


MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Consumer and Academic Culture Convergence: the Implications of the Internet on Student Evaluations
of Faculty Members and the Shaping the Rhetoric of Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

The increasing commercialization of higher education is challenging the fundamental role of the University in today's democratic society and the consequences are grave. Increasingly, higher education is applying a customer-service approach to the student-professor relationship that is undermining effective pedagogy. Edwin Guthrie (1954) notes that the function of the University is to attempt to insure that the following generation will be more good, wise, and knowing than the present one" (p.1). Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness are often used to ensure that the function is fulfilled. Student rating websites such as Ratemyprofessr.com (RMP) offers an online community forum that exists outside the institution, where students can anonymously share evaluations of instructors with others. Students can choose instructors and courses based on the ratings. However they are selecting their professors relative to criteria that fulfills a pedagogy that is fuelled not by the drive for an enriched knowledge but by a pedagogy that is influenced by a consumer and academic culture convergence. These consumer attitudes towards higher education are spilling over into the institution and faculty members are suffering the impact. Professors need to have the freedom to motivate students to learn without having to be concerned with entertaining them. It has been argued that Universities need to re-instate their legitimacy and remind students that degrees are granted on a learning basis, not for tuition payment (Delucchi & Korgen 2002). Without a re-establishment of an academic ethic, the University could fall prisoner to the pedagogically irresponsible demands of their customers.

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PART I – INTRODUCTION AND PAPER OVERVIEW

Once a student pays for his/her tuition, is he/she then entitled to a degree? According to a study done by Micheal Delucci and Kathleen Korgen (20002), almost half of the students sampled seemed to think so. In agreement with other theorists, Delucchi & Korgen argue that consumer sovereignty in higher education conflicts with the goals of effective pedagogy. By vesting authority in students as consumers, the professor-student relationship becomes inverted through an undue emphasis on customer service. The concept of merit within the University that is fundamental to an academic ethic is replaced by a consumer ethic where the customer gets what he/she has paid for. This trend is however not exclusive to the world of academia but is rather part of a larger consumer culture convergence where attitudes of the market are appearing where they may not be welcome, the University being one of them (Ritter 2008).

This trend is demonstrated within the online phenomenon Ratemyprofessor.com that offers an online community forum where students can anonymously share evaluations of instructors with others. With students increasingly viewing themselves as value-conscious consumers of their educational experience, the site is simply a response to that shift in student's educational perspective (Gilroy 2003 as cited in Sonntag et al. 2008). Students can now choose how they are going to consume their education by choosing professors based on their personal teaching preferences. The site offers thousand upon thousands of student ratings of their professors and in a sense by offering on the Internet, the site simply brings everyday schoolyard banter to a large public scale.

The practice of evaluating teaching effectiveness has been around for over 85 years but has now moved out of the privacy of the institution and into the public realm of the Internet, ultimately enabling students to become leading agents in shaping the public rhetoric of pedagogy (Ritter, 2008). The site has been applauded by students for the ‘democratizing’ effect that it has had on education, but has been criticized by professors for its unregulated and academically damaging nature. This online forum is enabling students to deliberate freely about their education and empowers them within the traditionally hierarchically based student/teacher relationship. Students can hold professors accountable for their teaching styles and within this new power relationship, students are setting the standards of effective or good teaching; not the professors. After all, they have first hand experience in teaching.

The democratizing effects of online consultations can be seen in many areas of society and the Internet is enabling such consultations to reach wider audiences and is arguably democratizing public discourse. The Canadian government consults citizens online, and students consult each other online as well. Some may even argue that the Internet is hosting the modern day notion of the Habermasian public sphere. The model of the public sphere provides a paradigm for examining and analyzing this historical change, while it also serves as a normative category for political critique (Eley 1997). The Internet, as a possible host for the modern day public sphere, has also been both applauded and critiqued for its democratic possibilities. The complexities that accompany the merging of the two are many, but will however be set-aside for the moment if only to examine the issues and examples of culture convergence at hand.

The next section (part II) will take a closer look at the long-standing debate over the Internet’s dividing and democratizing abilities. It will examine democracy as a concept and also where it fits into discussions of the Internet and how it compares with Habermas’ notion of the public sphere. The following section (part III) will introduce public consultation and provide a detailed explanation of

how, where and why the University uses student evaluations of teaching effectiveness. It will discuss issues of validity and reliability, what studies stand out in the literature, and faculty resistance to their use. Part IV illustrates when and where public consultations have occurred online starting with examples from institutionalized consultations followed by a non-institutionalized consultation. Next, part V will discuss the issues and the excitement that surrounds the online consultations and finally part VI discusses the physical world impact that such deliberations are having.

PART II – SETTING THE CONTEXT

The emergence of new telecommunications technologies in the last 130 years has fundamentally changed the way we communicate with each other. Though traditional forms of communication still remain intact new technologies, from the invention of the telephone to the Internet, have expanded communication capacities in such eminent ways that new conversations, discourses and communities have resulted. The democratic potential of the Internet, has been praised and contested. Some think that the Internet is a natural host for what Jürgen Habermas' (1989) termed the public sphere (Beers 2006), others argue that it is simply fostering a new unresponsive commercial sphere dominated by the usual corporate players (Beniger 1996; Lessig 1999 as cited in DiMaggio et al. 2001). The concepts and ideas being considered here are complex. Simplifying and accepting them in their ideal forms, though it may arguably be unrealistic, allows us to apply and understand them in relation to various other variables and concepts in society. Therefore in order to suspend them in time and space, we will consider the idealistic reduction; in hopes to be able to tease out fundamental issues, values, and tensions that surround discourse regarding the Internet, the public sphere, and democracy.

The Democratic potential of the Internet

Defining the Internet is not a straightforward task. Paul DiMaggio, Eszter Hargittai, W. Russell Neuman, & John P. Robinson's (2001) define the Internet in *Social Implications of the Internet* as; "an electronic network of networks that link people and information through computer and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval" (p. 308). The Internet, as a networked computing system, challenged the fundamental and underlying principles of broadcast media; access, participation reciprocity and many-to-many rather than one-to-one communication (Jenkins & Thorburn 2003). This shift has significant political relevance as it "expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate and ensures that no one voice can speak with unquestioned

authority” (Ibid: 2). The broadcast media were defined, owned and controlled by a few monopoly networks and the Internet enabled individual citizens to offset the one-way communication system by empowering them with the ability, authority and freedom to publish to the public. Though the Internet has been praised for its democratic possibilities, it has also been scrutinized for its unrealistic utopian views on reality (Buchstein 1997, Jenkins & Thorburn 2003, Jeffery & Nayman 2001, Trend 1997). What the Internet means for democracy is still unclear and controversial but with the size of the online community vastly increasing every year, very few doubt the potential importance of the Internet for transforming the way people live, work, and play (Norris 2001). At any time in history, the introduction of new technologies or in other words, extensions of ourselves, have both personal and social consequences that need to be acknowledged and explored (McLuhan 1987).

Some theorists, the optimists, regard the Internet as an information-gathering tool and applaud its deliberative potential while others, the pessimists, do not (Fishkin 2000). The optimists argue that never before have individuals had the capacity or the means to speak and publish their opinions and views to such a degree as they can now do on the Internet. Others are not as optimistic about this possibility (Norris 2001). The pessimists are concerned about issues such as the ‘digital divide’ that cast a dark and undeniable cloud over the scope and breadth of the Internet’s capacity to strengthen democratic discourse and debates about this polarized condition concerning the Internet continue to occur.

The ‘optimists’ have high expectations for the Internet. For them, thanks to the Internet, the future is bright for public democratic discourse and debate. The advocates argue that this technological turn in communication is enabling a global means of transmitting ideas and opening minds. The Internet, by fundamentally changing the way we communicate with one another, is ultimately supporting, encouraging and facilitating democratic debate. The technological qualities of the Internet

are vast but among them those that stand out are that it has the capacity to ‘immunize against authoritarianism’, that it is ‘easily accessible’, and it is universally available’ (Buchstein 1997: 250). And given the increasing significance of technologies in our daily lives, new, fresh ideas for democratic reforms are surfacing, large-scale public consultations possible (Fishkin 2001) and a more critical, public sphere is emerging as a result (Jeffery 2001).

Not everyone is however convinced, however in contrast to the optimists, the pessimists are critical of the democratic potential of the Internet and argue that there is a serious discrepancy between “the promise land of the democratic infrastructure and the actual and real working of networks” (Buchstein 1997: 249). There are global, social and democratic divides that exist; global inequality to Internet access between industrialized and developing societies; social gaps between the information rich and poor in each nation; and a “democratic divide that signifies the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life” (Norris 2001: 4). So not all citizens have guaranteed access to the Internet (Baskoy 2007) and in fact, it is perhaps even increasing social stratification (Buchsein 1997).

Statistics provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) illustrate and conceptualize the inequalities and inconsistencies in Internet access. What we see is inequality in the ability of citizens to participate in online public debates. Not only are there Internet access divides between countries but there are also divides between household and commercial access. In other words, some countries have greater Internet access than others and furthermore, businesses have greater Internet access than individual households.

Of all the OECD countries, as of 2007 statistics, Korea has the highest percentage of household access with 94% access and Mexico had the second lowest at 12% access (OECD 2009a). In Canada, as of 2006 statistics, 68% of households had Internet access and as of 2007 statistics, the U.K. had 67%

access (Ibid). To put those numbers into perspective, there is a difference of 82% between the highest and lowest percent of households across the world with access to the Internet. These statistics also indicate that in Canada alone, 32% of households do not have Internet access.

As of 2007 statistics, businesses in the OECD countries have much greater access to the Internet than regular, household citizen access; Canadian businesses have 98%-99% access, Korea at 96-100% access, the U.K. at 92-99% access and Mexico at 88-94% access (OECD 2009b). These statistics indicate that commerce has greater access than citizens and with the influx of private companies, converging industries and ownership dynamics, it suggests that the business elite dominate, virtually. The debates over the nature and qualities of the Internet are strong on both ends. The Internet, while viewed by the optimists to have democratic potential, has its downfalls. Commercial interests, social stratification and inequality are just the beginning of the critiques. Other issues such as “panoptification”, and ‘de-realization’, which we will not discuss here, are also granted serious concerns (Buchstein 1997: 250). Each side has very relevant points that should not be overlooked. In order to accurately define and understand the Internet and its implications on society, it is therefore important that it be considered within a more complex context and critically evaluated from different angles and perspectives. That being said, for the purpose of this paper, we will for a moment, set aside the relevant and complex issues of the digital divide and focus on the situation of those who are in fact using the Internet as a means of public discourse in order to explore where and how that the Internet can and has had a significant impact on the public sector, democratic public debate and communication as a whole. After all, as previously noted, in 2006, 68% of Canadian households do have access to the Internet (OECD 2009a). Statistics Canada supported that 2006 statistic and translated that number into 16.8 million adults (2006). The democratic potential that an online existence presents to those that do

have access to the means must not be overlooked and should be evaluated in this context with an acknowledgement of its possibilities, limitations and implications for the future.

