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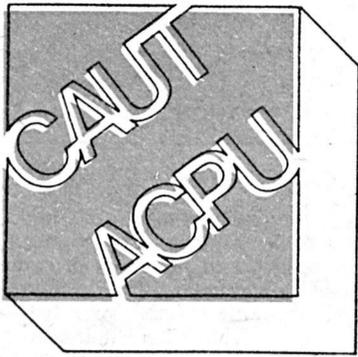
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Can a performance-based approach be adapted to higher education?

Improving university teaching

by Robert R. Newton

Efforts to improve university teaching are hindered by the same lack of clear purposes and objectives which plague the educational enterprise generally. Most educators are not very good at defining with precision what they wish to accomplish. Many would argue that 'mindlessness', the failure or refusal to think seriously about educational purpose, continues to plague education. Behaviorists claim to have found the answer — translation of educational goals at every level of administration and teaching into precise performance objectives. Other educators protest: the behavioral objective is too narrow an instrument to incorporate all the goals of education, including some of the more important.

It is easy and also quite accurate to propose that a large part of the failure to promote good teaching is based on the failure to define more specifically what good teaching is. And a logical corollary emerges: how can you promote or encourage what you cannot define?

Further complication is added by the independent role of the teacher. Though an individual teacher may be subject to administrative direction or collaborative planning with colleagues, most of what teachers do (on any level of education) is almost totally under their control and outside the view of others. Once a faculty member closes the door to the classroom, he/she is almost totally autonomous and unobserved. The rise in student evaluation of teaching in recent years has changed this somewhat by providing the client's (student's) perception of what is happening behind the closed door. However, it remains true to say that university teachers are generally unobserved in their teaching performance except for occasional, atypical moments.

This has three effects which hinder the improvement of teaching:
- it virtually eliminates the context in which teaching performance might be analyzed more systematically to assist teachers;
- it eliminates accountability to colleagues or administration for teaching effectiveness (except through student evaluation);
- it fails to provide an incentive system to encourage faculty to improve their teaching. This last element seems especially important since improved teaching is ultimately self-improvement; if the system in which the teacher works does not have mechanisms for defining and rewarding good teaching, then the faculty member is likely to turn his/her attention to those areas of faculty responsibility in which more concrete measures of performance are present, e.g., research/publication.

Promoting growth by defining outcomes

The concern to improve performance in the teaching role does not lack parallels in other organizational contexts. In any growing organization intent on change and

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The proposals contained in Dr. Newton's article are consistent with those presented in **The Teaching Dossier**, *a report of the CAUT Teaching Effectiveness Committee which was published last year as a supplement to the* **Bulletin**. *Copies of* **The Teaching Dossier** *at 50¢ each are available at the CAUT central office.*
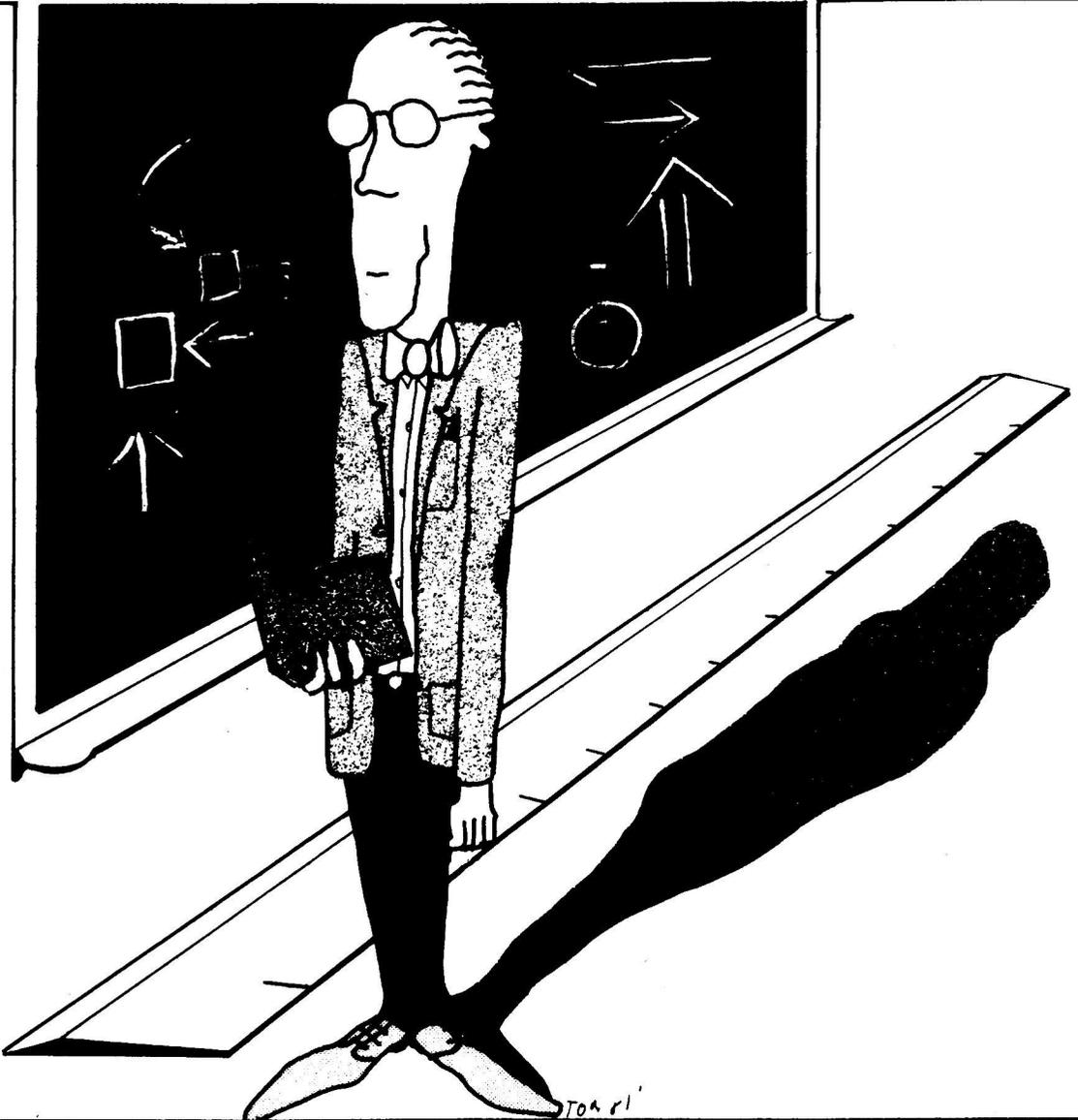
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adaptation, there is an interest in improving the performance of personnel.

