

A time to reflect?

Professor Stephanie Rae entered her room and let her stack of papers and books hit the desk with a satisfying thud. Reclining in her chair, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief. She had finally seen the back of the postgraduate research methods course for the term and could now get back to her 'real' work, as she saw it, by concentrating on a major new research grant proposal. The students had not been an easy group this year.

Stephanie had been appointed as a professor in Health Sciences at The University of Broadlands four years ago, having established an international reputation for her research work on evidence-based health care. Her busy professional life left her little time for other things, although Stephanie had always been a committed member of the Church of England. The research methods course was her only formal teaching commitment in addition to master's and doctoral supervision. Much of the rest of her time was spent working on various research projects, speaking at conferences, writing for publication and editing a major journal in her specialist field. However, although she had just finished teaching the research methods course, there was the little matter of the student evaluation questionnaires to consider. Sitting at her desk, Stephanie started to skim casually through the questionnaires which she had collected from the students at the end of the last session of her course. Departmental and university procedures required staff to evaluate their teaching and Stephanie's department used a standard questionnaire for all postgraduate courses. Lecturers (and professors!) are expected to collect this information, analyse the results and include this in their annual course report. While she could give these evaluations to one of the department's administrators to analyse, she usually felt a little embarrassed about letting someone else see them.

Reading the comments of her students, Stephanie became increasingly concerned. There were positives but quite a few complaints about 'boring readings' which were 'too theoretical'. There were also unfavourable comparisons made between Stephanie's approach and the way another, more junior colleague made lecture notes available on the Web and provided

handouts of lecture slides in advance. Stephanie, though, had qualms about 'spoon feeding' the students in this way. There were also irritatingly low 'scores' from a minority of students who claimed not to understand the assessment process even though she had explained at length the role of this process in the course handbook. They were probably, Stephanie guessed, poor attenders who had got a low mark in their first assignment, a project proposal. Finally, following a teaching observation carried out by a colleague the previous term, she had tried to be 'innovative', with the encouragement of the university's Educational Development Unit, by getting the students to assess each other during oral presentations of research project outlines.

However, several of the students complained that they were fed up with being used as 'guinea pigs' or being 'experimented on'. One student commented that 'Lecturers are paid to assess our work. Why on earth should we do it!' Momentarily, Stephanie felt tempted to dump some of the more unfair evaluations in the bin but wondered, resisting the urge, what she ought to do about the critical comments. She certainly did not have the time to spend ages rewriting the course with her research workload.

Recalling the last departmental committee meeting, she knew that 'quality' procedures had recently been overhauled and she was obliged to show in her 'action plan' how she would respond to these comments.

The charismatic lecturer

Stephanie was still wondering how she ought to respond to this set of critical evaluations as she made her way over to observe a lecture, by pre-arrangement with a colleague, as part of the department's 'quality enhancement' procedures. This required, among other things, reciprocal observations with a different colleague each academic year. Stephanie had certainly found it an eye-opener and had learnt a lot, she felt, in the process. The lecture turned out to be highly engaging and accomplished in many respects. It was well prepared and the students responded

enthusiastically. They clearly found the lecturer, Max Schaefer, quite a charismatic speaker and, in fact, she knew that his course was extremely popular as he regularly got 'rave reviews' from students. However, Stephanie had qualms about its highly political nature. Max was overtly critical of a number of researchers and 'rubbished', she felt, the government's health-care research agenda. While he made a number of valid points, she was worried about over-generalizations which the students were apparently lapping up. When it came to questions from students towards the end, none of these sought to challenge the highly contentious nature of his lecture. She wondered, perhaps somewhat uncharitably, how well students would be treated if they wrote an essay or other assignment that took issue with his line of argument. While Stephanie needed to give Max some feedback following the observation, she knew, from previous contact with him, that he did not take kindly to criticism and that he was a firm believer in 'letting students know where I am coming from'. Looking at the teaching observation form she needed to fill in about 'pace of delivery', 'use of audiovisual equipment, etc, there was certainly no need to raise the issue on paper.
