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The Authority of the Student Evaluation Questionnaire

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ABSTRACT The student evaluation questionnaire is a method of student feedback compatible with assumptions about effective organisational control contained recent higher educational policy texts and guidelines issued by statutory agencies. It is also coherent with the criteria for, and is conducive to the means of, external scrutiny of institutional management procedures. One of the many objectives set for the student evaluation questionnaire is to facilitate the lecturer's professional development in teaching. This article argues that the assumptions that underpin the student evaluation questionnaire and the claims made for it within developmental research on this method of student feedback require substantial critical analysis. With reference to the views of two lecturers, the article concludes that the contemporary use of the student evaluation questionnaire as a means of summative and comparative appraisal has several negative implications for lecturers' understandings of teaching and their professional self-development as teachers.

Recent UK government policy advocates the generation of students' feedback on courses, teaching and learning as 'good practice' in respect of institutional arrangements for enhancing and monitoring educational provision. The authority, assumptions and specifications of this policy context has advanced the use of the student evaluation questionnaire such that it is the dominant method employed to gather information from students (Silver, 1992; Husbands & Fosh, 1993; Clouder, 1998). The status and authority of the student evaluation questionnaire method of generating student feedback is contingent on its widespread use. Yet, whilst this method conforms to the specifications of recommended institutional practice contained in government policy texts and guidelines issued by statutory bodies, it stands in tension with many of the objectives for student feedback that are articulated in these same documents. This article investigates this conundrum in respect of one of these objectives: the use of student feedback for the professional development of lecturers' practice as teachers. It focuses firstly on the policy context that conceptualises and advances the questionnaire method of student feedback; secondly, it examines the status of claims about the potential of the student evaluation questionnaire contained in research that promotes its use; and thirdly, by reference to the views of two lecturers it raises three sets of questions. These concern the assumptions that

underpin research and policy claims; the impact of the student evaluation questionnaire on lecturers' concepts of 'good teaching', and the implications of contemporary uses of the student evaluation questionnaire for lecturers' engagement with professional self-development.

An Authoritative Context

The context of documents that make reference to student feedback is an increasingly assertive and expansive government policy programme for the reform of the public sector (Pollitt, 1993; Ferlie *et al.*, 1996; Clarke & Newman, 1997); in higher education this programme is symbolised by the concept of 'quality'. The concept of 'quality' signals the introduction of structures, tools and discourses informed by both a market ideology, and a bureaucratic-rational concept of institutional management. Market orientated flexibility and responsiveness of service provision contrasts, and often stands in considerable tension with, the Weberian trappings of management strategies and procedures for 'public' accountability; whilst the former is a legitimating rhetoric, the latter provides the machinery for intrusive regulation of the higher education sector and its institutions. 'Quality' is an 'hurrah' word (Barnett, 1992); it is a device that glosses the detail of policy with positive overtones of virtue, at the same time as it is a device used to name and implement (Wilkinson & Willmott, 1995; Kirkpatrick & Martinez-Lucio, 1995) new structures, relationships and mechanisms orientated to government authorised external leverage. 'Quality' implies a lack of trust in, and questions the authority of, the academic profession (Trow, 1993) at the same time as it changes the conditions and practices of academic work and undermines the authority of academic expertise. 'Quality' is a slippery rhetoric of empowerment, excellence, enhancement, efficiency, accountability, and 'service' that has been imposed upon tightly defined and closely observed managerial procedures. The rhetoric of 'quality' diverts attention from its own implication in the operation of mechanisms that serve powerful interests. Yet these same mechanisms often *contradict* and *conflict* with many of the objectives—rhetorical and implicit—they are designed to fulfil.

The objectives of mechanisms that 'monitor and evaluate' (HEQC, 1994a, p. xv) educational provision are both diverse in rhetorical focus and narrow in intent. As one such mechanism, student feedback is advanced in the following ways:

- (1) it is a means to ensure 'high standards of teaching' (DES, 1987, p. 18);
- (2) it is information to be used for the purposes of public accountability and, simultaneously, it is information for employers and prospective students that can be used to stimulate competition between institutions (DES, 1991, p. 24);
- (3) it is a means by which students can register their views and complaints about the standard and management of teaching provision (DfE, 1993, pp. 3, 12);
- (4) it is summative information that can be used by managers for the appraisal of the performance of individual lecturers against expected standards defined at institutional level (HEQC, 1994a, p. xv);

- (5) it generates information to be scrutinised by managers for comparative analysis of standards obtained across the institution, or for analysis against (what are taken to be) students' expectations of both the institution and their experience within it (HEQC, 1994b, pp. 12, 18, 19, 21).

