understand what “statistically significant” means.

But I dare you to ask them directly. If they're able to respond at all, chances are it will be something like, “It means you've rejected the null hypothesis.” This sounds like they understand, but now try asking them what “reject the null hypothesis” means. You'll eventually discover that in most cases the fundamental idea—that they're trying to decide whether a sample result reflects something that is true of a larger population—has been lost on them. And of course this is largely our own fault. If understanding what “statistically significant” means is an important learning objective (especially if it's a difficult one), then we should not be satisfied with such indirect demonstrations of it. A better approach would be to set up a null hypothesis of our own—that students are not learning—and then look diligently for indications that they aren't. That is, after all, where the real teaching opportunities lie.

I should add that I never realized how easy it is to assume that learning is taking place until I converted my research methods course from a lecture format to a cooperative learning one a few years ago. In the cooperative learning format, students spend most of their class time working in small groups on activities related to the day's topic. So when I finally shut up for a while and started listening to my students and observing them work with the material, I found that concepts that I used to breeze through in 10 minutes of lecture and then assumed they had mastered were actually taking them an entire class session simply to get a feel for. I recommend this approach, therefore, not only for its well known benefits for the students, but because of the often surprising feedback it provides instructors.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that I've convinced you to accept my premise that you're not as good a teacher as you think. What's the point? After all, scholars from a variety of fields—philosophy, psychoanalysis, and evolutionary biology among them—have argued that this kind of self-deception may be functional. One contemporary view in psychology is that being unrealistically optimistic about one's traits, abilities, and level of control over the environment is an important component of good mental health.⁹ The idea is that such positive illusions keep us happy and motivated, while seeing ourselves as we really are would be depressing and demotivational. In the context of teaching, it seems likely that a college professor who believes that she is doing an amazingly good job and that her students are growing by leaps and bounds probably also works hard, is enthusiastic, and persists through the tough times.

But what if I'm able to convince this professor that she is actually no better than her peers, has important weaknesses as a teacher, and her students are failing to master many fundamental ideas and skills? Will she find this to be so depressing and demotivating that she stops working hard on her teaching, shifts her focus to research or administration, or gets out of academia altogether? I'm pretty sure the answer is no, as long as she realizes that no one is really as good as he or she thinks. In fact, the professor I just described will now be one up on many of her colleagues because she is in a position to become the amazingly good teacher that she once thought she was (or at least move in that direction). She will now be interested in observing her colleagues more closely, giving some thought to her weaknesses as a teacher, and actively probing for what her students don't know and can't do. Once she reaches this point, there's no shortage of information available on approaches and techniques for improving her teaching. The difficulty is getting to this point. When we accept the proposition that we're not as good as we think, we're already considerably better than we were. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cross, "Not Can But Will College Teaching Be Improved," 1977.
- ² Pronin et al., "The Bias Blind Spot," 2002.
- ³ Dunning et al., "Flawed Self-Assessment," 2004.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Kruger, "Lake Wobegone Be Gone!" 1999.
- ⁶ Dunning et al., "Ambiguity and Self-Evaluation," 1989.
- ⁷ Sears, "The Person-Positivity Bias," 1983.
- ⁸ Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," 1990.
- ⁹ Taylor and Brown, "Positive Illusions and Well-Being," 1988.

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