Holistic Evaluation of Teaching at Dalhousie: Discussion Paper

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Context:¹
One of our new Dalhousie Strategic Directions, approved by Senate and the Board of Governors in 2014, is “Innovation in Programs and Excellence in Teaching and Pedagogy”. Within this context, Dalhousie is committed to ensuring that the ongoing evaluation of teaching is supportive of an institutional goal to enhance our teaching and learning environment and aspire to excellence in teaching and pedagogy.

The current 2011-2014 collective agreement for Faculty at Dalhousie does allow for (and encourage) a holistic and multi-faceted approach to the evaluation of teaching. For example, in clause 16.06a, it states:

“Promotion is based upon positive evidence of actual achievement and accomplishment in those duties and responsibilities which, in accordance with Clause 20.04, constitute the individual Member’s workload, and not on years of service.”

Anecdotally, we have learned over time that there are many academic units on campus that do not systematically evaluate teaching beyond our current student evaluations (with some notable exceptions). In the collective agreement, there is a clause (18.09) that addresses processes related to the student evaluation of teaching, but the rest of the agreement is silent on other forms of evidence when it comes to “actual achievement and accomplishment” as part of the evaluation of teaching. The same is true of Senate policy.

Student Evaluations of Teaching (or Student Ratings of Instruction):
In any institutional environment, it is important to ensure that the student voice is present in the overall evaluation of teaching. This will continue to be a major part of Dalhousie’s approach to the evaluation of teaching, and there are ongoing efforts being made by the Centre for Learning and Teaching and Senate (through their Senate Learning and Teaching Committee) to review and enhance our approach to a comprehensive, effective and efficient student evaluation system on campus.

There are, however, ongoing challenges with respect to student evaluations, including response rates, the faculty opt in to make the quantitative results public, and the ongoing use of student evaluation data (particularly, but not exclusively, in tenure and promotion processes). As well, due to concerns about ensuring the anonymity and

¹ Please note, this document is for discussion purposes only, and does not represent an institutional plan for moving forward with expanding the evaluation of teaching.
confidentiality of student respondents, student evaluations are not conducted in courses below 5 students, and are not used for evaluation purposes if there are fewer than 5 respondents. This results in several courses going unevaluated, and in some cases there are faculty (due to the nature of their assigned teaching load) who might not be evaluated over the course of an academic year.

**Complementary Components of the Evaluation of Teaching:**
There are challenges when institutions are over-reliant on one aspect of teaching evaluation – in particular student evaluations of teaching. Student evaluations are fundamentally a measure of student satisfaction. And while studies have shown that students are fair, and often very positive, in their evaluation of teaching, there have been examples where student evaluations have been (perhaps inappropriately) positively correlated to anticipated grade in the course and the perceptions of the easiness of the course. Other studies have shown that student evaluations may drop in courses where faculty have adopted teaching strategies that emphasize effortful learning (such as problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning), even though those teaching strategies have been proven to improve student learning outcomes (ie. students learn more and better). This would support the argument that it is important to ensure that we are gathering multiple sources of evidence to corroborate the evidence gathered from student evaluations.

Indeed, many of our peer institutions in Canada, and around the world have moved beyond Student Evaluations of Teaching to a more comprehensive and holistic evaluation of teaching. A couple of research-based models that have been widely adopted include ensuring that there are multiple sources of evidence. Multiple sources of evidence in such a process might include, but are not limited to:

**Peer Assessment of Teaching Materials:**
In many academic contexts, processes have been implemented that entail peers in the same discipline systematically reviewing course syllabi and, in particular, assessment materials to ensure that the assessments reflect the appropriate learning outcomes expected for the course, and the level of academic rigour expected for a course at that level of study.

**Peer Review of Teaching:**
On many campuses, faculty conduct peer reviews of the teaching of their peers, particularly through observations of the classroom, and provide evaluations based on their review. This should be done systematically at the level of the academic unit (whether at the faculty or departmental level), rather than relying on individual faculty to organize someone to observe their teaching. And when this is implemented well, it should include training for the reviewees to ensure the evaluation is conducted fairly and reliably (to reduce individual bias).
**Evaluation of Student Learning Outcomes:**
The evaluation of student learning outcomes entails programs systematically exploring the outcomes of courses, based on the learning outcomes articulated in the approved syllabus, to ensure that the assessment and teaching strategies used are in alignment with the learning outcomes, and that students are demonstrating the attainment of those outcomes on their required assessments in the course.

**Alternative Forms of Student Feedback:**
There are many forms of gathering student feedback, beyond the institutional SRI process, that can be used as part of the evaluation of teaching, including running focus groups and conducting interviews of students (for example, those supervised by the faculty member). These are particularly important in circumstances where the faculty member is teaching small numbers of students and the SRI process is inappropriate.

**Alumni Feedback**
Alumni, in reflecting back on their experiences as a student, can provide very useful feedback that can be used in evaluation processes. In fact, there are examples where alumni report extremely positive experiences in retrospect (based on their future learning and ongoing career development) that they rated negatively at the time.

**Evidence of Engagement in Professional Development:**
Evaluations of teaching can be used as one lens that might inform the creation, and renewal, of a plan for ongoing professional development for individual faculty and instructors. And the evidence of meaningful engagement with professional development is in itself a form of evidence that might be considered in the evaluation of teaching.

**Self-Evaluation (often represented by Teaching Dossier):**
On many campuses, and indeed in many parts of Dalhousie, faculty have a requirement to reflect in an ongoing and systematic manner about their teaching effectiveness, and to capture (in the case of teaching dossiers) evidence of their effectiveness in a curated dossier. Indeed, the reflective processes used in formal self-evaluations (and in particular the production of a teaching dossier) should bring together all aspects of the evaluation of teaching described above, including student ratings of instruction.

**Support for Academic Leaders and Members of Tenure and Promotion Committees:**
Regardless of the policies and process put in place on campus, there needs to be effective training and support for academic leaders and tenure and promotion committees to effectively and appropriately interpret and make decisions based on these sources of evidence. There are a number of anecdotes, at Dalhousie and across
the higher education sector broadly, of academic leaders or faculty evaluation committees considering files for tenure and promotion making inappropriate decisions based on a lack of understanding of the nature of the evidence presented as part of the evaluation of teaching, or on the misinterpretation of that evidence.

**Beyond the Evaluation of Individuals:**
In addition to implementing a more holistic evaluation of teaching for individual faculty and instructors on campus, we also need to consider how we move beyond the evaluation of individual faculty members in a summative manner. When implemented effectively, holistic evaluations of teaching should be formative in nature as much (or more) as they are summative. The evaluations of teaching should be used as one lens to inform program and curriculum renewal. If there are areas of strength identified in the evaluations across a department, programs might be adjusted to take advantage of those strengths to improve the student experience and focused development opportunities to expand upon those strengths might be instigated. If there are areas of concern, the program might be adjusted to mitigate the impact those might have on the student experience, and focused development opportunities might be instigated to address those identified challenges. And at an institutional level, we could use the aggregate (anonymized) results of our comprehensive evaluation to inform our ongoing work to innovate in our academic programs, and support ongoing excellence in teaching and learning across the campus.

**Key references:**