The *Guidelines for Quality Assurance* (HEQC, 1996a, pp. 30–32) recommend the use of student feedback as 'good practice' in respect of the institutional management of course improvement (Section 4 part 3.2iii), the enhancement of the students' experience (Section 4 part 4.1), and the development of professional teaching staff (Section 4 part 4.2). In this document the student's willingness and capacity to give feedback is articulated, respectively, as both a responsibility and a mark of their progression as a learner (Section 4 part 4.3). Student feedback is thus a means to monitor and evaluate activities and processes of teaching and learning such that evaluation practices and all individuals concerned are subject to internal institutional control procedures and external scrutiny and judgement.

Within these documents student feedback is connected, explicitly and implicitly, with a concept of 'communication'. Close examination reveals that the 'communication' that student feedback facilitates is conceptualised as a system of procedures that articulate and constitute organisational structure:

Section 6: student communication and representation

... Communication, here means the creation and use of systems, processes and channels which operate throughout the organisational structure for the exchange of information and ideas concerning quality control, quality assurance mechanisms and their implementation. At a formal level communication can take the form of representation.... In creating effective channels of communication, an institution should give consideration to

- the balance between formal, often documentary-based, communication systems and informal, often oral systems;
- how it regulates and promotes the flow of communication through the channels it has established, to allow and to encourage two-way traffic. (HEQC, 1996a, p. 41.)

This concept of 'communication' is configured such that it is compatible with an idea of the university as a bureaucratic-rational organisation (c.f. Miller, 1995, p. 98). The system of procedures is assumed effective in structuring and organising human activity through the specification of hierarchical command and control processes and techniques. Formal, explicit and documented means of regulation are legitimate to the extent that they are requirements devised by those with instituted authority.

The concept of 'communication' implies an idea of the university that is impersonal and reliant on technical, rational mechanisms of control. It is an idea of 'communication' devoid of social or educational implication. It stands in tension with an understanding of the university as an organisation structured by, and

constituted through, social or educational processes—processes that are grounded in inter-personal interaction and exchange between the individuals and groups that engage and operate within each institutional context. The following extract, in which the concept of ‘communication’ is configured as loose, in explicit and socially contingent processes, highlights that such ‘communication’ is considered a problem. The solution is greater formalised clarification of procedures:

The Responsibilities of Individual Faculty Members

It was frequently reported that institutions relied to a large extent on a positive and responsive community culture to enable active and effective feedback. This often meant the availability of individual faculty members, for example, through ‘open-door’ policies, to receive students and take action on issues raised. However, this led to problems in terms of effective and timely response to informal communications. Even where formalised arrangements for feedback existed, it was noted that responsibilities for subsequent quality improvement might require clarification. (HEQC, 1996b, p. 54.)

When considered against this context it is perhaps not surprising that the student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ) has obtained the status as the dominant means of researching students’ views of courses, teaching and learning in contemporary UK higher education. The imperatives of institutional management are neither the promotion of inter-personal dialogue between students and lecturers, nor the development of inclusive, participative democracy, nor even the fast flow of an intimate, responsive exchange conducive to commercial, consumer service-cultures. Managerial imperatives are the development of a form of student feedback that can be ‘systematically organised on an institution-wide basis’ (HEQC, 1996b, p. 10), monitored, documented and ultimately produced as evidence of ‘good practice’ in respect of institutional organisation, control and management during external inspection by Quality Audit and Quality Assessment:

Quality Audit

The auditors scrutinise quality assurance procedures used in relation to: the design, monitoring and evaluation of courses and degree programmes; teaching, learning and communications methods; student assessment and degree classification; academic staff; verification and feedback mechanisms. (HEQC, 1995, p. 3.)

Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Key Features

- Evidence from HEQC audit.
- Subject provider-level internal quality assurance (for example, cur-

riculum or course review, feedback mechanisms) and linkage with institution-wide quality assurance ...

Relationships with: ...

- Indicators/measures of effectiveness. (HEFCE, 1995, p. 20.)

First and foremost the authority of the SEQ is contingent on its contemporary policy context; it is commensurate with an ideologically informed and politically motivated concept of the purpose, organisation and management of higher education. The SEQ serves the exigency of internal institutional management at a time when this is conceptualised and oriented in respect of government interests, beliefs and values.

The Assumptions and Constraints of the Questionnaire and the Authority of Concepts of ‘Good Teaching’ and ‘Professional Development’

SEQs come in many formats, and vary in the demands made of students in terms of forms of response. Formats might be ‘tick-box’ forms that are available to computerised analysis, they might be constructed in consultation with students or contain spaces for qualitative commentary. In general, students are asked typically to rank, on scales from ‘very poor’ to ‘highly satisfactory’, from 1 to 10, or from –2 to +2, various variables taken to be essential to teaching and learning. A questionnaire design is considered valid if it generates responses against each set of variables that show a high degree of reliability when aggregated across groups of students. In the contemporary context for the use of the SEQ, a particular design becomes more useful to the extent that it can be used systematically and widely for standardised summative appraisal of individuals, and for comparative appraisal of groups of lecturers.

The SEQ method of evaluation does not allow students and lecturers to discuss, evidence, explain, justify, negotiate, or gain new insights into their own or the others’ views, interests, values and assumptions during the process of the evaluative activity.

It devalues the subjective quality of personal opinion and experience because it holds subjectivity to be a problem; both parties’ implication in the results obtained, or both parties’ interests and concerns about the substantive content of a question, about the results obtained or about the use made of them are reduced to a matter of ‘potential bias’. The questionnaire format implies that evaluation process is not a reflective, mutual learning experience, nor one in which a student’s or lecturer’s individual views and reasoning have high value.

Good Teaching

The SEQ method implies a view that the concept of ‘teaching’ is a single phenomenon that might be identified by a set of discrete elements and characteristics. Before a questionnaire can be constructed, what is understood to be ‘good teaching’ has to be identified and defined. The variables that students are required to rank on a

particular SEQ reflect the concept of ‘good teaching’ under investigation. Yet if questionnaires are standardised across a group of lecturers or across the whole institution, the concept of ‘good teaching’ is not then defined personally by the individual lecturer. Rather, the identification of the essential characteristics and defining features of ‘good teaching’ is conceptualised as a problem for empirical research by those who construct the questionnaire. Moreover, the questionnaire implies a generic notion of ‘good teaching’, typically this is a disaggregated set of component techniques. This concept of ‘good teaching’ contrasts with the ideas that what constitutes ‘teaching’ is a philosophical, value-led, discipline-specific and open question, and that this question might be repeatedly addressed and debated by each teacher as part of their own continuing professional development. The construct of a standard questionnaire dislocates the question, concept and practice of what is ‘good teaching’ from the control and interests of ‘the knowing subjects’ (Habermas, 1978, p. 67) who teach. Finally, the questionnaire, and the process of completion implies that students, as the ‘knowing subjects’ who experience teaching do not participate with each other or with their lecturers in reflection on, redefinition of, and expression of what, for them, might be ‘good teaching’.

Professional Development

The high status and dominance of the SEQ method imply and reinforce a message that a defining set of elements and characteristics of ‘good teaching’ is available, is to be identified by those who claim exclusive, expert interest and knowledge about the nature of ‘good teaching’, and is closed to challenge. The lecturer is effectively de-skilled—beyond the extent to which s/he might also be confused if results collected are not compatible with his or her own interests in or views about ‘good teaching’. Moreover, the concept of ‘professional development’ is reduced to a process of receiving and reacting to summative measures, where the measures are treated as facts, not questions, and are assumed sufficiently meaningful and informative on face value. The consequences of the ‘closure’ of the concept of ‘good teaching’, of the set of criteria appraised, and of the means advanced as best practice in evaluation, are that the professional lecturer is not required to draw on or develop a questioning, reflective attitude towards the idea of teaching, and is not required to draw on or refine a diverse range of research skills. This approach to researching and re-assessing teaching is a paradox within a profession in which critical thinking and analytical research skills are qualities that one might assume in the professional academic, and expect them to want to employ.