Democratic debate, public sphere and social space

The implications of the Internet are vast, not just as an extension of existing institutions but as a profoundly transformative technological structure in its own right (Poster 1997). In and of itself, the Internet is just a technology, a tool that may be used in a way that is democratic or in ways that promote democratic social debate. The Internet, in terms of how it facilitates the World Wide Web, is more like a social space than a thing. The Internet as an instrument, or a 'thing', has the means of creating new channels for a representative democracy that encourages effective participation by connecting individuals to one another in a new virtual space (Stephens et al. 2006). As a medium however, the Internet can give rise to entirely new social functions, subject positions and conceptions of individual agency (Poster 1997). As a social space, it initiates new forms of power between its participants and essentially creates a new kind of politic between all communicating individuals (Ibid). When examining the politics of the Internet, it is appropriate to compare ideals of the Internet to Jürgen Habermas' (1989) ideals of the public sphere, which will be defined shortly. Just like the Internet, the notion of the public sphere suggests an area for exchange. The Internet arguably facilitates a virtual social space that exists outside the physical world but is directly permeable by individuals by means of various types of networked computing systems. The abstract venue concept that accompanies the public sphere can be appropriated social space facilitated by the Internet as it too embodies the concept of a spatial metaphor or intangible social space. Both in their ideal forms lend themselves to a relatively smooth comparison (Poster 1997). Some theorists frown upon the comparison arguing that it is too simplistic and unrealistic based on the critiques of Habermas's ideal public sphere and of the Internet's digital divide. But others believe that the ideals lend themselves to a more clear view of

such complicated issues. Furthermore, just as the notion of the public sphere anticipated an enhanced democratic debate, the Internet is transporting that same anticipation into the next technological era. To situate this discussion, it helps to look back on the literature written on the concept of democracy and the public sphere.

Democracy: brief history, development and use of the term

Democracy as a general concept is not simply or clearly defined. “No questions are more difficult than those of democracy, in any of its central senses (Williams 1967: 86). The word ‘democracy’ stems from the ancient Greek terms *demos*, which means ‘people’, and *kratos*, which means ‘rule’ (McLennan 2005, Williams 1967). Paul Woodruff (2005), author and professor in Ethics at the University of Texas, supports the ideal of a democratic society but he warns against some of the misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the concept that have accumulated among citizens, professionals and scholars. “Democracy”, says Woodruff, “is a beautiful thing; a government by and for the people”; that “promises us freedom to exercise our highest capabilities, while it protects us from our own worst tendencies”; where all adults are allowed to speak freely and participate in the discussion of how we should arrange life together; where no one is granted an unchecked power that so often leads to arrogance, abuse and foolishness (p.3). In the modern world, democracy is greatly accepted and unchallenged, but that was not always the case (Woodruff 2005).

For centuries, the negative connotations of these two root words, ‘people’ and ‘rule’, were fused together and created an idea a “mob rule” that was highly looked down upon by elite classes (McLennan 2005, Williams 1967). The word ‘rule’ was considered in terms of influence and sway, the word ‘*demos*’ or ‘people’ was associated with the poor, the common herd or “the fickle and ungrateful populace” (Machiavelli 1531 in McLennan 2005: 72) so for a very long time, democracy, as a political condition, was a strongly unfavorable term. While today, the term democracy may serve as a

conceptual contrast with oligarchy and monarchy, it was only in the late nineteenth century that intellectuals and politicians began to consider democracy as a positive political value in its own right “given the supposed volatility of the common people and their openness to manipulation” (McLennan 2005:72). Today the word ‘democracy’ is far less controversial and contested as it was to those that first used the word. The concept of a democratic government has been trimmed back so that it does not seem a threat to the rich or to commercial interests (Woodruff 2005).

According to Raymond Williams book of *Keywords* (1967), the first time the term democracy was used in the political constitution was in 1641 and by then was understood as ‘popular government’, which meant to say that;

“...it is in the power of the body of freemen orderly assembled, or major part of them, to make or constitute just Lawes, by which they will be regulated, and to depute from among themselves such ministers as shall see them faithfully executed between man and man” (p. 84).

Since then, the term and its definitions have morphed into a plethora of slightly differing versions of itself, all containing a similar foundation but varying conditions. ‘Representative democracy’, defined by Hamilton in 1777 for example does not have the same investment in all people, ‘or a major part of them’ as the law-makers that the ‘direct democracy’ definition asserts. When judicial powers are vested in a collective body of the people, error, instability and confusion can occur. This view of democracy rather elects representatives through a secure and regulated system to represent the governed mass of people and unlike the direct democracy can be extended to larger societies (Williams 1967). Thanks to a systematic order, the overall concept tends to distance itself from the unfavorable taboos of a ‘mob rule’. Furthermore, critics and enemies of democracy often argued that citizens did not have the wisdom or authority to participate in governmental decision-making (Woodruff 2005). Though citizen wisdom is now considered as a relevant voice of authority in governmental affairs, this is another reason why the modern day democracies replace a direct democracy with a representative democracy.

“Some issues are far too complex or too technical to be put up directly for open discussion” (Woodruff 2005:160). So an elect few speak on the citizens’ behalf. Woodruff (2005) brings up another important point to consider is that in the beginnings of democracy, the entire population of Attica was somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000. The small sized population was a huge advantage in the creation of democracy. Athens for example was small enough to be able to directly involve all of its citizens in the politics of the state. Not only were they few enough but they could be relied upon to know more or less how things were supposed to work and why (Woodruff 2005). In today’s society, directly involving everyone in government affairs would be entirely impossible. Having a representative democracy attempts to solves this modern dilemma. This fundamental shift in nature of the definition; electing representatives attempts to excluded the former definition, the original form of democracy is considered to be one of the major important shifts in the defining democracy that effects the term to the current day.

Democracy has often been mistaken for ‘mob rule’, which is a catch phrase for majority rule (Woodruff 2005). How they differ however is that mob rule is a kind of tyranny as it excludes the minority under the absolute power of the majority. In order to feel free in the tyranny of the majority, you must join the majority. Democracy avoids any sort of tyranny so it does not define itself as majority rule and has restraints such as the rule of law set in place to evade such circumstances. The rule of law is the “principle that no one may be permitted to be above the law” (Woodruff 2005:115). It “restrains those in power and protects the weak” (Woodruff 2005:112). As a democratic feature to any governing system, the rule of law, innately grants equality to every citizen as long as it is written and made available for all to read. Otherwise those in power could declare the law to be whatever they wish it to be (Woodruff 2005).

Structural conditions however depend on social dynamics and how ‘the people’ are defined affects the not only the condition but also the process and practice of democracy (Williams 1967). There have been various attempts to limit and shape ‘the people’ into qualified groups. Even if a process of an election defines the term democracy, in order to be fully democratic, the proportion of ‘the people’ who have the right and ability to take part in the election must be considered. In other words, defining who can and who cannot participate can counteract the egalitarian spirit that is fundamental to the concept itself.

The term democracy however is not limited to only political contexts. The conditions of democracy are often used in other contexts and are used to describe human rights in various open discussions. Numerous areas of political, economic, industrial, cultural and social situations are steadily coming under democratic interrogation (McLennan 2005). Issues of gender, ethnicity and disability are being challenged in the name of democracy. After all how can discrimination of any kind be legitimated in a society that claims to be democratic, that is, “where its citizens are supposed to be free and equal”? (Ibid: 74). A broader social ethic of democracy is developing to include effective capacities and it is spilling over not only into political, civic and social rights but also into cultural, environmental, spiritual and virtual rights too.

The public sphere: setting the context

When it comes to the development of new technologies, it is important that we re-establish our positions from which we analyze and recognize not only the government actions and responsibilities (Poster 1997) but also everyday social discourse. A re-conceptualization of not only the Internet but also of the public sphere and the fundamental structure of what it means to participate in democratic society is required. New media technologies are affecting and changing the way we communicate and it is naive to assume that the social sphere remains stagnant in relation to changes and advancements in

technology. Technology and society change together, the former conditioned by its surroundings in the latter (Barber 2003).

The beginnings of a parliamentary democracy arguably emerged when Habermas' (1989) ideal concept called the 'bourgeois public sphere' began to take form. According to Habermas' theory, the public sphere disregards social status all together and authority of the better argument prevails over that of social status. Those involved discuss issues that, up until the emergence of the public sphere, had not been questioned. And because of its inclusive nature individuals, insofar as they are propertied and educated could enter into and participate in conversations and discussions without discrimination. However not everyone agrees with Habermas and the particulars of his theory have been challenged. Critics argue that Habermas analysis of the public sphere "needs to undergo some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a category capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy" (Fraser 1990: 57). Some theorists even claim that very few scholars today would accept the "Habermasian view as Habermas originally proposed it" (Schudson 2002: 483). Despite the critiques however, the notion of the public sphere is useful as a conceptual resource or as a framework that helps to analyze theoretical and intangible arenas of discursive interaction.

The public sphere allowed for citizens to engage in critical debate and it created an abstract venue where individuals were able to speak their minds and a collective interest was able to transcend the notion of social status. The goal of the public sphere was to put the state in touch with the needs of society through the vehicle of public opinion. Capitalist interests were however disguised as collective social interests and were disseminated to the public via the printing press. The print era afforded citizens with an "enhanced experience of a mutual culture and shared perception of nationality" despite the challenges of physical geography (Trend 1997:13). What was discussed and decided in this public discourse was communicated to many as a collective interest therefore ultimately, instead of being

connected to the public, the state was actually connected to the interests of the bourgeois. This issue of inclusiveness was a critical downfall of the democratic function of the public sphere. Even though it was a required criterion, the public sphere was not actually representative of the mass public. Women, slaves and immigrant communities were excluded from the public sphere (Ibid). It was essentially a bourgeois public sphere and the socially ideal 'collective interest' that ultimately emerged from the rational debates ended up as a mere ideological illusion.

Regardless of the issue regarding favoring ruling class ideologies, the public sphere had a major impact on society as it gave rise to a critical authority. What the public had over the state authority was critically and rationally debated arguments. This ultimately created a situation where coercive state power was displaced by arguments that were coded in a social law and that were supported by reason. What eventually developed was a kind of power through reason that worked as a means to sway the state authority. With a public opinion, ideologically fueled or not, the notion of a public sphere changed democratic governance. The arena, though a metaphor, essentially "gave citizens an opportunity to assemble in order to hold those in power accountable for their actions" (Eriksen & Weigard 2003: 180). With the establishment of this public space, people in positions of power could no longer simply count on institutional, traditional or religious authority to exercise their will. The traditional basis of legitimacy had changed and they now had to enter the public arena in order to justify their decisions and gain public support (Ibid). Authority was now at the mercy of the public, reasonable debate and legitimacy was awarded through public accountability and critical debate now reigned over a coercive, authoritative voice.

For Habermas, freedoms of thought and of speech are the basic conditions for personal opinion-formation (Eriksen & Weigard 2003: 181). This notion 'communicative freedom', which is based on the right of individuals to speak their minds, is critical to the idea of the public sphere because it

suggests that the only way that one is to know one's thoughts and opinions are legitimate or right is to hear the counter-arguments and it embeds a sort of "moral duty to justify" one's standpoint (Ibid). Democracy as a public deliberation depends on this notion because it rests on the principle that one can come to an informed, logical, and reasonable formation of an opinion through deliberation with others. Without public justification, one would be claiming infallibility, which actually counteracts the fundamental nature of such deliberation and illuminates the idea of a rational truth.

