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# Using Class Projects as Indexes of Students' Feelings

by

James A. Eaton

It is nothing new for the faculty and administration of a college to be concerned about the welfare of the students. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that even the best-intentioned faculty member might be totally unaware of the feeling tone of the students sitting before him, and because of that lack of awareness, will lose opportunities to be of service to the student as a person. Blessed is the teacher to whom any student can come in freedom to discuss how he feels about things—the class, the college, himself, or even the teacher. These blessed souls are not overly abundant on the average campus, unfortunately. And yet, it is of utmost importance that the student's feelings be understood if the student is to be understood and if the academic and social objectives of the campus are to be effectively assimilated by the student.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, some systematic attempts should be made by the faculty and administration to keep abreast of the feeling tone of the individual students and of the student body in general if the college is to render the maximum service to each student.

*The Proposal.* The suggestion here being offered is that among the many possible methods of taking this type of "temperament reading" is the effective analysis of student projects that are ordinarily assigned to classes in basic communications skills, social science, and education courses. The student, for example, who is asked to write a two-page autobiography for an English class reveals much more about his personality than he does about his knowledge of the rules of grammar. Freshmen, in some colleges are asked to write feeling-loaded papers on "My Philosophy of Life" as part of orientation assignments. In almost any class a student might find himself being assigned to write on "Why I Decided to Major in Whatever-it-is-that-I'm-majoring-in," revealing much about the student and how he feels about a number of different things important to his college career. These types of topics (one might add "What I Think about This College" or even "My Most Disliked Teacher" to round out the picture) can be helpful in understanding the way students feel about things important to them as students.

Obviously, the information gleaned from these assignments must be processed to be useful. The individual responses are helpful for understanding the individual giving them. Compiling this data and converting it to statistical units can be helpful for giving an overall view of student feelings on any given subject. This is not the easiest thing to

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<sup>1</sup>Increasingly, studies are appearing on the importance of how a person feels about a matter. A basic approach can be found in Carl R. Rogers, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942. Additional references will be given at the end of this paper.

do, for it requires interest, time, energy, and some degree of know-how. Before discussing the labor involved, it might be wise to look at several types of student projects to see what they can reveal.<sup>2</sup>

*Examples of Types of Projects and Their Results.* The projects to be discussed are all projects carried out by undergraduate psychology classes over a two-semester period as part of the normal class-related practical work required by the courses. At first they may seem unrelated. An attempt to show their relationship to the feeling tone of the student body will be made later.

The most elementary project was an opinion poll growing out of a campaign for the election of a president of the Student Council. Such campaigns are marked by the usual promises, printed handbills, posters, pictures, and politics. This particular election was of great interest because the outgoing president had made a superb record, and it was felt that only an unusual person could continue the program he had begun. Running for the office were four able men, experienced in campus activities. As the election grew near, it became evident that only three men were really in the running and one of these was far in front. The psychology classes decided to take opinion polls to try to discover the relative positions of the candidates and the reasons behind their popularity.

A simple check sheet was prepared to be used for each person to be questioned, asking him to give his choice of candidate, his reason for the choice, his sex, and his classification. Two days before the election, 25 per cent of the entire student body was contacted. Tabulations indicated that 69 per cent of the students were for the expected favored candidate (an honor student and football quarterback), 23 per cent for the second man (the only candidate with actual experience of working on the Student Council), 6 per cent for the student generally recognized (it was felt that this was generally recognized, at least by the class) as having had the best experiences to qualify him for the office (chairman of the activities committee of the student center). The fourth man (president of the campus chapter of the NAACP) had the support of 2 per cent of the straw voters. The next day, the day before the elections, another poll was made which indicated relatively small changes, inspite of the big political debate among the candidates the evening before—59 per cent, 23 per cent, 9.5 per cent, and 7.5 per cent, respectively. (Incidentally, this is just about how the actual election turned out.)

What gave the lead man his position? An analysis of the answers given failed to reveal that burning campaign issues were considered. Half of the voters "liked his personality;" 25 per cent thought "he is the right man for the job;" another 25 per cent gave varied answers ranging from "I don't know" to "I just like him." Incidentally, 65 per cent of his backers were women (he is married). The second candidate broke even with the sexes among his backers, while the third man had

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<sup>2</sup>Projects listed here were carried out by students, sophomores and juniors for the most part, at Elizabeth City State College, Elizabeth City, N.C. The results are similar to ones which might be found any place.

58 per cent women supporters and 42 per cent male backers. The largest percentage of the first candidate's backers were sophomores and juniors; the second candidate's, freshmen; and the third, 41 per cent seniors.