The Authority of the Questionnaire Method

The field of research into the SEQ is often described as ‘voluminous’ (Feldman, 1996, p. 1) or ‘enormous’ (Wachtel, 1998, p. 191). In the US, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the SEQ was employed to produce information to be used by managers for the appraisal, promotion and tenure of academic staff. Since that time, research interests have spanned both technical and ethical considerations,

focused primarily on the design, construct and testing of different SEQs, so that these produce results both equitable and suited to these managerial purposes. Owing to the use made of the information, it is perhaps understandable that there has been a high degree of interest in issues such as the factors that influence students' judgements, in whether these factors constitute unfair biases or reflect what are considered the essentials and effects of 'good teaching', and in the degree to which results obtained represent different lecturer's teaching work in a consistent and uniform manner.

Contemporary research work in the UK and Australia draws on this US research base; the focus of research interests is similar, yet is shaped by the contextual circumstances that themselves motivate such research activity. This research focuses on the design and application of the SEQ for the purposes of producing summative information about teaching, courses and the students' experience that facilitates comparative judgement both by managers within an institution and by those who assess institutional performance in national accountability exercises. There is, however, little critical appraisal of why the questionnaire is used so widely. Instead, much of this research on the SEQ is premised on the argument that, *because* the collection of students' opinions via questionnaires is the most widely tested means of investigating teaching, the SEQ approach is the authoritative methodology and most effective tool of evaluation in higher education.

However, Herbert Marsh, a leading figure in both the US and Australian/UK fields of work concerning the credibility of the SEQ, has always been perplexed:

opinions about the role of students' evaluations vary from 'reliable, valid and useful' to 'unreliable, invalid and useless'. How can opinions vary so drastically in an area which has been the subject of thousands of studies? (Marsh, 1984, p. 708.)

Marsh's peers consider his reviews of research on the SEQ to be 'careful, critical and reflective' (Feldman, 1996, p. 2). Citations from his work are frequently used as an acceptable legitimisation of further research work on the SEQ. Marsh adopts a generally positive position on his own scale of equivocation; his 'tempered conclusions' (Feldman, 1996, p. 2) are grounded on deliberative argument, as opposed to conclusive research evidence. His opinion has remained stable over time:

Research described in this article demonstrates that student ratings are clearly multidimensional, quite reliable, reasonably valid, relatively uncontaminated by many variables often seen as sources of bias, and are seen to be useful by students, faculty, and administrators. However the same findings also demonstrate that student ratings may have some halo effect, have at least some unreliability, have only modest agreement with some criteria of effective teaching, are probably affected by some potential sources of bias and are viewed with some skepticism by faculty as a basis for personnel decisions. (Marsh, 1984, pp. 749; 1987, p. 369.)

He is peremptory in advising that use of the SEQ be cautious and differential:

In future research a construct validation approach should be used in which

it is recognized that effective teaching and students' evaluations designed to reflect it are multi-faceted, that there is no single criterion of effective teaching, and that tentative interpretations of relations with validity criteria and with potential biases must be scrutinized in different contexts and examine multiple criteria of effective teaching. (Marsh, 1984, p. 707)

Marsh (1984, p. 708) suggests that the controversial status of the SEQ is a product of the 'preconceived biases' of researchers in the field, 'unrealistic expectations of what student evaluations can and should be able to do', 'fragmentary' research and design of a 'plethora of *ad hoc* instruments', and because,

University faculty have little or no formal training in teaching, yet find themselves in a position where their salary or even their job may depend on their classroom teaching skills. Any procedure used to evaluate teaching effectiveness would prove to be threatening and highly criticized. The threat is exacerbated by the realization that there are no clearly defined criteria of effective teaching.

The 'considerable debate' about student ratings is a product of fear and the character of 'the academic profession, in which faculty members are better trained to find counter-explanations for a wide variety of phenomena than to teach' (Marsh, 1984, p. 749).