The Internet meets the public sphere

Now what happens to the public sphere when it is confronted with the Internet; an enormous, ever changing connecting space? For Habermas (1989), the public sphere is a "realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed, access is guaranteed to all citizens and a portion of the public sphere comes to being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Foster 1997: 28). The Internet is enabling these conversations and discourses to occur in places and time that they would have never occurred before. The communication capabilities that the Internet provides is not only changing where people are talking about also how people are talking and theoretically anyone connected to this vast space of interconnected discourse is able to participate. Theorist John Hartley (1992) even argues that the modern day public sphere, or public domain as he calls it, is the media itself. The public realm is "still to be found, large as life, in the media" (p.1) and public activities, though accruing in this intangible, theoretical space, the Internet in particular, its implications directly permeate real physical life. David Beers (2006) states a similar claim when he suggests that the Internet, because of its interactive character, viral disposition, global outreach capacity and relative inexpensive costs, "seems a natural host for the public sphere" (p.117). In more recent publications, there are two sides that are at odds. Online, "the enthusiasts find evidence of a more deliberative, re-engaged, more unbiased political community (Browning 1996; Hill &

Hughes 1998; Negroponte 1995 as cited in DiMaggio et al. 2001: 319), where as the skeptics predict that the Internet simply facilitates the “re-emergence of an unresponsive commercial sphere dominated by the usual corporate players – but with an increased capacity to invade the privacy of individual citizens (Beniger 1996; Lessig 1999 as cited in DiMaggio et al. 2001: 319). Henry Jenkins & David Thorburn (2001) reflect on the optimism of many writers in the early 1990s that believed networked computing would revitalize the public sphere. Closer to the end of the twentieth century, they were predicting that cyberspace would give birth to a new civic culture. The promise of a new public sphere however, depends on the extent to which technical, economic, and cultural barriers can be overcome (Jenkins & Thorburn 2001). There has been evidence that suggests that passionate debates can occur online as multiuser domains (Dibbel 1999 as cited in Jenkins & Thorburn 2001) but also other evidence that suggests that online communities often struggle with strategies for coping and dealing with dissent and antisocial conduct. These days, what is of great concern is the familiar threat of corporate and commercial interest to this participatory culture. Habermas was criticized for his utopian view of the public sphere and the Internet is facing the same issues. Habermas was criticized for underestimating the barriers to participation such as economic factors that determine who had access to the printing press. ‘The economic colonization of cyberspace’ causes the same right of concern (Jenkins & Thorburn 2001: 9). As decentralized as the Internet appears to be, it is shrinking in size and few are cashing in.

It has been argued that the utopian rhetoric of the revolutionary online public sphere is often too simplistic, and may not be an accurate measure of the impact of new media on social functions; it may however support serious discussions about core values and central institutions (Jenkins & Thorburn 2001). Imagining a utopian ideal can offer clarity and simplicity when trying to understand society. Therefore, just as the issue of the digital divide was set aside in order to analyze Internet users; for the

purpose of this paper, I will temporarily set aside the complications that surround the concept of the public sphere. Kellner (2004) even suggested that, “Habermas’ arguments serve, if nothing else, as an ideal of what new media should be” (as cited in Beers 2006: 110). So a continued concentration on the ideal concept rather than the complex reality will help to tease out the fundamental issues that this paper is attempting to examine.

Garth Graham;s (1995) contributions to Habermas’ concept of the public sphere helps to understand how the Internet brings the public sphere to another realm of existence and simultaneously addresses yet another Internet access issue (Foster 1997). Graham’s idea of this public sphere, or a public community as he calls it, needs to include not only a universal access to the means to communicate and to participate in meaningful discussions but must also include a universal freedom to actually communicate. In other words, the conditions of communication need to be so that all participants feel that they are in a position to actually raise their voice and participate in public discourse. It is not simply about having access to the means, but rather having the power to be heard and the freedom to public deliberation. Though both theorists are arguing for an egalitarian quality, the difference between the Habermas’ traditional notions the public sphere and Graham’s vision of an electronic public community is that the latter is both egalitarian and de-centralized (Foster 1997). What Graham touches on is a crucial aspect to how and why the Internet can make a significant contribution to the democratic practices of citizen participation. Where at one time in history, the public sphere addressed issues that were arguably in favor of bourgeois interests because it was the bourgeois community that fundamentally formed the public sphere, the decentralized aspect of an online public sphere has the capacity to redistributed authority of voice to those that once may not have been included in a bourgeois discourse; those that may not have been propertied or educated. In this sense,

the Internet arguably had the potential to enable greater citizen participation and disperse decision-making authority to a greater amount of participants.

Though there is still a discrepancy in access on online critical debate that reminisces the traditional critiques of public sphere, the Internet has a possibility for a power shift in communication and information distribution. One example of this re-distribution of the power to communicate is the weblog. 'Blogging' has enabled points of view that may have otherwise not have been heard to be published to the public, creating a two-way flow of information enabling a greater authority of the public voice. Beers (2006) suggests that such "the quickly evolving world of online, independent news media", such as the weblog, open publishing sites or e-zine news media, "a world that in some important, if limited, respects brings us closer to Jürgen Habermas's ideal of the public sphere" (p. 110). Canada's mainstream media is becoming more and more concentrated in the hand of very few large corporations. What results is a centralized pinnacle of power and authority in Canadian media. With such concentrated power comes potential corruption, abuse and domination of public information. But, according to Habermas, a diverse news media is an essential component of democracy because it is the news media that provides citizen with the information and ideas they need to make political decisions (Beers 2006). Independent news media is "news media that is not subject to most common pressures associated with the dominant, corporate form of ownership" (Ibid: 115). This is not to say that it is unbiased, it rather facilitates alternative views that are not subject to the pressure of profit generation. So with this new sense of citizen agency in the media and the increasing access and use of the Internet, more and more individuals are logging on to the Internet every day (Montagnier 2008). Statistics Canada reported that in 2007 household access to the Internet was at 73%, up from 68% from the year before which is a five-percentage increase in only one year (2008). These numbers are far too substantial in and of themselves to be ignored.

PART III – PUBLIC CONSULTATION

By definition, consultation, or to consult, means to go to somebody for information or advice; to discuss something with somebody to get their permission for something or to help you make a decision; to look in or at something to get information (Oxford University Press 2005). Individuals consult one another on a regular and frequent basis in many different ways and regarding many different topics. Views are discussed, advice is offered and decisions are made accordingly. Consultation however is built upon the assumption that those being consulted are in a respected position of knowledge, are experts in regards to the topic of concern who speak with authority, or who's opinions of the topic are relevant and appropriate. For example, for advice on travel, one may not consult someone who has never left his or her town, but may rather consult a travel agent or friends that have in fact done some traveling in the past.

The topics and areas of consultation occur in, institutional & social, serious & casual and private & public realms of society. One area however that has been studied for many years and has recently received new attention is consultations regarding teaching effectiveness that occur inside and outside the walls of the University. Students are being consulted both by the institution and by one another based on experience. Are students well equipped to evaluate pedagogy? Some think so, others are skeptical, but despite the disputes and critiques, the consultations persist.

Student Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness

It has been 85 years since students at the University of Washington filled out what was arguably the first student rating forms (Guthrie 1954), and almost that long since the first research study on student ratings was published (Remmers & Brandenburg 1927 as cited in Kulik 2001). The first forms were given to students at the University of Washington and since then, various renditions of the forms have been applied across North America. The use of student evaluations on teaching effectiveness has

been both applauded and criticized (Kulik 2001). While some view the rating systems as being “reliable and valid measures that bring scientific accuracy to the evaluation of teaching”, others argue that the ratings are actually “meaningless quantifications” and are pedagogical misrepresentations (Kulik 2001:10).

When and why are they used?

Edwin Guthrie (1954) notes that “the function of the University may be defined as an attempt to insure that the following generation will be more good, more wise, and more knowing than the present one” (p.1). To ensure that the function is fulfilled, the University administration monitors and evaluates the quality of faculty performance as teachers. Teachers themselves are also continuously monitoring their own success because improvement and the elimination of faults depend on the realization of faults. Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness help by informing teachers as to how their students think about their teaching abilities. The use of formal student appraisals of courses and instructors in was introduced on a widespread level as an attempt to do just that, evaluate higher-level teaching. An extensive research study done in the sixties on 584 colleges and universities (Gustad 1961) revealed that student ratings were sited most often as preferred method of evaluation (Costing, Greenough & Menges 1971). There is no current data as to how many colleges and Universities are using student evaluations today, but judging by the current publications of the subject, the practice is still in use.

The basic and general value of student ratings can be beneficial not only to the individual faculty member him/herself but also to the department and educational institution itself. By its anonymous nature, student ratings provide feedback, which the instructor may not be able to elicit from students in a face-to-face interaction and the systematic procedure can provide the institution itself with a set of general norms against which individual faculty ratings can be judged (Costing et al. 1971). Ideally the individual faculty members can use the results to demonstrate higher teaching effectiveness

to those who are evaluating requests for salary increases but they can also use the ratings and comments from the students as a means of improving their own teaching skills (Ibid). The institution, on the other hand can use the results to spot areas of strength and weakness' in undergraduate teaching and suggest directions for the development of new courses and programs (Ibid). Also the evaluation ratings, if published and made available to the public, could provide the student with a source of information to help him/her in the selection of courses (Ibid). All of these benefits however only exist and can only be considered to the extent that the student ratings represent accurate, reliable and valid appraisals.

Concept clarification: Evaluation and rating

Before we continue, I would like to clarify the conceptual use of the words evaluation and ratings. The literature on the subject uses the two terms interchangeably however, as acknowledged by James Otto, Douglas Sanford Jr. & Douglas Ross (2008), a possible confusion resides in the terminology. "An 'evaluation' implies a conclusion based on some direct definitive measure, whereas a 'rating' connotes data susceptible to interpretation." (365). In this paper, it will be hereon assumed that students, when evaluating instruction, regardless of the terms of evaluation, provide different ratings according to different aspects of the evaluation. In other words, evaluation is interpreted through a set of various ratings provided by the student. The two terms work together, will be considered together and should not cause terminological confusion.

Methods and administration of the evaluations: validity and reliability

Methods of developing, administering and regulating student ratings of courses and instructors have varied considerably and only occasionally have the instruments used been developed under the input and interpretation of a committee of special academic division whose members were specialist in educational measurement (Costing et al. 1971). The methods used for evaluation have traditionally

been in the form of questionnaires or scales and have been developed by people involved with student groups, departmental committees or even by individual faculty members (Ibid). Validity and reliability concerns arise here if it is believed that those involved in all areas of the teaching evaluation process such as developing, administering, completing, regulating and those compiling results, are capable and qualified to do so.

Reliability and Validity

In order to be deemed reliable, the evaluations need to be dependable. A trust that the evaluation is going to yield a true and accurate representation of the instructor's teaching abilities is required. In other words, in order to be reliable, the ratings have to come together to provide valid results that can and have been replicated. Though students were being consulted on a large scale and wide spread level in regards to their instructor's teaching abilities, it was noted that by the 1960s, there was a substantial decline of the systematic use of student ratings (Gustad 1967). They were still being used, but were now being considered through a critical lens. It was suggested that these declines might be due not only to perceived threat to faculty members but to the lack of convincing validity of data (Costing et al. 1971). We will return to this validity issue later on in the paper.

