Editorial

Vox Populi?

The ancient Greeks had a process called *ostracism* whereby individuals could be banished from society for a period of time. Although specific accounts differ, the process was one whereby individuals could, after preliminary procedures were followed, inscribe the name of the person they wished to ostracize onto a potsherd. These were deposited in an urn located in the agora, and if there were 6,000 or more potsherds, or *ostraka*, with the same name inscribed, that individual would be exiled (Pollux, 1706). The process was considered anonymous and somewhat democratic. It could be contended that by the means of ostracism, citizens were held accountable for their actions by the people. Moreover, it could also be contended that the voice of the people was exercised through the process of ostracism.

For several years now educators have been the subjects of *accountability* (Reeves, 2002). Essentially, accountability embodies the notion that what we do, and how we do it, must be continually scrutinized by individuals and agencies both within and from outside education. In this way the *consumers* of education can be assured that what they are receiving is both appropriate and up to date. At least this is how it is supposed to work in theory. A part of accountability, at most universities and colleges at least, is the formal student questionnaire given near the end of each course. Specifics differ among institutions, but basically these instruments enable students to provide anonymous feedback, both positive and negative, about the course, the instructor, and even the program. Ostensibly these instruments are not intended to be popularity contests, nor are they intended to be the only metric of an instructor's teaching. Moreover, because the questionnaires are anonymous, they are not supposed to be a means of libeling someone. Nevertheless, it seems that to some students the questionnaires are a means either to wax eloquent about an instructor or course that they liked or a means to vent about a bad experience. How much credence institutions place on the ratings and comments of these questionnaires differs, but in most places the questionnaires are used either as a component of instructor evaluation or as an indicator of extremes. In other words, the validity and reliability of anonymous student questionnaires are recognized as being low. Unless an instructor receives consistently poor evaluations over several terms or even years, the student ratings do not contribute to ostracism. To some entrepreneurial-minded individuals, however, institutional accountability processes for instructors are insufficient.

In 1999 John Swapceinski, based in California, began a Web site that is now known as RateMyProfessors.com (see http://www.ratemyprofessors.com). A similar site called RateMyTeachers.com began in 2000 (see http://www.ratemyteacherrs.com/index.jsp). Related sites that specifically address Canadian schools and universities can be accessed from the RateMyProfessors (RMP) home page. According to RMP, the site allows students anonymously to rate their professors in each of three categories: Helpfulness, Clarity, and Easiness. "And now, students can even see who the sexiest professors are at their school,

as well as reading the top 15 funniest ratings, such as rating number 5: He will destroy you like an academic ninja" (http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/About.jsp, para. 4).

What is the purpose of the Web site? According to the founder, RMP is intended to enable students to "use the site to help plan their class schedules, and improve the quality of their educations [sic]… When word of the Web site gets out at a university, the ratings grow like wildfire and students really begin to benefit from the information" (http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/About.jsp, para. 3).

On reaching the site, one can navigate to a particular geographic area or to a particular institution. Once there, one may in the case of a school browse the list of staff names. With larger institutions such as universities, one can browse names alphabetically. When one reaches the name of the desired instructor, his or her rating can be read, and if one wishes a rating may be entered. One may indicate the course to which the rating refers, or by leaving the field blank make a general rating. Given that the Web site calculates the average rating of each individual, most questions asked consist of a five-point Likert-type selection. For example, the *helpfulness* category ranges from *very helpful* to *very unhelpful.* Three main rating questions are asked: easiness, helpfulness, and clarity. The ratings given to the latter two questions affect what kind of icon is placed in front of the instructor's name. A low average score results in a sad-faced icon, whereas a high average score yields a smiley-faced icon. A nonsmiling icon represents scores in between. Provision is also made to accept comments entered by keyboard. There is a statement, however, warning users not to write libelous or defamatory statements. Given some of the comments I read while visiting the two Web sites, I believe that either some students do not know the meaning of *libel* or they act with impunity because the rating is anonymous. The following excerpt came from an evaluation of a colleague: "I think a trained baboon could have done a better job teaching." Another professor received this comment: "She is a bad woman with bad research and lame grad students who follow her around like she is the ayatollah." Although preservice teachers are students, it is disconcerting that the attribute of respectful constructive criticism is lacking among some of them. No doubt these students will instantly become paragons of kindness and mercy once they are on the other side of the desk. At the same time I wonder what their reaction would be if their students wrote such things about them? Clicking on the red flag icon next to a particular rating enables one to send a message to the Web site screeners about the inappropriateness of a rating and a request to delete it.

To be sure not all comments are disparaging or highly critical. One comment states, "Very approachable and willing to help. Easy to understand. A bit of a hard marker." Other comments refer primarily to the course rather than to the instructor. For example, "only class worth attending."

The last part of the rating is a binary choice question as to whether the instructor is "good looking." Although this question is touted as being "fun" in order to show who is "hot" or not, the subjective nature of the question suggests that subjectivity is indicative of the entire Web site. If an individual receives sufficient "hot" votes, then a red chili pepper icon appears below the rating icon. Although one may register with the site and thus be eligible for

various bonuses and newsletters, anyone can access the site and rate any person. If a name is not already listed, one can enter it and then enter a rating.

Without doubting the claim that the Web sites help students make informed choices about the instructors and courses they choose, how valid and reliable are such ratings? Is the information on such Web sites a good basis on which to select courses or instructors? First of all, as the Web site claims, the questions asked refer to perceived helpfulness, clarity, and easiness. The mind boggles when considering how the term *easiness* is defined by some raters, especially in the light of a comment provided about a colleague, "kept getting lost in his dreamy eyes." A definition of terms is provided on the Web site, but students' phenomenological interpretations of the terms often prevail.

In an examination of the professors listed for the University of Alberta, and not all were listed, most had ratings from between one and 14 students, with most having fewer than eight ratings. A few instructors received at least 30 ratings, whereas one instructor received 56. Clearly there is a difference between the instructor who receives a sad-faced icon based on four ratings and the instructor whose happy-faced icon is based on 40 ratings. Perusing comments, and only the 15 most recent show, one finds that in many instances recent comments are influenced by what the raters read in previous comments, as shown by statements such as, "I agree with previous comments." Although RMP claims to aid students in making informed choices about instructors, the low number of ratings in most instances means that the information about a specific instructor is as good as or little better than polling the opinions of acquaintances. In other words, RMP is hardly the postmodern equivalent of the ancient Greek ostracism. At least 6,000 votes were necessary before one could be ostracized. Conversely, receiving rave reviews from six raters and receiving a hot chili pepper icon on RMP does not necessarily mean that one is a superb teacher or someone who possesses the necessary physical attributes to become the next model for a line of stylish clothing.

Although accountability in education is here to stay, much of what is done both within education and without should be examined carefully. Concepts underlying solid educational inquiry such as validity, reliability, or trustworthiness in the qualitative analogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) should always be applied by educators and administrators. In addition, it is beneficial for the general public to consider that much of what appears on the Internet claiming to enable the voice of the people to be heard is usually nothing more than the electronic version of speakers' corner in London's Hyde Park. Such Web sites should be regarded as an amusing novelty and diversion perhaps, but not much more. Although anonymous evaluations purport to benefit students, do such evaluations do any harm? The final word should be left to William Shakespeare, who wrote in *Othello*,

> Who steals my purse steals trash: 'tis something, nothing;
> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
> But he who filches from me my good name
> Robs me of that which not enriches him,
> And makes me poor indeed. (Act II, Sc. iii, 155)

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