Marsh's considerable caution is directed at his own peers and yet his critique is drawn in terms of his own research paradigm; to the degree his comments are salient they neither raise a challenge to the SEQ approach nor question whether teaching is rightly conceptualised as, or available to definition as, a set of discrete dimensions. Marsh called for 'further scrutiny' into the SEQ (1984, p. 750); such continuation-work is in general limited to investigations of the weaknesses of SEQ constructs and contention over dimensions of the required definition of 'effective teaching'.

The Authority of Research Justification

It is significant that reports of 'further scrutiny' into the SEQ frequently cite selectively from Marsh's equivocal conclusions and thus offer an unbalanced representation of Marsh's work. This crude appropriation of his work also sheds Marsh's own sense of the educational implication of the SEQ, sheds his consequential caution about both the validity of a generic, standardised questionnaire construct, underplays Marsh's view of the complexity of defining 'effective teaching', and does not reflect his doubts about the SEQ's potential to give comprehensive, consistent insight into teaching.

Marsh argues that the least appropriate use of student ratings is as a summative judgement for purposes that might incur potential pecuniary or personal penalty. Shannon *et al.* (1996, p. 42) note that Marsh advocates that 'feedback from student evaluations should be diagnostic (Marsh, 1987)'. That is, this information should provide faculty with a profile of their strengths and weaknesses, and be useful in working toward the improvement of their teaching'. Marsh warns:

Despite the generally supportive research findings, student ratings should

be used cautiously, and there should be other forms of systematic input about teaching effectiveness, particularly when they are used for tenure/promotion decisions. (Marsh, 1984, p. 749)

Ramsden's (1991) reference to Marsh's work lends the impression that Marsh is categorical in his support for the SEQ, and gives no indication of Marsh's hesitant deliberations about the validity and implications of its use in summative appraisals:

Marsh (1987) carried out a definitive review of the massive literature on the use of student evaluations and their relation to teaching effectiveness.... Discussions of the North American and Australian literature on student evaluation such as those of Marsh (1987) [and others] ... attest to the usefulness and accuracy of student evaluation of instruction in comparison with other measures such as peer evaluations ... The general consensus is that there is no other single measure of teaching performance which is as potentially valid. (Ramsden, 1991, pp. 131–132)

Whilst Marsh implies a general assumption that dimensions of effective teaching might be identified, he is emphatic in his advice that such dimensions will be so intricately multi-faceted and that relationships between variables so highly context dependent that the idea of a standard questionnaire is mistaken. Yet Ramsden claims that the dimensions of 'good teaching' are not so intensely diverse, contingent and diffuse:

There is a widely-held belief that teaching quality is a many-sided yet ultimately elusive phenomenon. This conviction has led several commentators to doubt whether an unambiguous scale of measurement suitable as a PI could ever be devised. This conclusion seems altogether too pessimistic.... It is important to realise that research from different but related standpoints has produced similar results. Although 'good teaching' is undoubtedly a complicated matter, there is a substantial measure of agreement among those empirical studies about its essential characteristics. (Ramsden, 1991, p. 131)

These discrepancies are crucial to note, because Ramsden's references to Marsh serve here to introduce and legitimate an influential research report on the development of his own questionnaire construct, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), as an instrument for the production of summative indicators of performance. His subsequent work with Wilson *et al.* (1997) leads to the assertion that,

the CEQ would appear to measure constructs directly relevant to students' reported approaches to, satisfaction with and outcomes of, their learning in university contexts. The CEQ's sensitivity to differences [between programmes] would suggest its useful application in research studies seeking to establish the comparative educational efficacy of learning environments. (Wilson *et al.*, 1997, p. 47)

The claims and assumptions that underpin Ramsden's work stand in considerable tension with those expressed within the work that he references in order to legitimate

his own. Furthermore, Ramsden's work is used by others to legitimate and inform their own further research; these reports also cite selectively from Marsh's work. Each introduction to Richardson's (1994, p. 59; 1997, p. 31) reports on the application of Ramsden's CEQ in the UK identifies Marsh (1987) as an 'authoritative and very comprehensive review'. He suggests the SEQ is a legitimate approach to the evaluation of teaching, and cites only the affirming of the conclusions cited in Marsh (1984, p. 749; 1987, p. 369), rather than those that promote caution and restrictive use—see the second extract in the previous section. This enables Richardson to promote the CEQ as an 'instrument ... designed explicitly as a performance indicator for monitoring the quality of teaching in particular degree programmes' (1994, p. 59; 1997, p. 32).