What has been studied? Biases and support for student evaluations

The topic of consulting the student body in regards to teaching effectiveness on campus has been surrounded with many questions, high emotions, and wavering uncertainty, mostly because, despite the controversy, it has become a common practice at universities to use the data from the student ratings of instruction to evaluate faculty members (Ory 2001). Concern has arisen among faculty members alike because there are high stakes involved such as wage increases, tenure considerations and course cancelations. These concerns however have not gone un-noticed as it was

stated in 1995 that there were over fifteen hundred articles and books dealing with research on student ratings (Cashin 1995).

Resistance

Though student ratings have been generally accepted as a sufficient means for evaluating teaching effectiveness, there was considerably wide spread resistance to the student rating evaluations from faculty members. It was suggested that the resistance is rooted in the fact the methods of evaluation have been prepared by individuals of groups that are not necessarily qualified to do so, though there are however several individuals who resist the use of such evaluation methods regardless of who develops, prepares or administers them (Costing et al. 1971). The arguments against the use of student evaluations of courses and teachers are many. There are claims that “the student ratings are unreliable, that the ratings favor the entertainer over the instructor who gets the material across effectively, that the ratings are highly correlated with expected grades (a harder grader would thus get poor ratings), and that students are not competent judges of instruction since long-term benefits of a course may not be clear at the time it is rated” (Ibid: 511).

The validity of student rating measures of instructional quality was severely questioned in the 1970s (Greenwald 1997). Many theorists and researchers have attempted to assess such evaluation processes and along the way, various researchers have kept reviews of studies that have been done (Costing et al. 1971, Kulik 2001). Much of the research on student evaluations of instructors has been concerned with the effect of different variables on these ratings. Numerous studies, mostly done in and after the 1970s, have suggested that student evaluations of teaching effectiveness can be more of a reflection of peripheral factors, such as teacher personality or grading standards (Amady & Rosenthal 1992; Greenwald & Gilmore 1997; Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly 1973; Rodin & Rodin 1972; Williams & Ceci 1997 as cited in Kulik, 2001). These studies, that questioned what the students were actually

evaluating, however were argued to be undeniably flawed and have not yet been properly refuted, corrected or replicated. Furthermore, because not all course evaluation forms are the same and not all methodologies of administering the forms are standardized, the results of the investigations are often discrepant (Aleamoni & Hexner 1980). Yet, other studies, conducted mostly in the late 1970s and 1980s have shown that those who are being ranked high in student ratings, are also usually rated high in other credible teaching effectiveness indicators such as student learning, ratings from outside observers and alumni ratings (Feldman 1989; Murray 1983; Ory, Braskamp & Pieper 1980; Overall & Marsh 1980 as cited in Kulik, 2001). Most experts and institutions have therefore dismissed the critical findings as inconsequential and since the 1980s have accepted the practice of consulting students for teaching evaluations as a relevant way to assess faculty members.

So the reliability and validity doubt that has challenged student evaluations of teaching effectiveness today can be traced back many years. The large number of studies and research done on teaching evaluations indicates that such practices have been questioned, doubted, contested and challenged for many years. The bottom line is that when the results of the evaluations are affecting individual careers, opportunities, salaries and reputations, confidence in such evaluation practices is crucial and the pressure is on to ensure their reliability and validity.

Useful if used correctly

In general, the research surrounding student ratings favors the use of student evaluations and Universities continue to consult their students on the matter. Peter Seldin (1993), distinguished professor and author, in comparing three studies of the same 600 liberal-arts colleges done in 1973, 1983, and 1993, he found that student ratings have become the most widely used - and, in many cases, the only - source of information on teaching effectiveness. He found that the number of institutions using student ratings to evaluate teachers had climbed from 29 per cent (1973) to 68 per cent (1983) to

86 per cent (1993). One reason that student evaluations of teaching effectiveness have become so popular is that they are relatively easy to administer and score (Seldin 1993). The issue however is that they are as just as easy to abuse. Seldin argues that student ratings, when taken, administered and evaluated in proper context are both reliable and valid but he warns against misusing them as the sole source of information gathered concerning teaching performance or asking students questions that they are not equipped to answer. Instead he encourages to use what he argues is the best way to get at both the complexity and individuality of teaching; the teaching portfolio which includes not only students' rating of the professor but also evidence of students' learning in his or her classes, also other teacher's observations of the instructor's teaching, reviews of the instructional materials used in classes, and an essay by the faculty member reflecting on why he or she teaches in a particular way.

Complex situations call for complex measures, and student evaluations alone may not be able to carry the whole load. McKeachie (1997) also addresses this issue. He argues that when it comes to matters such as promotion, a single average score may not suffice as a valid measure of the individuals teaching effectiveness. Great teachers come in different shapes, sizes and styles. Teaching effectiveness can be achieved in many ways and to include ratings of individual characteristics such as warmth, organization or enthusiasm subjectively prioritizes certain styles over others. Some even argue that judging someone on the basis of such characteristics is just as unethical as judging on the basis of race or gender (Scriven 1981 as cited in McKeachie 1997). It is these kinds of issues that encourage inquiry into how many dimensions of teaching should student ratings evaluate, and also as to what the factors or criteria of effective teaching really are. We will revisit this issue later on in the paper.

PART 1V - ONLINE PUBLIC CONSULTATION:

Since the late 1990s, the web is gaining in popularity as a vehicle for collecting survey information. Many consider it to be a cost and time effective method for reaching out to the public that has been known to enhance response rates, especially among computer savvy respondents such as college and University students (Carini et al. 2003). Public consultation practices date back in politics (town hall meetings etc) and even occur in general social conversations (movie ratings, restaurant reviews), and as we've seen in the last section of this paper, is a highly practiced in Universities across the country, but consultation via the Internet is a whole new realm on its own.

As a democratic tool

The Internet has enabled a different kind of communication; a communication that enables near instantaneous interaction over great distances; a communication among that is open for others to see, read participate in and comment on; a communication that voices the otherwise silent voice and a communication where many can participate at different levels, times, dates and places. Online-consultation, commonly referred to as e-consultation is, as a tool, acting as a way to enable citizens to communicate with each, consult one another and participate in critical, rational debate online. It has arguably become a successful tool for democratic communication, public debate and reflects a kind of e-democracy, where "information and communication technologies are being used to engage citizens, support the democratic decision-making processes and to strengthen representative democracy" (Macintosh 2004: 2). The Internet as a medium is facilitating online consultation as a democratic tool and in turn individuals are granted agency to participate and engage in democratic public discourse.

New space, real consequences

There are some fundamental issues that need to be addressed when considering the convergence between any kind of public discourse and the Internet. The Internet has the potential for fostering an

arguably wider and deeper reaching discourse to occur but it is important to acknowledge where this discourse is taking place and how it differs from the traditional public settings. One of the fundamental differences that the Internet brings to traditional public activities and discourses is that it provides a technological infrastructure for computer-mediated communication that occurs across both time and space (Foster 1997). It has overcome perceived limitation of organic face-to-face communication and has even enabled live face-to-face communication that is not constrained by the traditional boundaries of time and space through online video and voice technology. This extra-institutional, virtual, co-present co-communication is creating an online community where real discussions occur, real identities exist and real discourses are framed and they are all occurring outside the physical world. A new virtual community is created and this development challenges the existing theoretical approaches to public discourse as a whole because it is occurring outside of traditional boundaries of the public sphere.

Where it is used

As an activity, e-consultation takes the idea of soliciting information from others and brings it to the Internet and it happens in a number of different way and in a number of different areas in society. The practice has gradually been used more and more when it comes to implementing new governmental policies and regulations but also in general social network websites. Such public solicitation allows for institutions, organizations, groups, and individuals to reach out to the public for their opinions, advice and thoughts about various subjects. Supported by the assumption that the public has valid and relevant opinions, and that their opinions are both respected and are ultimately taken into consideration for decision-making, e-consultation engages the public, voices opinions of the masses to both the masses alike and to social & political leaders. First in order to contextualize the democratic potential of utilizing e-consultation, I will illustrate how, when and why the government has used such systems. Next I will discuss how another institution, the University has consulted its students online,

and finally I will look at where e-consultation is occurring outside the walls and restraints of the institution on online website such as Ratemyprofessor.com.

1). Government: Institution

It is often a concern in political discourse when the government becomes both isolated from and unresponsive to its citizens. In order to enhance democracy, a worthwhile transfer of ideas and concerns needs to take place from the bottom up where the governed are able to communicate with their governors in a meaningful, efficient and clear way. So it has been suggested that consultation initiatives via the Internet, e-consultations, may have the potential to improve this stalled two-way flow of communication, increase information distribution and facilitate public feedback (Stephens et al. 2006). By counteracting the traditional one-way, top down flow of the mass media by means of the Internet, a redirection of power and agency in mass communication is occurring. The Internet is thus in a sense, leveling the political playing field and also balancing out the distribution capability of public information as well. Individuals are being given the opportunity to speak out within the mass media discourses and are not only being consulted by the government but also are giving the opportunity to consult with one another, online, like never before. Citizens are able to deliberate freely in a virtual world and belong to online communities that have direct effects on the 'real', material or physical world.

The use of new information technologies for public consultation has become a key component of interactive policy-making (Borins & Brown 2007). In governmental and policy-making affairs, e-consultation has been considered as an alternative to other forms of public consultation. It is meant to support traditional forms of public consultations such as written communications, attendance at public meetings or hearings chaired by legislators or regulators and is hoped to help alleviate or solve the current concern of a democracy deficit (Ibid). Though e-consultation has never been central to its

policy process, the federal and municipal governments of Canada have made use of such online possibilities and tools.

In the last twenty years, the Canadian government has incorporated e-consultations to policy development and decision-making and has solicited the public's input on major public policy issues (Borins & Brown 2007). The public may not be experts in policy-making, or in politics but they are directly affected by the policies themselves. Their experience and role that they play as individuals in society make their opinions relevant, valid and deserving of respect and acknowledgement by authorities. In the early 1990s, former finance minister Paul Martin made frequent use of online public consultation in developing budget measures and to reduce the deficit. The Department of Finance used the Internet to both publish and obtain feedback on budget documents (Ibid). In 1996, as part of a major reform in the government's regulatory process, consulting both stakeholders and Canadians in general became an actual requirement. By 2000, divisions of the Canadian government, the Privy Council Office and the Communications Secretariat, partnered with the Public Works and Government Services Canada to initiate and develop online methodologies and an official e-consultation community (Ibid). In 2004, the Treasury Board of the Government Communications Policy was revised to include a section on consultation and citizen engagement and a permanent 'Consulting with Canadians' online portal was established the next year (Borins & Brown 2007). This new and improved policy required federal departments and agencies to demonstrate that Canadian citizens had been consulted and that they have had an opportunity to participate in developing or modifying regulations and regulatory programs (Government of Canada, 2008b). All public consultations had to be published on the website and all consultation feedback had to be adequately processed. Furthermore, procedures were set in place for online consultations (Borins & Brown 2007).