So far, there is nothing unusual about this poll. However, behind all of these figures, the survey revealed the power of feelings in the selection of the president. First, it was generally felt by his backers that the first candidate would "stand up" to the administration and not "give in" on issues dear to the students. Second, it was felt that although candidate three was well-qualified, he was too friendly with the president, the president's family, and the faculty in general to "go all out for the students." Third, the seniors, who largely supported the third candidate, felt that being realistic, he was the only student who had the necessary ability and the necessary rapport with administration and faculty to continue the progress in student government which had been made. These are the real factors which decided the election.

The results shown in this project are related to the results found in another class project.

The second project was a more formal one, conducted by several advanced students in cooperation with four faculty members and supervised by the class teacher. The project grew out of a class discussion of the reason for so many students being on academic probation. Therefore, the purpose of the project became to discover what the students felt to be the factors in the campus environment which adversely affected their academic achievement. They were given an open-end statement ("The factors in the environment on this campus that keep me from doing my best academic work are—") and asked to write whatever they desired. Names were to be omitted (although about half of them gave their names) and classification and sex were to be listed. Their responses were grouped under certain categories in order to be handled statistically, and the results were tabulated according to classification and sex.

It goes without saying that the students were responding on the feeling level. The *fact* of their replies was not important. Emphasis was on how the student felt in order to see what was needed to be done to counter his negative impressions.

A total of 212 responses were given. From that total, 54 per cent considered the teachers as the factors preventing their best work; 28.8 per cent, the students themselves; 6.4 per cent, students other than themselves; 2.2 per cent, lack of classroom and laboratory equipment; and 8.6 per cent, miscellaneous items.

Criticisms against teachers ran the gamut from their showing favoritism to their being boring, but the top three were 1) lack of rapport between teacher and student, 2) unfair grades, and 3) teachers who favor their "pets." The juniors were most critical of the faculty, followed closely by the sophomores (especially the women—68.7 per cent) with the freshmen in the third place (especially the men—41 per cent).

As for the second category, "the student himself," the greatest number of the responses said that the students did not have a serious purpose—56 per cent of the responses in this area. "Too many activities or too much social life" was next with 20 per cent of the responses.

"Those other people" who accounted for 6.4 per cent of the total answers were other students who "called you a bookworm if you studied" (20 per cent of the responses were in this area); "who would ostracize you if you make good grades" (12 per cent); who "didn't want to study themselves and disturbed others trying to study" (60 per cent); and those who "kept too much noise in the dorm" (8 per cent).

The miscellaneous items (8.6 per cent of the total replies) included "Lack of adequate living space" (16.6 per cent); "living under a dictatorship" (33.3 per cent); "not enough time to do assignments" (37.5 per cent); and, of all things, "overly-friendly relations between some teachers and some students" (12.3 per cent).

*Conclusions from These Two Projects.* These two class projects, each drawing responses from over a quarter of the entire student body, ranging from freshmen to seniors, indicate strong feeling tones of subdued hostility toward the faculty and administration among a considerable number of students. Once again, regardless of the presence or absence of factual evidence for these charges, the feelings do exist and need to be recognized and responded to before some seemingly insignificant incident triggers this hostility into an explosive situation. Excepting for such things as these class projects, how would these feelings and the extent to which they are held become known?

*General Conclusions.* The class projects discussed here—only two out of a much larger number carried on during the year with similar possibilities on a variety of subjects—leave little doubt that class or individual projects of a routine nature for some courses can be used as projective instruments for better understanding the feeling tone of the class or even the entire student body. However, the value of such instruments will depend upon the correct handling of the data. Individual teachers with "the personnel point of view" (and there is a need for more of them on the college level) will undoubtedly use such projects to understand better the students they teach and become better teachers in the process. In many cases, however, such data might best be analyzed by committees or persons especially charged with the responsibility of student personnel policies. Of course, it is assumed that their findings will be made known to the administration and faculty. It is also assumed that these persons in turn will be sincerely interested in taking whatever corrective action deemed necessary. Corrective action does not mean punitive action. It means correcting the discordant factors first revealed by an analysis of students' feelings and later verified by objective investigation. Such an idea as this envisions a student body, a faculty and an administration sincerely bent upon making their college truly the "best college" it can become; such an idea envisions a spirit of cooperation between students on the one hand and faculty and administration on the other.

It is possible for a simple class project to become still another of the many available instruments for helping to create the proper "ethos" on campus atmosphere—that complex, illusive Unknown that either makes a college a community of scholars or a community of complainers.

Some suggested readings related to the ideas discussed in this paper:

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