Work that advances the CEQ as a method of summative, comparative evaluation draws on research that commends the use of the SEQ only for formative purposes by and for the individual lecturers who teach, and not for use by institutional managers for summative and comparative appraisal of lecturers' performance. Recent work on, and commendation of, forms of the SEQ reflects the context in which summative and comparative appraisal are the major purposes of student feedback; in which 'good practice' in institutional organisation and management is conceptualised in terms that imply formal, systematic and documented forms of student feedback; and in which the SEQ meets the demands of and enables external scrutiny. Yet this work requires critical examination in terms of the interpretation and use of previous empirical work.

The final section of this article suggests that critical examination of the impact and assumptions of the SEQ is also required in respect of the ways that 'good teaching' and 'professional development' come to be conceptualised and practised.

Professional Development: the SEQ and the responsibility, agency and authority of the individual lecturer

This section draws on extracts from interviews with two lecturers that were conducted as part of a wider PhD study of lecturers' and students' perceptions and experiences of student feedback in UK higher education. Overall, 16 lecturers were interviewed; whilst other lecturers will have both similar and divergent views, analysis and use of all the interviews progressed from the perspectives that there is no unequivocal, 'truly' representative view to be identified. These interviews are sufficient to generate questions about current concepts, practices and purposes of student feedback. The extracts used here offer a brief illustration of some of the implications of the SEQ that are possible to construe in the majority of the interviews. Here, I argue that the SEQ form of student feedback has impact on the ways in which lecturers might come to conceptualise and learn about 'good teaching'; that mandatory, summative evaluations used internally for management appraisal appear to generate a malaise of attitudes and relationships amongst students and lecturers; and that both this form and use of student feedback neither encourages individuals to take responsibility for, or to actively progress their own professional development: the SEQ is seen as a managerial device used to identify

poor performers who are then considered to have failed and to require remedial action instigated by institutional managers.

This initial extract suggests that the lecturer apprehends that the SEQ method of evaluation limits the range of variables that might be investigated, and that it predicates an idea of teaching as a set of 'essential characteristics'. In the lecturer's view, the core criteria of teaching are 'nuts and bolts' to do with the material environment and various technical devices and techniques:

Lecturer 1

The second major thing about questionnaires is that, in my view, there are 2 bits to a questionnaire, and there are the basically nuts and bolts things: 'can you hear?', 'can you see?', 'are the visual materials adequate, transparent?' and so on. There are a series of common things that apply, and they've got to be useful, they've got to be, and I don't believe that they are heavily value led in most cases. I think you can get proper responses: 'was the room well ventilated?', you know 'does the lecturer have mannerisms that annoy you?' I think that set of things is valuable in its own right. I just think they're essential. And then there are the set of things that relate to the specific course content, and they're not quite so dangerous. And then at the end we've got all the bits like 'have you any other comments?', or the stuff which is much more reflective. And that is a difficult area, because there there's lots of difficulties of interpretation.

What constitutes a 'proper response' is a question that is conditional on the demands of method, statistical analysis requires categorical statements, and cannot tolerate equivocal, ambiguous or complex responses. Thus, the means and techniques of evaluation place restrictions on the form and content of information generated, and imply that what is 'value laden', what cannot be measured or what is not objective, becomes 'dangerous' subject matter for investigation. The lecturer wishes to ensure that any judgements drawn will be based on responses that require no further clarification or codicil.

Richardson (1994, p. 65) claims that a high level of student agreement with the SEQ item, 'Too many staff ask us questions just about facts', indicates teaching that encourages a superficial engagement with subject knowledge. He argues that such a result should be interpreted as a negative statement about that teaching. If his claim is reasonable then it is also highly ironic that the educational implication of a method of evaluation that produces numerical responses to factual questions about teaching and learning remains unexamined within that same literature. The SEQ promotes an engagement with the subject matter of teaching in which attention is focused on what can be measured. The questions that generate such 'proper responses' become the referents of what is investigated as, and comes to be understood as, 'good teaching'.