The 'Consulting with Canadians' website was a part of the Canadian Government's commitment to finding new and innovative ways to consult with, and engage Canadian citizens in democratic debate. It aimed to enhance public awareness of government consultation activities, create opportunities for Canadians to participate in government consultations, develop the government's capacity for engaging Canadians online and to improve management of government consultations across departments. The site provides the public with "single-window access to a list of consultations from selected government departments and agencies" and provides a structured, single-point of access to on- and off-line consultations (Government of Canada, 2008a: na). The site is meant to be a convenient way for Canadians to find out what the Government is consulting Canadians about. It also provides one place from which access to these consultations is possible which makes it easier for Canadians to find consultations of interest to them without having to understand how government is structured to determine which department is handling a specific consultation (Ibid). Not only does the site provide the public with information regarding proposed policies and allows citizens to send in their comments and views on matters ranging from global issues to food security policies.

E-consultation for policy-making decisions in practice

There are many examples of where e-consultation has been used in policy-making decisions and processes (Baskoy 2007; Borins & Brown 2007; Stephens et al. 2006; Whyte & Macintosh 2001). The following example illustrates where and how the Canadian government had used the Internet in its effort to successfully consult with the public but also showcases failures to the democratic potentials of this practice.

In 2003, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Minister Bill Graham initiated a public consultation project (Borins & Brown 2007). The initiative involved a variety of activities that included town halls all across Canada which were in person events complemented by an advanced

online notice, simultaneous webcasting and online posting of the results, expert round tables, a national youth forum, meetings with the provinces and parallel activities by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The goal was to 'empower' citizens with a means of communicating their views on foreign affairs to government officials. By soliciting bottom up ideas for the public, citizens are included in the 'agenda setting, 'analysis' and creation' stages of foreign policy adjustments, changes and establishments.

Technology played a big role in both the distribution of information and the collection of public feedback (Borins & Brown 2007). Consultation documents were made available to the public online and approximately 28,000 copies of the position paper were downloaded. Over 3800 responses to the paper's five themes were submitted and a moderated, bilingual online discussion forum for each of the five themes attracted over 2000 participants. The town halls were broadcast to the public via webcasts and documents from the expert round tables were made available on the consultation website along with video interviews with the participants. Foreign Minister Graham was actively involved in the process and attended all of the town hall meetings and five of his Cabinet colleagues became involved as well. Their extended participation was seen to have sparked public interest and increased public participation. The Foreign Affairs and International Trade department made a conscious effort to expand and articulate the tools and etiquette involved in the consultation project and established proper rules of conduct for the online discussion forum participation. The efforts made to establish rules and regulations for participation allowed for an accessible and accurate source of information about the process and a record of what was being said. It has also been suggested that such an extensive consultation project could not have been carried out in three months without the website and online tools that were used (Ibid).

Though the consultation was deemed a success, what followed the project was a democratic disappointment. It was said to be an “artistic success but a political failure’ (Borins & Brown 2007: 257). When it came time for Foreign Minister Graham to address the consultation results, his response to Canadians was essentially a personal statement in which he asserted that the results would inform his discussions with Cabinet colleagues. The disappointment was that no proper documentation was released with a summary of the public opinions expressed during the consultation. Furthermore, no documentation was released stating how the results of the consultation affected the decision-making within each theme category that was consulted upon. The response and participation in the online initiative was rendered irrelevant. Without a statement on how the information gathered from the citizens was used, there is no proof that the initiative itself was merely an empty effort to fool the public into what they thought was an inclusive, democratic, rational and interactive policy making decision processes.

Other than political realm: issues of regulation, the institution vs. the social sphere

Though the practice of consulting the public online has been arguably successful in its efforts to improve communication, e-consultation is by no means automatically democratizing. We can see how e-consultation efforts have created a power shift in various areas of society though things like the blogosphere and interactive media. When it comes to government material however, e-consultation strengthens the democratic processes by providing a role for citizens between elections but only to the extent that citizen’s input is properly managed, put to use and accounted for. E-consultation however is not only useful in politics; it is being increasing used in other areas of society.

II). University: Institution

Given the increasingly computer and Internet savvy student body, the University has also started to make use of the advantages offered by online consultation by conducting their student

evaluations of instruction online. Traditionally, the student evaluations of instruction have been conducted during class time, at the end and sometimes also in the middle of the term and though received with initial resistance mostly from faculty members, Universities across the country have been considering conducting these evaluations online.

“The new online evaluation form mirrors the paper evaluation form; it has the same questions and format, which allows integration of the evaluation reports from both systems” (Hardy 2003: 32). Given that University sponsored evaluation results are often used for promotion and tenure decisions, online rating systems, just like the traditional paper form evaluations systems, must be able to provide not only valid results but reliable ones as well (Ballantyne 2003). There are few research studies comparing online vs. paper modes of student surveys and they report mixed findings (Carini et al. 2003). Several single-campus studies found a few substantial differences between the responses of students who completed the same survey via the Web and paper (Layne, DeCristoforo & McGinty 1999; Olsen, Wygant & Brown 1999; Tomsic, Hendel & Matross 2000 as cited in Carini et al. 2003). Other research suggests that the reliability of student ratings of instruction tend to be fairly comparable for both ratings obtained online, and for ratings obtained in the classroom where there were adequate agreements between the overall ratings (Ballantyne 2003, Hardy 2003, McGhee & Lowell 2003).

Among other areas researched, comparisons between off and on line evaluations were made in regards to response rates, anonymity, confidentiality, and authentication. Response rates were found to be somewhat lower using online systems, however Universities that have switched over to online format have managed to increase the response rate through effective strategies such as faculty support, increased on-campus Internet access, favorable incentives (Ballantyne 2003). Anonymity, confidentiality and authentication are relatively easy to achieve for paper evaluations. They are done during the class in question, one form is given to each student present and identification on the form is

not required. Online however, these requirements are not so simple. In order to preserve the reliability and validity of the evaluations, additional safeguards need to be in place (Ibid). In order to ensure that students submit only one review per course or instructor or that they were/are in fact enrolled in the course, students would need to somehow identify themselves by entering their student numbers for example. Their identities need to be authenticated but in turn must be protected to ensure anonymity confidentiality. Without these safeguards, the validity of the results will be compromised, not necessarily completely but enough that their use in formal evaluations should be eliminated.

Extra-institutionalized online consultations: RateMyProfessor.com

Consulting with the public via the Internet as a means of requesting feedback is not only practiced and regulated within large institutions but are also, to a large extent, practiced in social spheres as well. E-consultation within social matters on the other hand is not as clear-cut as online political consultations or University sponsored consultations. Social sphere consultations do not necessarily require formal documentation of the effects on the physical world or the influence it had on decision making and opinion forming processes. Any result of an online social consultation, particularly informal consultation between individuals is usually small scale and is evaluated and applied by individuals personally. The decisions that these types of consultations affect are single individual decisions and though they may in some way or another have implications, often immense, that affect others in society, they are not always institutionalized and formally documented, monitored or regulated.

Intro to RMP

Though the practice of students rating their instructors dates back to the 1920s (Guthrie 1954), the emergence of the Internet has made a significant impact on the practice, use and discourse surrounding such evaluations. Not only had the Internet changed the format, structure, procedures and

complications of the institutionalized student consultation, but it has also enabled a different form of the student consultation to occur outside the walls of the institution. Just as the institution consulted students on their opinions of instruction, students are consulting each other in a similar way. The rules however are not the same. Different issues have arisen and consequences have appeared but this virtual peer-to-peer consultation practice is growing in popularity and is maintaining its position in pedagogical discourse.

What is the RPM website and why does it exist?

Online student rating site ratemyprofessor.com has been suggested to be a "rhetorical phenomenon that is born out of our culture's fascination with evaluation and Internet based communication" (Ritter, 2008: 259). The Rate My Professors (RMP) website offers an online community forum where students can anonymously share evaluations of instructors with others. John Swapceinski, founder of the site, has argued that students are increasingly viewing themselves as value-conscious consumers of their educational experience and that the site is simply a response to that shift in student's educational perspective (Gilroy 2003 as cited in Sonntag et al. 2008). Deemed as an online student resource, the point of this word-of-mouth transfer of opinions and experiences is to make information available so that students can choose better instructors and courses and thereby improve their education (Davison & Price 2008).

Word-of-mouth networks in which individuals share opinions and experiences are available online over a wide range of topics. They serve as online feedback mechanisms that "harness the bidirectional communication capabilities of the Internet to engineer large-scale, word-of-mouth networks" (Dellarocas 2003: 1407). Word-of-mouth communication is one of the most ancient ways of communicating history; the Internet brings it into a modern setting. The concept dates back in history where stories are told from generation to generation and advice passed on to others. The future is then

built upon stories and lessons of the past; advice from those with experience. An inherent trust is woven into past experience, especially from those who share common interests. A well-known application of such online feedback mechanisms is for building trust in online consumer markets such as on eBay (Dellarocas 2003). Online traders are held accountable through ratings of their service and reliability. Trader reputations then become publicly known and may therefore “affect the behavior of the entire community toward that trader in the future (Ibid). Traders then have an incentive to behave well toward each other in order foster trust in future traders. Without such accountability, the online trading market is otherwise too risky. Ratings and reviews from previous deals help to settle insecurities and secure a goal-based trust and confidence in the reliability of the exchange and because traders have shared interests (Koehn 2003). Internet users are now rating almost everything from telephone companies, to movies, and the list goes on and on. Ratemyprofessor.com works on a similar concept.

In comparison to the Institutionalized consultations 1: Dynamics

RMP differs from the last two examples of online consultation in two fundamental ways. First of all, the dynamics of the consultations are different. Whereas both government and University efforts towards public consultation are in the form of the institution seeking input from either citizens or students, RMP is in the form of students seeking input from other students alike.

In comparison to the Institutionalized consultations 2: accountability

Secondly, unlike in government sponsored consultations regarding political matters and University sponsored student evaluations of instruction, RMP, as an equalizing, democratizing tool, does not directly depend if and how the results of the consultation are put to use and implemented into the framework in question. RMP, though a commercial site, is not institution-sponsored, and those who are soliciting the information are not held accountable for documenting how the information affected

their decision-making, where the institution, in order for consult-ees to feel that their input is making a difference, has to report how the consultations will have an effect. For example, the government has to publicly document how the results of their public consultation have affected policy development, changes or implementation. The University also needs to generate faith that the comments provided are in fact being given to instructors as a way for them to improve their teaching. Otherwise, the consultations lose credibility and are simply seen as empty attempts to convince the public, citizens or students that their opinions do in fact matter.

Details about the RMP website

Davison and Price (2008) offer an overview of how the RMP site works. Basically, the site lists several categories, which visitors may use to rate an instructor. The categories include easiness, helpfulness, clarity, sexual hotness, and the student's overall interest in the course prior to taking it. All of the categories are measured on a five point Likert scale and an overall score, which is an average of the helpfulness and clarity ratings, is given to each instructor. High overall scores produce a symbol of a smiling face next to the instructors name and the low overall scores produce a frowning face. Furthermore, instructors that received high hotness scores receive a chili pepper next to their names. Students are also invited to offer open-ended comments about the teacher or the course itself. As an effort to protect all users- both teachers and students, there are clearly marked guidelines as to what is considered acceptable or not. Students are encouraged to be honest, objective and to limit their comments to the professor's professional abilities rather than personal remarks (RMP 2009). Negative comments that offer constructive criticism are useful and welcomed but comments that bash a professor on a personal level are not and comments that are at all deemed inappropriate; ie that are "libelous, defamatory, indecent, vulgar or obscene, pornographic, sexually explicit or sexually suggestive, racially, culturally, or ethnically offensive, harmful, harassing, intimidating, threatening, hateful,

objectionable, discriminatory, or abusive, or which may or may appear to impersonate anyone else” will be removed from the site (RMP 2009).

