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**Commentary on article by J.W. Morehead and P.J. Shedd on "Student Interviews: a vital role in the scholarship of teaching"**

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**ABSTRACT**

Student interviews provide valuable input into peer evaluation of teaching. Both the University of Georgia and Stanford University have explored ways of using student interviews to tap into student perspectives. The approaches taken by the two schools are compared in this paper. Similarities and difference are identified and discussed. In addition, the aspects of teaching that are best reflected on by peers vs. students are enumerated.

Like Professors Morehead and Shedd at the University of Georgia, a group of seven faculty\* in Mechanical Engineering (ME) at Stanford participated in the AAHE Project on Peer Evaluation of Teaching during the 1994-95 academic year. The Stanford ME group (which took on the name ME-PEER), like the University of Georgia group, came to a consensus that student interviews are a rich source of constructive feedback on many facets of teaching and learning. In addition, the Stanford group felt that video tapes of the interviewing process can foster improved understanding among faculty colleagues of each others' teaching and insight into new and alternative teaching techniques. We have found that performing student interviews is a community building process that makes lunch conversation about teaching and learning as common as discussion of technical research experiments.

Based upon our experiences with student-based peer evaluation of teaching, we offer the following comments as amplification and counterpoints of the description of student interviews presented by Professors Morehead and Shedd at the University of Georgia.

The Stanford ME-PEER group began with the goal of developing peer-review based methods to assess teaching effectiveness and to document teaching scholarship for promotion and tenure purposes. Early in the formulation process the group narrowed its focus on formative assessment rather than summative assessment, with the objective of providing input into the improvement of teaching, as reflected in student learning behavior. The focus on student interviews emerged from approximately 15 hours of discussion in which we attempted to identify the major elements of good teaching and how they might

best be assessed. One factor in this discussion was the relative contribution of student and peer input to various aspects of assessment. An important outcome of these discussions was the identification of students interviews as a means to provide more depth than is possible using traditional survey instruments.

Table 1 shows the issues that were identified by the Stanford ME-PEER group to be important in assessing teaching, and the relative weighting of student and peer input into the assessment. The first five of these items are based on qualities of effective teaching discussed in References [1] and [2]. This list of issues was made available to the students during the interview process. At Stanford, two peer reviewers were present for each student interview session, one taking notes, the other leading the discussion (2 or 3 one hour long interviews of 5-7 students were held for each course/instructor being assessed). The faculty discussion leader was in the same field as the instructor whose teaching was being assessed. An audio-video tape record was made of these interview sessions. Table 1 also illustrates that many aspects of Student Interviews at the University of Georgia have alternative counterparts in the issues raised by the Stanford-ME-PEER group.

Like Professors Morehead and Shedd we found that there needs to flexibility in the interview process--the issues and questions act as initiators and sign posts for broader discussions. As a result of the student interviews we also found that our issues need some refining. In particular, we found that we need to better define what is meant by the Analytic & Synthetic aspects of a course. Analytic aspects refer to analysis and reductionist type activities and the Synthetic aspects refer to design activities that require a synthesis of ideas. Many students have not explicitly identified this aspect of their learning.

There are several significant differences in the implementations of student interviews at the two sites. These differences include:

- 1.) Timing of the interviews in the context of the course;
- 2.) Sources of supplemental information that establishes context;
- 3.) Process, questions and structure of the interview; and
- 4.) Products of the Interview recorded for external examination.

*Timing of the interviews:* At the University of Georgia, the interviews were held midway during the term; we agree that this is an effective way of getting information for formative feedback in time to influence the course in progress. In contrast, our interviews were held several weeks after the end of the quarter. We believe that interviews held after the course is complete allow students a greater sense of anonymity and a more complete case for reflection regarding the overall course. These two implementations (con-current and post

course) are complimentary. The timing of the interview is flexible and should correspond to whether the instructor wants to make course changes during delivery of the course (concurrent interviews), or wants to make broader changes to the next offering of the course based on students' perspectives from an entire term (post course interviews).

*Sources of supplemental information:* Morehead and Shedd used student interviews in conjunction with peer classroom visitations to provide two perspectives on the teaching. In our case, the additional perspective was provided by a reflective memorandum written by the faculty member under review. This memo, in which the faculty member is at liberty to discuss his or her teaching philosophy, course implementation details, course evolution, and overall goals is provided to the peer interviewers prior to the student interviews. We found that the background provided by the reflective memo gives the interviewer a better understanding of student comments made during the interview. We also perceive a second important application of the reflective memo in the continuous development of the course.

*Process, questions and structure:* As mentioned above, the issues that the ME-PEER group identified were the result of 7 faculty working together over an extended period. Our process was "front-loaded". We feel that our systematic up-front approach paid off with a process that needs little revision. A major disadvantage is that it took a significant investment of time. In addition, we have yet to test drive our approach with additional faculty or test its robustness in other non-engineering domains. We perceive that Professors Sheed and Morehead spent less time on question/issue development and got to the task of student interviewing more quickly. They therefore have more interview experience to use as a basis for modifying their questions.

*Products of the Interview:* In the three course/instructor cases assessed by the Stanford ME-PEER group, a summary memo was written by a senior member of the faculty (typically the instructor's mentor) and addressed to the instructor. The summary memo was based on the instructor's reflective memo and notes from the student interviews. The senior member was also one of the two interviewers. In this protocol, the summary memo included a "verbatim" listing of selected student comments and suggestions for how the instructor could affect change in his/her class given the student's views. The video tapes proved to be very helpful during preparation of the summary memos. In the long term, these tapes will support longitudinal study of teaching, learning and curriculum evolution.

Like Professors Morehead and Shedd, we will continue the use of peer-assisted student interviews as a means of gaining greater insight into teaching effectiveness. Used in conjunction with reflective and summary memoranda, these interviews are a powerful formative assessment instrument. We anticipate that peer assessment will expand in the department over the next few years. We also foresee that faculty teams will be assessing their own team teaching performance. Like Morehead and Shed, we see that a variety of student/peer interview methods have the potential to catalyze the evolution of a deeper and broader teaching community.

**REFERENCES:**

1. Way, D.G., *Teaching Evaluation Handbook*, Instructional Support, Cornell University, 1992.
2. Hildbrand, M., Wilson, R.C., Dienst, E.R., *Evaluating University Teaching*, Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, 1971

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