Yet the lecturer's concern with asserting parameters for 'essential' questions that produce 'safe' responses is also tightly connected to the use to which the results are put:

Lecturer 1

Now in any other walk of life—and this is a crunch point about questionnaires—in any other walk of life, any accusation of any seriousness, natural justice demands that the accuser actually faces the person he or she is accusing, and says, ‘You have been derelict, criminal, immoral, whatever’. And with questionnaires this doesn’t happen, and that is a major difficulty in my view about some of the adverse comments. I have colleagues who were accused of things like, ‘This lecturer has clearly not opened his notes since you know 1927’, or things like that. In many of these cases the lecturers will say, ‘If you look at last year’s lectures, you will find that they are totally different this year, and I have actually changed them to meet students’ complaints last year. But the member of staff doesn’t have that opportunity, because these are anonymous comments, and so there’s a very real difficulty. Now they’re only a fraction of the returns, but they could, if we are not careful, make staff very unsympathetic and very nervous, and a lot of staff are very nervous about questionnaires received.

During the stages of completing and analysing a SEQ, both the student and lecturer are separated and disengaged both physically and practically. Here, the lecturer suggests that the SEQ is a highly divisive *process*: students and lecturers are positioned in opposing roles and litigious relationships; communicative activity is reduced to an anonymous and broken chain of accusation and counter-accusation. The lecturer sees the SEQ as a consumer ‘complaints’ form that induces cruel banalities from students and generates a level of bad-faith tinged with nervous anxiety on the part of the lecturer. This scenario is better suited to Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*: the lecturer perceives the roles and power relations to be obscured and yet also real; the source and agent of power is not the (faceless) student, but the managerial bureaucracy; students and lecturers develop a sense of mutual mistrust from their exchanges.

This second lecturer echoes Marsh’s caution regarding the implications of using the SEQ for summative performance appraisal of academics’ teaching. He also protests his own lack of training, and disputes the idea that teaching can be reduced to a set of objective components and outcomes. However he admits to a sense of relief when the ‘marks’ are good, despite his view that they do not connect with, or relate to, his own understanding of teaching and hence lack of value as results useful to informing his practice:

Lecturer 2

It is a worry I have about it. You know how do you actually—Can you get anywhere near an objective quantification of what has actually been taught and learnt and absorbed within a class, or within a course or whatever? ... I think it’s the same thing as I was saying right at the beginning about being a lecturer, I mean—Am I in a position to analyse what teaching should be? You know I don’t

know what it is. There's this attitude either you can do it or you can't, but I haven't got much exposure to it, I haven't had much exposure to it and different sorts of teaching and whatever.

... For what it is it gets a good mark, or whatever. And therefore the lecturer looks at the results and thinks 'I've got a good mark, I don't need to do anything'. It's informing my practice in as much as it's reinforcing my practice. I'll just carry on just doing the same thing. And that is self-perpetuating as well I think, or can be. But I, you know these are all sort of doubts and questions I have about it which I haven't got any answers to I must admit. Because I just go on handing these out every year at the end of the course, and getting them back and being very pleased.

The SEQ method of student feedback is framed by the lecturer's university policy and guidelines for good practice [1]. These stipulate that annual evaluation should be conducted via a questionnaire; that 'departments should not rely solely on individual members of teaching staff to conduct their own evaluation', that 'unambiguously worded' questionnaires 'should provide a measure of students' overall satisfaction with a course' and a 'detailed analysis of all its components', that 'evidence suggests that students prefer questionnaires which require tick-only responses', and assumes that whilst it is a drawback that responses to 'at least one open-ended question' 'cannot easily be analysed by quantification' these can nevertheless 'indicate areas of concern which can be examined by structured questionnaires in future'.

The lecturer recognises and contests the idea of an objective concept of 'good teaching'—an idea that the SEQ predicates and the university policy authorises. Yet the authority of this document throws him into a state of confused self-doubt that undermines his confidence and generates a personal sense of professional inadequacy—despite the '*good marks*' he receives. His sceptical view of the value of the results conflates with the catharsis of relief at not being revealed as incompetent, to induce a complacency that is reinforced by his feeling that he is not in a legitimate, expert position to reflect on his own practice.