Awareness and utilization

RateMyProfessors.com boasts that it is the “Internet's largest listing of collegiate professor ratings, with more than 6.8 million student-generated ratings of over 1 million professors” and that it “currently offers ratings on college and university professors from over 6000 schools across Canada, the United States, England, Scotland and Wales with thousands of new ratings added each day” (Rate My Professors 2009). Similar websites such as pickaprof.com, myprofessorsucks.com, rateyourprof.com and campusdirt.com all offer similar features but RMP is by far the most popular and wide reaching student-rating site of them all. According to a sociologists Elizabeth Davison and Jamie Price (2008), the website is extremely profitable. Since its launch in 1999 the for-profit website has had great business success and now sells adds to corporations such as Visa, Allstate and Citibank.

Davidson and Price (2008) reported several RMP awareness and utilization statistics. Of the 261 students that they surveyed, 92% had heard of the RMP website, mostly from friends and classmates. Most (80%) had visited the website more than once, but less than half (30%) claimed to have posted on the site. Most of the respondents (84%) however deemed the site as helpful and almost all of them (95%) believed it to be credible. So even though students seemed more apprehensive about providing ratings, most of them seemed to trust the ratings provided on the website. It is quite clear, students are not only browsing the ratings, but they are registering on the site and participating in the evaluations. With a daily traffic average of over 200 000 unique visitors per day, RMP is incredibly popular and has proven to be commercially lucrative.

PART V - WHAT'S ALL THE HYPE ABOUT??

Students are flocking to the RMP website for several reasons, whether it be to speak their minds, to offer their experienced opinions, to seek advice about courses, to vent about a professor, to praise a professor or simply for entertainment sake. What is it however about the website that is so appealing that it is attracting such mass participation?

First and foremost, not only has the website has provided a place for students to voice their opinions about the state of their education but it has also empowered students with the ability to choose how they are going to experience their education. University is no longer luck of the draw. Students can choose their courses and professors according to what is important to them. If they want challenge, an easy A, and entertaining professor or a course that is a guaranteed walk in the park, they can browse the site for reviews and ratings provided by their peers who have (ideally) taken the course, or have been taught by the professor in question. Secondly, the idea here is that the website is bringing the face-to-face schoolyard chatter into an online public forum. These 'ratings' are already happening on campus, off campus, between friends and classmates. RMP is simply organizing them, and making them public so that other students can use them. Students are already consulting each other about such things as what courses to take and professors to take from. In a sense, the site is just making these consultations less personal, more public, and less dialogic by making the ratings anonymous, organizing them and publishing them online.

This peer-to-peer consultation fundamentally separates online student evaluations of teaching from institutionalized ones. There are structural, theoretical and foundational differences between RMP and institutionalized student evaluations of teaching. Structurally, the consultation is occurring outside the boundaries institution; theoretically, the consultation is empowering the students to choose who they want to teach them; and at the foundation level, the info being collected is for the other

students alike, not hierarchical authorities. Unlike within the University where the information gathered is used by the institution to make collective decisions about not only the quality of teaching but also promotion decisions, the information posted online is to be used by other students alike on an individual basis. The difference is in the dynamics of the consultations themselves. Peer-to-peer consultations are going to have different dynamics than institution-to-student consultations. The stakes are different, the goals are different, the motivations are different, and the audience is different.

Despite the websites popularity and the advantages that it provides for students, RMP has been criticized to great extents. There are serious issues that beg for attention from trusting students' abilities to evaluate pedagogy to the fundamental basics of what is exactly being evaluated on the site. There may even be just as much attention on the issues about their site as there is excitement about it. The critics begin with the issues that surround publicly publishing the students' evaluations, then the regulation of the site come into questions, the effect that these evaluations have on public discourse of pedagogy, how professors are indirectly impacted and the inconsistent definitions of teaching effectiveness.

Publishing evaluations

The primary focus of the RMP is that student evaluations are being published online and are free for anyone, not only students, to browse. There are both advantages and disadvantages to publishing student ratings of instruction for the public. Even though student evaluations have been accepted as sufficient and valid measures of teaching effectiveness and of student learning, there is less certainty as to their 'consequential validity'; the extent which ratings can affect future teaching, course selection, and indirectly affect personnel decisions (Greenwald 1997, Howell & Symbaluk 2001). Howell & Symbaluk (2001) noted that though the benefits and downfalls of publication were agreed upon and acknowledged by both faculty and students, students remained in favor of publishing student

evaluations of instruction where as faculty were not. The most prominent advantage to publishing student ratings was that they would facilitate course and instructor selection. Disadvantages however expressed concern that publishing student ratings may influence students' expectations in a way that may be resistant to change and a concern for both student and instructor privacy. Negative and/or positive ratings may influence students' perceptions of a course or instructor before he/she has a chance to experience it/him/her without prior bias and a self-fulfilling prophecy may develop and cause a halo effect regardless of what occurs in the classroom. Furthermore, publishing the ratings may change the way students evaluate their professors. For example, they may hold back in fear of their identity being exposed or they might change their evaluation based on who will be reading the results.

These findings suggest is that "the judgments of faculty and students are anchored by the salience of what they stand to lose or gain if ratings are made public" (Howell & Sambaluk 2001: 795). The information gained from published student ratings (PSRs) could greatly affect a students' educational experience and furthermore enable students to hold their professor accountable for their actions. That being said however, if the ratings are published, professors must accept the potential negative publicity but more importantly, may fall victim to validity issues involved with student ratings that are constantly being contested.

Students evaluating pedagogy

Something that comes up again and again in the literature is whether or not students are capable and well equipped to evaluate pedagogy in the first place. "That students are able to provide reliable and valid evaluations of instructional quality has come to be recognized" (Aleamoni 1987; Costin et al. 1971 as cited in Aleamoni & Hexner 1980: 67). Researchers, though they always come back to accepting this practice as sufficient for the task, still question its validity. RMP, however, adds another level to questioning students' authority to evaluate their instructors.

Just as one would get a better notion of the merits of the dinner from the dinner guests than from the cook himself (Guthrie 1954), students are asked to evaluate their instructors based on their experience and subjective opinion of the instructors teaching quality and effectiveness. Students are well equipped to evaluate their professors because they have had significant experience with the professors (Otto et al. 2008). McKeachie (1990) concluded " that despite faculty doubts about the ability of students to appreciate good teaching, the research evidence indicates that students are generally good judges - surprisingly so" (p. 6 as cited in Kindred & Mohammed 2005). Students receive first hand experience of the instructors teaching abilities as they are the ones that are spending the time and learning from the instructor. This may hold true for evaluations sponsored by the institution, but it is not that simple for RMP. Within the institution, the paper evaluations are distributed in the classroom within class time. Online, there are ways to ensure that those filling out the rating form are actually registered and participating in the course. On RMP however, the precautions discussed earlier for online evaluations are not applied. There is no way of knowing that those who rate a professor or his/her course have actually taken the course in question, not only making it possible for professors to rate themselves and each other, but also for anyone imaginable to submit a rating. Why someone would want to take the time rate a professor for reasons other than providing feedback of their experience is a whole other issue in itself but the point is that it is possible. Individuals, whether they have taken the course or not can that rate professors based purely on hearsay or even just for fun. The RMP website, in the guidelines provided encourage that "comments should only be posted by students who have taken a class from the professor. Please limit one comment per person per course". The site also asks professors not to rate one another. However, it is not possible for the site to verify these details so the site merely encourages fair play rather than actively enforces it. Unless the rater signs in with an account, which is not obligatory, RMP has no idea who is providing the ratings. The website

does have some monitoring mechanisms in place but not to an extent that they claim statistical relevancy. The site acknowledges its downfalls and encourages users not to forget that the ratings are subjective.

Again, apart from the validity issues surrounding the practice and methods of RMP, the actual practice of allowing students to rate their professors raises more concerns. It is true that the practice does grant students agency to express themselves and to have a voice in their education. Students can express both their satisfaction and dissatisfaction in their academic experience and they act as a buffer on the traditionally widely separated power dynamic between student and teacher. Putting such power in the hands of the students has however been a subject of concern as well. Critics of the practice fear that students often use these rating forms to get even with their professors and that the ratings are more of a personality contest than anything else.

There are many studies that point to this more critical view of the effectiveness of student ratings (Amady & Rosenthal 1992; Greenwald & Gilmore 1997; Naftulin, Ware & Donnelly 1973; Rodin & Rodin, 1972; Williams & Ceci 1997 as cited in Kulik, 2001). These studies suggest, “that instead of measuring teaching effectiveness, ratings reflect peripheral factors, such as teacher personality or grading standards” (Kulik, 2001:16). For these critics, the ratings measured low teaching standards, showmanship, body language, leniency to good grades and even variations in vocal pitches and gestures (Ibid). Though these studies have been criticized as being undeniably flawed and have arguably not yet been properly corrected, replicated or refuted, most experts have dismissed the findings as inconsequential. They however still need to be acknowledged and considered.

In the 1970s, one of the main concerns about validity, among a variety of others, was the possible effect that grades had on student ratings (Greenwald 1997). This possible grade-induced bias was based on the idea that a teacher could get a good rating simply by assigning good grades (Snyder

& Clair, 1976 in Greenwald 1997). There have been studies done that support these suggested biases where grades were manipulated to see if ratings changed accordingly (Chacko 1983, Holmes, 1972, Powell 1977, Vasta & Sarmiento 1979, Worthington & Wong 1979 as cited in Greenwald 1997). The obtained grades could affect how the students evaluate their course or their professor. Not only could high grades influence better ratings, but also poor grades could influence poor ratings. If the ratings are attempting to measure teaching effectiveness, then the grade bias definitely challenges the validity as there is no way of knowing if it was poor teaching quality, reduced learning, difficulty or the course or if it was lack of effort on behalf of the student that resulted in the low grade.

This brings us to arguably the most controversial issue of all; what are student evaluations of teaching effectiveness actually evaluating? How teaching effectiveness is defined is crucial to assessing and comparing all aspects of teaching evaluations. If students have different perspectives than do the instructors, or if the instructors have different expectations than the institution, and furthermore if different rating systems define teaching effectiveness differently from one another, then reliability of the assessments or the comparisons of the evaluations is compromised.

Defining teaching effectiveness

Defining teaching effectiveness is the overarching shortcoming of student ratings both online or offline, institutionalized or not. Student rating systems fundamentally a flawed practice as the ratings are meant to evaluate teaching effectiveness, yet teaching effectiveness itself has yet to have defined measurable criterion (Kulik 2001). Evaluating teaching and instructors is more complicated than simply measuring teaching effectiveness; there are many other factors that are involved in what is considered to be 'good teaching'. It requires a great variety of teachers and researchers to staff a university. And also, most importantly, good teachers cannot be reduced to a type.