There are a variety of approaches to improving performance in organizations. One widely used approach concentrates on formulating more precise definitions of outcomes. It can be viewed as a modern version of the systematic approach to management proposed by Frederick Taylor at the turn of the century under the name of scientific management.

Taylor's aim was to discover the most efficient way to perform any job by careful analysis of the role and the top performers in the job. From this analysis emerged a precise job description and a series of training procedures and supervisory mechanisms to inculcate and monitor the 'one best way' of performing the task under scrutiny. Taylor's successes in increasing the productivity of workers in a variety of industries led to the widespread application of his ideas.

The modern version of scientific management has turned from prescription of what the employee should do to prescribing what outcomes the employee should accomplish. The shift has been from managing by role description to managing by results. The popularizers of this new form of systematic management are the proponents of management by objectives and other managerial systems which attempt to administer organizations by defining with precision the performance expected.

Though a method of management, this approach also includes a substantially dif-

ferent approach to motivating personnel. There is an assumption that the clear definition of an attainable objective will have a strong motivating effect on the person, drawing him/her towards its attainment. It is a reflection of the old scholastic maxim: whatever acts, acts toward some goal. It parallels the insight implicit in the concept of achievement motivation: a reasonable goal will stretch the person towards its attainment and simultaneously create growth and improvement. A clearly defined goal has a motivating power which is dramatically more effective than any amount of generalized exhortation 'to do a good job.'

The typical educator who has read this far is now beginning to feel uneasy. The general fear that business procedures will distort the more lofty purposes of education, that educational goals and roles cannot be translated into performance objectives, that good teaching cannot be described in terms of results — all come into play to create first disquietude and then rejection of further consideration of a performance-based approach to improving teaching.

Yet it can be argued that one of the primary obstacles to the improvement of teaching is the failure to define what good teaching is — not only the basic components of good teaching, but also the basis for differentiating levels of teaching performance. As a result, teachers are robbed of a powerful motivating force: clearly defined objectives which describe the substance of the performance expected and provide ben-

chmarks by which the individual or others can estimate the quality of performance. Each individual is left to determine on his/her own not only what defines better teaching performance but also how to measure it. A vaguely defined objective will produce vague outcomes; a set of clearly defined goals for teaching performance will draw teachers towards their achievement.

At the same time, teachers may well be correct in arguing that typical behavioral objectives do not fit the realities of teaching. An approach suitable for a sales organization or a production unit where targets are tangible and easily measured is not likely to be suitable for the teaching profession where outcomes can neither be so clearly defined nor so precisely calculated. It has been a mistake to attempt to force education into a model which may work in other organizations but is unworkable for defining good teaching in university classrooms. It has been a mistake that has meant performance-based development schemes have generally been rejected as inappropriate for the improvement of teaching performance. What is needed is an adaptation of the concept of performance standards to the special circumstances and demands of teaching — the creation of a 'performance middle ground' for a human service profession whose technology is less scientific or rigorous, whose goals are less defined, and whose measures of success are less tangible and precise.

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A performance-based system for the improvement of teaching must have a number of characteristics. It must not attempt to force teaching into categories which are unsuited for the less precise goals of education and less precise nature of teaching. At the same time, it must be specific enough to define in concrete terms what good teaching performance is, its components and levels; in so doing, it should generate a set of clearly attainable and worthwhile objectives.