The responsibility the lecturer feels towards his own practice conflicts with his impression that his view of teaching has no legitimate authority. It is his lack of confidence in his own expertise that, paradoxically, prevents him from taking action to redress the situation. He maintains a position of conscious and 'skilled incompetence' (Argyris, 1990); he feels guilty of his own fraud yet grateful for the security of '*good marks*' that do not call his expertise and professionalism into question.

In contrast to a concept of professional development which demands that a lecturer learns to recognise and confront his or her own weaknesses (Argyris & Schoen, 1978), the implication of the centrally devised and controlled questionnaire is that the lecturer is not the agent of (self)evaluation. The first lecturer implies here that the enhancement of academics' practice is not their own, but a managerial responsibility:

Lecturer 1

If there were continuous spectrum of questions in questionnaires, which run from the nuts and bolts through to the philosophical, then probably the interpretations in the nuts and bolts end are not a problem. The problems develop as you move on and on and on to things that are much less capable of objective assessment. I mean I think one thing that is important to remember is that this has been useful in the extreme cases, of identifying teachers who are clearly not up to the job. I mean it, I know it has identified a number very clearly. And whatever the theory, if people are that bad, this is one mechanism by which this is revealed, and it then becomes possible to try and help these people.

His own university policy [2] authorises various methods of student feedback. It states that the ‘principles underlying the recommended procedures below are that: student feedback should occur, be seen to occur and should have an effect which is recorded’. Because government policy and statutory texts construct a need for visible, documentary evidence of both the practice and impact of student feedback, it is understandable that it has become ‘University policy to encourage the use of student questionnaires to collect feedback’. The university’s policy states that the ‘appropriate member of staff should be involved in analysis but should not be the only person to see results of feedback’, that one of the ‘other members of staff who will find it helpful to see results’ is the Head of Department, and that ‘results of questionnaires can be helpful in the staff review process and in supplying information on teaching abilities for promotion purposes’. The document assumes, rather than states that the information will be useful for developing teaching. However, the main purpose of information is as summative and comparative judgement: the development of teaching is itself conceived in terms of ascending a league table:

Some departments publish a ‘top five lecturers’ list annually as a result of questionnaires, which is popular with students and rewarding for the staff involved.

The document was published a year after the university’s audit report (HEQC, 1993, p. 22) stated that:

Recently a standard list of core questions has been devised for general use, although this sensible development is unlikely to realise its full potential unless some consistency of approach towards the use and administration of student questionnaires is encouraged. The University might wish to consider the merits of a system whereby each department is required to designate a member of staff to oversee the questionnaire exercise, and to certify, perhaps to the appropriate dean, that this has been done.

The revised specification of procedures indicates that the summative and comparative information that results from student feedback questionnaires articulates, and is used within, such formalised, hierarchical management structures.

Conclusions

The impetus for the SEQ, and its systematic use as a device for 'identifying teachers who are clearly not up to the job' (**Lecturer 1**) originates in external demands for a form of student feedback 'communication' that implies a bureaucratic-rational concept of organisation and management. Research reports that legitimate and promote the SEQ are motivated by the exigency of these externally imposed ideas and constraints and are harnessed to managerial interests rather than the concerns of theories of professional development. The claims made about the SEQ within these reports require close scrutiny.

Mandatory evaluation of teaching using an institutionally authorised, standardised procedure is perceived as a form of professional development underpinned by ideas of threat and penalty. The SEQ is experienced by these lecturers as surveillance. It generates fear, damaged relationships and self-doubt, and is based on (Barnett, 1992) and appears to generate technicist concepts of teaching. It may have little additional impact in terms of a lecturer's professional development. Moreover, it promotes a concept of professional development as remedial action instigated by managers. It undermines and devalues the professional's own responsibility for initiating creative means of investigation that bear the authority of an individual professional's integrity and sense of relevance, and that generate action authorised on the basis of genuine interest, experiment and informed negotiation between the 'expert', their peers and their students.

NOTES

- [1] Advisory Panel on Student Evaluation of Courses (July 1993) *Student Evaluation of Courses: Notes on Good Practice*. University of Sheffield, p. 2.
- [2] *Guidelines for Direct Student Feedback* (FQAT3sh94/5), University of Bristol (1994).

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