Traditionally, there has been a commonly agreed upon understanding in regards to the “practical impossibility of finding a single perfect criterion of teaching effectiveness” and institutions have continued to use student ratings as a way of both improving teaching and monitoring the quality of the education that the University is providing (Kulik 2001: 10). Earlier in the paper, the function of the University was defined as “an attempt to insure that the following generation will be more good, more wise, and more knowing than the present one” (Guthrie 1954: 1) which suggests that the University administration should know and evaluate the quality of faculty performance as teachers. It also suggests that it is important that teachers themselves continue to monitor their own success because improvement and the elimination of faults depend on the realization of faults. Studies done to measure effectiveness of student evaluations on teaching improvement suggest that rating feedback helps teachers improve their teaching performance (Cohen 1980; Marsh, Fleiner & Thomas 1975; Overall & Marsh 1979 as cited in Kulik 2001). The validity of the ratings however can be compromised and may not be entirely beneficial for instructors to use to improve their teaching abilities and styles. There is a possible negative effect of low ratings on teaching motivation and also it has been found that students’ perceptions of effective teaching has arguably favored passive listening, which requires the least effort on the part of the student (McKeachie 1997). This kind of disconnect between student and professor perceptions of ‘good teaching’ trivializes the process of instructor evaluation, challenges pedagogy and devalues education.

This disconnect in pedagogical perspectives does not stop within the University. A disconnect between the University and RMP also exists and its consequences are substantial. Not only is this difference in perspectives causing confusion, animosity and frustration among faculty, but it is also arguably the outcome of a shift in public discourse of pedagogy driven by commercial culture rhetoric. If we consider that is being rated on the site, we can see the difference in terms of motivation for the

evaluations. Where institutionalized evaluations are meant to evaluate teaching effectiveness to improve teaching, monitor educational quality, and to aid in personnel and promotion decisions, online student ratings are meant to separate the nasty from the nice, the boring from the entertaining, the challenging from the flighty, the serious from the funny.

It can be argued that data from online rating sites such as RMP are characterized by biases such as instructors' personality, charisma and grading leniency, and are therefore not a valuable measure of for either faculty performance or student learning (Costin et al. 1971, Greenwald 1997, McKeachie 1997). But still, judging by the amount of traffic on RMP site alone, students continue to not only visit, but participate on the site regardless of warnings of its ability to effectively and reliably produce valid data about teaching quality and effectiveness. This extreme popularity of the site suggests that perhaps what the University constitutes as 'teaching effectiveness' is not in line with the students' perspectives.

So if they are not interested in statically relevant data on teaching quality and effectiveness, what are the students looking for? Though there have been numerous studies done with conflicting results indicating bias and lack of bias in student evaluations of teaching, effectiveness in terms of students learning has been consistently positively correlated with instructor clarity and instructor helpfulness (Otto et al. 2008). The RMP does have clarity and helpfulness as part of the evaluation, but what it also included, that is not included in institutional evaluations, is easiness and sexual hotness ratings.

In 1954, Edwin Guthrie noted that "The goals of teaching are defined in terms of values for which we have no accepted measuring sticks" and because of this, it should be accepted that we will never reach a completely factual basis for evaluating the operation of teaching (p.2). He also acknowledged that all the measurements are subjective and depend on personal values and tastes of the observer. That however was before RMP existed and before students were considering sexual hotness

in their evaluations. Attractiveness is an important dimension to consider as students posting to RMP can rate attractiveness of a professor by assigning a "chili pepper" icon to indicate "sexual hotness". This concept is not defined for users anywhere on the site but is generally understood as the physical attractiveness of the instructor (Kindred & Mohammed 2008).

I would argue that this chili pepper part of the rating scale is the product of an entertainment factor inherently embedded in schoolyard banter. Beyond that however, some may even argue that it is entirely unethical to judge professors in regards to their appearance (Scriven 1981 as cited in McKeachie 1997). Rather recently however, a study using the data from the RMP website was conducted that set out to demonstrate the relations between Quality, Easiness and Sexiness for 3 190 professors at 25 Universities (Felton et al. 2004). They found that a students' evaluation of professor's quality are significantly affected by how easy the course and how sexy the instructor. These results were welcomed with discontent and shame towards the non-institutionalized online student rating sites. It is these kinds of results that suggested that the ratings on the RMP were biased and invalid; not worthy as a consideration of teaching effectiveness at all.

The truth of the matter is that these same results have been found again and again by researchers studying campus-sponsored student ratings. The studies that indicate the presence of a 'Halo Effect' created by level of the instructor's attractiveness in student satisfaction of instruction. Several studies have found a positive correlation between physical attractiveness and effectiveness ratings (Feeley 2002; Moritsch & Suter 1988; Pike 1999 as cited in Felton et al. 2004). Professors who were rated as easy were perceived as sexier and of higher quality than professors rated as not easy. In other words, a good-looking professor can do no wrong.

If students are in fact more generally satisfied with attractive instructors, maybe the chili pepper rating, as shallow as it seems and as controversial as it is, does actually play a legitimate part in

students' course and professor selection. It may not be a statistically valid or even fair way of evaluating professors, but one must not forget, RMP is a commercial website, and will cater to what the students want. After all, RMPs goal is to generate profit rather than education. If students want to know, then RMP will separate the hot from the not. Davidson and Price (2008) however found that 'hotness' was rated the least 'not very important' factor in selecting an instructor and 'easiness' as the second least. The 'very important' factors, indicated by students were professor interest, helpfulness and professor knowledge. So students do recognize what suffices as indicators of teaching quality, but it is evidently not what they are interested in.

This brings us to the second controversial rating scale on RMP; the easiness rating. In the same study, Davidson and Price (2008) found that "when commenting about instructors in the open-ended statement, students do not offer many rigorous indicators of teaching effectiveness" (p. 11). In the evaluation of qualitative remarks, they found that almost half (46%) of the students referred to the easiness aspect of the course. The emphasis on easiness suggests, "that students today are not interested in the learning process or the end product of knowledge" (Ibid: 11). Instead, they are seeking the path of least resistance to obtaining a University or college degree.

Do grades affect student evaluations of teaching? This question has been studied numerous times dating back to 1928 by various researchers with conflicting results. Edwin Guthrie (1954), whose studies are referenced by almost all teaching evaluation studies done in the last 50 years, contemplated this particular bias. "Do the grades which a student is currently making in a course affect student judgments materially" (Guthrie 1954, p.6). In his study done in 1954 on a large class in the medical school at the University of Washington, he found that "student judgment of an instructor ...is independent of the grade the student is getting" (p.6). He concluded this by telling each student which third of the class their grades fell in. When their ratings of the instructor were compared to with the

class standing, he found that the total ratings were similar across all three divisions. Furthermore, in a consecutive study, Guthrie also found that there is no relationship between improvement in grades and ratings given. There have however been numerous studies done on this potential grade bias and if organized by year of publication, a shift starts to become apparent.

From the late 1920s up until the early 1960s, the studies indicated that there was in fact no relationship between students' ratings of instructors and their expected or actual grades in a course (Blumb 1936; Cohen & Humphries 1960; Garverick & Carter 1962; Guthrie 1954; Remmers 1928 as cited in Costin et al. 1971). Starting in the 1950s however, more and more studies began yielding opposing conclusions. Researchers were beginning to discover that perhaps grades do in fact affect a student's evaluation on teaching. From the 1950s to the present time, there are far more studies that agreed the positive relationship (Elliot 1950; Rayder 1968; Treffinger & Feldhusen 1970; Weaver 1960 as cited in Costing et al. 1971, Cerrito 2000; Stumpf & Freedman 1979; Hudson 1984; Engdahl, Keating & Perrachione 1993 as cited in Felton et al. 2004, Greenwald & Gilmore 1997 as cited in Kulik 2001, Bowling 2008). Nathan Bowling (2008) in attempt to replicate studies done in the past, did a study that examined the relationship between student ratings of course easiness and course quality. He replicated a study done by Felton and colleagues' (2004) but used a much larger sample of professors and a larger number of schools. The correlation between perceived easiness and perceived course quality that he found ($r = 0.57$) was similar to that obtained by Felton et al. ($r = 0.61$). The finding suggests that, in general, "student ratings of professors' teaching performance are highly contaminated by course easiness" (Bowling 2008: 461). There is also evidence that "instructors will lessen the degree of course challenge in an attempt to bolster students' evaluations of their course" (Ryan 1980, Trout 1997, 2000 in Felton et al. 2004: 4). Ryan (1980) actually found that, as a result of university's using teaching evaluations for promotion and tenure, 22% of instructors reduced material

covered while only 7% increased, and 40% made exams easier while only 9% made them harder (Felton et al. 2004).

The easiness scale on RMP measures “if the class an easy A, or how much work do you need to do in order to get a good grade”. It is not included in the ‘Overall Quality’ rating but Kindred & Mohammed (2005) reported, “that of the numerical ratings provided on RMP, the easiness score was the most consulted by students” (Sontag et al. 2008: 2). Intellectual discovery is not on the agenda, students are after satisfaction at the cost with the least resistance.

PART VI - IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS

Online rating sites such as RMP have turned the traditional power relations of academia on its side. Students are now evaluating their teachers on their own terms and they are choosing how they want to experience their education. Information about how other students rate their professors is being widely dispersed to other students alike, creating a community bound together by a powerful common thread- democratic discourse. Through the website, students feel that they are able to extend the process of peer inquiry beyond their immediate circle of friends. Outside the boundaries of the institution, evaluations are made public for all to see. There is however very little regulation on the RMP website, and the results, valid or not, are having an indirect impact on the lives of those being evaluated. Not only that, but they are also a result of, if not a contributing factor to the change in the way the public thinks about education.

Shaping public pedagogy

Originally, institutional student rating systems were set up to serve two purposes; to help administrators monitor teaching quality and to help teachers improve their teaching (Guthrie, 1954). Currently, instructors have a lot more riding on the outcome of the evaluations. University sponsored student evaluations of teaching are used in hiring new faculty, in annual reviews of current faculty, in promotion and tenure decisions, in school accreditation reviews, assigning courses and more (Kulik 2001). Much like how faculty members warned not only against students' but also rating systems' capacity to critically and fairly assess quality instruction, they caution over students' ability to evaluate pedagogy. To what extent do student have authority to rate their professors? Does their experience alone give them that power to fairly do so or do their personal stakes in the matter fudge the numbers? Do students realize the impact of their actions? Whether it is by pencil or mouse, students have the power to make evaluation choices that have significant implications and many argue that they are ill

equipped to do so. It is now not only a matter of a potential impact on individual faculty members, but a matter of the impact that their collective actions have on how the public thinks, acts and talks about the essence of higher education as a whole. The practice of evaluating teaching effectiveness has moved out of the privacy of the institution and into the public realm of the Internet, ultimately enabling students to become leading agents in shaping the public rhetoric of pedagogy (Ritter, 2008).

The RMP website does not claim to offer statistically valid ratings. The site is a self-exclaimed, “listing of opinions and should be judged as such” (RMP 2009). When it is put that way, one can see that the results of the site cannot be compared to those of the institution and should be taken and considered for what it is; simply a resource for students to provide and receive subjective feedback on professor's teaching methods and insight into the courses. Even though the results of the RMP ratings are not officially used for institutional decision-making, the results are indirectly affecting faculty careers. There is anxiety among faculty that popularity is gaining in importance over good quality instruction and sites like RMP are contributing to the problem. Course registration for example, can have an impact on individual faculty members. Courses can be canceled or repeated, resources are distributed, and personnel decisions can be influenced all by course registration numbers. If registration for a specific course is high, resources become more available. If course registration is low however, a course can be canceled. Reputations can be built but also can be broken down. If no one signs up for a course, re-evaluation of both the course and the professor are a great possibility. On the other hand, those professors whose courses have the highest registration rates are seen as assets to the institution and are granted more freedom and often more compensation. Some professors are gaining in popularity over others, but for reasons that are the consequence of a greater shift in public discourse in pedagogy. Students are choosing their professors relative to criteria that fulfills a pedagogy that is fuelled not by

the drive for an enriched knowledge but by a pedagogy that is influenced by a consumer and academic culture convergence.

The essence of education, the art of teaching, and the fundamental attitude towards higher education is changing and it will have a serious impact on the academy, as we know it. Kelly Ritter (2008), associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina characterizes this shift in current public rhetorics of pedagogy as part of a “larger movement in extra-institutional discourse toward ranking as assessing people and products (p. 259). She also argues that there is a divide between academic culture and public discourse as a consequence of the University’s efforts to hold on to control and power within the institution. RMP, she suggests is the result of this divide and is ultimately having a negative impact on public perception of pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2003) also addressed this issue of the need for the University to facilitate a more critical pedagogy that engages students rather than controls them. He argued that education is not training and should rather provide resources for students to become socially responsible, inquisitive, and empower them with political agency. If the University closes its students off from internal and external discourse of pedagogy, then students will find other ways to deliberate without faculty guidance and at the mercy of the outside world.

As an example of a larger consumer culture trend of ranking and assessing people and products through a quantitative evaluation, RMP is altering public discourse about higher education via a reversal of traditional notions of assessment (Ritter, 2008). Students are becoming agents in the shaping of the public discourse of pedagogy but they are being influenced by the increasingly consumer oriented outside world. The Internet has facilitated this public, student-led rating site that ultimately provided students with a virtual space for engaging in evaluative discourse about their education and their instructors on their own terms. Websites like RMP illustrate a larger cultural shift in today’s society. Consumer and academic cultures are converging and in turn are altering public discourse of

pedagogy. Online, students are selecting their professors in terms cost benefit and consumer satisfaction. Students are now consuming their education more than ever before. What was once an accepted hierarchy of power and authority is being equalized in a sort of free market education.

Culture Convergence

The world of education has become a marketplace in both theory and practice. The University can become commercialized in several different ways; turning the campus into marketing sites for brand name products, alter how the education is delivered so there will be greater usage of privately supplied goods and services, adopting a corporate language such as ‘quality control’, ‘clients’ and ‘production’, moving from public funding to user-pay systems, and servicing private interests (Turk 2000). The increasing commercialization of the University however is challenging the fundamental role of the University in today’s democratic society and the consequences are grave. The University’s mission in our democratic society is the “unqualified pursuit and public dissemination of knowledge and the truth” (Turk 2000: 3). Increasingly, higher education is applying a customer service approach to the student-professor relationship that is undermining effective pedagogy. Dellucchi & Smith (1997) suggest that this movement towards student consumerism is a product of a new historical era, the postmodernism era, and is not easily amenable to ethical teaching practices or the use of responsible authority.

In 1982, Steven Weiss stated that educating students is more important than coddling them and treating them as customers (Delucchi & Smith 1997). The increasing shift of the University towards consumer and market tendencies is encouraging just the opposite and it is illustrated within society on websites like RMP. The website indirectly encourages a student consumerism perspective of higher education that challenges legitimate factors of pedagogy. It promotes student satisfaction over student learning and undermines the University and its faculty members as legitimate authorities in society. This

consumer and academic culture convergence employs the idea that the student is a customer of the University, and what the student wants, as a customer, he/she gets.

The postmodern era continues to have an impact on the way in which students approach their education. Delucchi & Smith (1997) employed concepts of 'performativity' (Crook et al. 1992) and 'implosion of boundaries' (Baudrillard 1983) - two essential components of postmodernism to illustrate student consumerism and its challenges to collegiate pedagogy. According to them,

“the modernist perspective maintains that language, reason, and science are the foremost mechanisms for driving the truth. For postmodernist however, language is not a path to the truth or a method for describing reality, but simply a series of discourses socially created in varying context, none of which offer superior truth claims. Science is not viewed as a value-free form of knowledge, but as a discourse created within a political context where power struggles occur for the control of its meaning” (Lyotard 1984 as cited in Delucchi & Smith 1997: 323).

American consumer culture is most disruptive to undergraduate education and the idea of 'performativity' helps to illustrate why (Delucchi & Smith 1997). Performativity describes the capacity to deliver outputs at the lowest cost. “In other words, efficiency and effectiveness becomes the exclusive criteria for judging knowledge and its worth in society and within the academy” (Ibid: 323). The attitude towards higher education relocates the concept of merit in the University and replaces it with a preoccupation with student satisfaction. Students, as consumers or clients of the University increasingly come to expect certain traits such as friendliness and support from their professors and will most likely negatively evaluate the professors who fail to provide such customer service traits not only on site like RMP but also on University sponsored student evaluations of teaching. Furthermore, professors become more concerned with their popularity than providing students with rigorous, challenging and stimulating course work, especially if promotion and tenure decisions depend on students' evaluation.

We can see here how this fundamental shift in students' attitudes of pedagogy can ultimately indirectly affect faculty members. Consumer attitudes towards higher education are spilling over into the institution. It is not only occurring on commercial website such as RMP. Bill Readings (1996) tackles the same issue but uses the University's obsession with excellence to link it to consumer culture. Readings, argues that the integrity of the modern University is linked to the nation-state and who's role is to preserve, promote and protect the idea of national culture. But with the decline of the nation-state, the University is becoming a different kind of institution, and is increasingly becoming a transnational corporation. The idea of culture is being replaced by the discourse of 'excellence' and his reference to excellence however refers to a remarkable level of efficiency but is meaningless and empty to culture. This 'wholesale culture shift' is changing everything from the way Universities educate their students to the language they use to define how they do it (Washburn 2006). The boundary between higher education and the market is collapsing and the belief that professors as experts and authorities on the subjects they teach is being wiped out along with it. Few academics are unaffected but "when colleges and Universities cater to student consumerism, it is inevitable that some faculty members will succumb to its demands" (Delucchi & Smith 1997: 325)

Delucchi along with Korgen (2002) explored the growing culture of disengagement that they believed was being embraced by many college students. They suggest that it is rooted in a pervasive belief that the main purpose of higher education is economic gain. In other words, they suggest that students are embarking on higher education in order to make more money. What is lacking they argue is an academic ethic, "a student world view that places diligent, daily, and intense study above leisure and employment activities" (Rau & Durand 2000 as cited in Delucchi & Korgen 2002: 103). One of the most alarming results that they found in their study on student attitudes towards higher education is the answer to whether contemporary University students' view of higher education as a commodity they

purchase in exchange for tuition payments. They addressed this question by asking students to respond, on a Likart scale, to a questionnaire statement that said “If I am paying for my college education, I am entitled to a degree”. They found that, 42.5% of their sample agreed with the statement, 22.8% were unsure, and only 35.7% disagreed. This kind of attitude is entirely one of a student situated as a customer, not of someone who wants to think and grow intellectually (Readings 1996). Delucchi & Korgan’s study supports the characterization of a student culture that subscribes to the idea that higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace and are doing the minimum amount of work necessary to graduate.

The teacher-student relationship is not intrinsically economic and there should not be fixed preferences set in advanced to student learning. “Learning is represents an essentially creative and unpredictable process” (Delucchi & Korgan 2002: 106). Professors need to have the authority and the freedom to motivate students to learn without having to be concerned with entertaining them. Though higher education cannot stand isolated from the rest of the increasingly consumer-oriented society, it must not succumb to all that traditionally comes along with the world of business and marketing (Delucchi & Korgan 2002). Universities rather need to re-establish their legitimacy and remind students that degrees are granted on a learning basis, not for tuition payment. Otherwise the University will loose its *raison d’être* and will fall prisoner to the pedagogically irresponsible demands of their customers.

Conclusions and Afterthoughts

It does not matter how you look at it, when it comes to democratizing potential, the Internet is a complex virtual space. The duality of the debate continues between the optimists and the pessimists, but it remains beneficial to explore and study the Internet from both perspectives. Just as everything else in society, the issue of democratizing potential is not clear-cut. Though the potential is there, there

are various roadblocks that prevent its full and ideal realization. However, assuming the ideals of both Habermas' notion of the public sphere and of the optimistic perspective of the democratic potential of the Internet, I was not only able to study the context and effects of Ratemyprofessor.com but it also enabled me to situate the phenomenon itself in a larger culture convergence movement.

Alongside this contextual duality, the situational dualities of student evaluations of teaching effectiveness are also quite complex. The concept remains the same; evaluating professors to ensure teaching quality, what differs are the goals, the audience, the context and the nature of the evaluations. The institutionalized evaluations are regulated by the administration; collected for both faculty use and administration decisions, occur both online and in paper form, and is built on a notion of teaching effectiveness that is based on a pedagogy that supports a traditional academic ethic. The online student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, in this case on RMP, however exist outside of the institution, is supported by a commercial market, with very little regulation, posted by and for students alike and is based on a converged academic-consumer ethic where students are calculating their education in a cost-benefit mind frame; effort versus degree.

In a vacuum, RMP may simply be a venue for student banter, student entertainment or a place for students to deliberate on common interests, but the sheer volume of students that are logging onto the site is cause for concern. RMP does not exist in a vacuum and it is enabling students to become the primary agents in shaping the rhetoric of pedagogical discourse. In one sense, students are capable and possess authority for such a task. They are after all considered experts in teaching effectiveness within the institution, which is why they are consulted on the topic. However, when there is little regulation involved, the stakes are high, and student authority for evaluating teaching effectiveness and shaping pedagogy are questioned. Market ethics clash with academic ethics, and the nature of higher education is threatened.

Just as Giroux (2003) suggest earlier, a possible suggestion is that the University must be willing and ready to include its students in internal discourses of pedagogy. Just like the days in ancient Greece where “those in power feared democracy because they feared giving power and freedom to their neighbors, or to minorities among them”, the University is apprehensive about sharing such authority with its students. Studies suggest that the consequences however are beginning to surface, and students are finding ways on their own to democratize pedagogical discourse. However without the institutional system, the online student forum, RMP, is without a rule of law and thus is not entirely democratic. Exploitation, manipulation and abuse of the system are all too possible and faculty members can get hurt in the process. What the literature ultimately presents is that rather than a democracy, RMP is creating more of a mob rule this exists without necessary boundaries. Though it does give voice to the students to speak their opinions about their education, RMP is not democracy; it is fulfilling commercial interests of both corporate sponsors and of the new wave of a consumer driven student body. Though RMP may be “claiming to export democracy” it might be the case that it is more “interested in exporting its own freedom to do business than in truly pursuing the ideals of democracy” (Woodruff 2005: 6).

But are they really to blame? RMP is after all providing students with information that the students themselves want. The duality of the democratizing potential of the Internet lives on. It benefits some; the students, but not everyone, and in this case, its at the expense of others. Not only is it as the expense of individual faculty members, but at the expense of a fundamental academic ethic.

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