Designing a performance-based teacher improvement model

Three steps are involved in designing a performance-based teaching improvement model. *First,* all activities which are seen as contributing to the teaching mission of the university must be identified. For example, good teachers are expected to teach courses which produce satisfied students; implicit in this statement are assumptions about what students are looking for: teachers with broad knowledge of the subject, teachers who encourage participation, teachers who stimulate interest in the subject, teachers who have organized the course well, teachers who have well defined and fair grading practices, etc. The teacher/course evaluation form currently in use in a particular university can be seen as incorporating a set of both process and content objectives, as defined by whoever composed the form.

There are numerous other ways in which teachers contribute to the teaching function of the university, many of which are often overlooked in evaluating teaching. Teachers who develop new courses with regularity, teachers who work with unusually large numbers of students, teachers who simultaneously teach a wide variety of courses — all are seen as making special contributions to teaching. Faculty members with particular expertise who are frequently called upon to lecture to other classes in their area of specialty, those who develop significant materials to improve instruction in their classes, teachers whose courses are in continuous revision to render them more up-to-date — reflect in a special way those characteristics which mark good teaching.

Obviously, there are numerous other components of good teaching — both universally recognized or particularly prized on a given campus. However good teaching is defined, the first step in devising a system is to identify the components of teaching as they are accepted (implicitly or explicitly) and promoted on campus.

The *second* step in the process is the incorporation of these elements into a coherent set of STANDARDS FOR TEACHING. The following schema suggests how such a system might be developed.

1. EXTENT OF TEACHING RESPONSIBILITIES
● regular teaching load (however defined in a university)
    very high student evaluations
    high student evaluations
    low student evaluations
    very low student evaluations
● unusually large number of students in classes
● significant number of directed study, internships, special students
● regular additional meetings with groups of students outside scheduled classes
● additional instructional time spent with individual students outside of scheduled classes
2. IMPROVEMENT OF PERSONAL TEACHING PERFORMANCE
● development of significant instructional materials for personal classroom use
● frequent use of outside resources for the enrichment of classroom instruction
● development of new pedagogical approaches to instruction, evaluation, etc.
● significant revision of existing courses
● peer or administrative review of classroom teaching performance
● peer review of course content and organization
● participation in conferences, workshops, etc. focused directly on the improvement of teaching

3. IMPROVEMENT OF OVERALL FACULTY TEACHING
● significant presentations to other classes
● assistance to other faculty in the development of their courses or classroom performance
● presentations to other faculty on teaching techniques
● research aimed at the improvement of classroom teaching (personal or more general)
● membership on program/course development committees
● development of new courses to add variety to program/departmental offerings

The above list, though general and incomplete, provides a model which can be adapted to a particular faculty's own definition of good teaching. It contains numerous assumptions: that teachers should produce a positive reaction in students, that regular revision of courses is important, that peer assistance in classroom teaching is to be encouraged, that the main forms of additional involvement with students are praiseworthy, etc. In a sense, every item incorporated includes an assumption about the nature of effective teaching.

The aim of such a schema is to state directly how faculty contribute to the good teaching at their institution. It provides a basis for communicating to faculty, old and new, what good teaching is; the system also establishes a set of norms against which faculty can measure their performance. By enumerating the elements of teaching performance, a comprehensive set of specific outcomes has been generated and articulated.

The *third* and final step in the development of an outcomes-focused system of teacher improvement is its institutionalization in the normal operating procedures of the university. A general list of ways in which faculty contribute to teaching is a useless exercise unless it is further implicated in the reward system and resource allocation decisions of the university.

An outcomes-based model, once developed, provides a set of guidelines for a variety of policies and procedures. For example, selection of faculty could be aided (in so far as teaching skill or promise is a factor) by evaluating candidates on the basis of their achievement or potential in areas which you have defined as the elements of good teaching. Similarly, candidates under consideration can be presented with a relatively complete description of what will be expected of them, should they be selected.

The system is easily translated into a format for faculty self-evaluation or administrative evaluation of teaching. The approach is a positive one, focusing on the variety of ways in which contributions to teaching are possible. The very existence of a clear description of components of good teaching performance presents teachers with a set of targets towards which their behavior can be directed. Similarly, the listing can be utilized by the faculty member in proposing him/herself for tenure or promotion, pointing to accomplishments in the various areas which publicly define good teaching. Those charged with tenure/promotion decisions can also use the elements identified as the basis for their judgment.

The organization and direction of faculty development programs can be derived from the definition of outcomes in the system. Presentations/workshops/opportunities for external review of teaching effectiveness become part of a coherent effort of faculty and administration to improve systematically teaching effectiveness rather than isolated events sprinkled throughout the faculty calendar.

The system should also reduce the number of faculty/administrative conflicts over the evaluation of teaching and promotion/tenure decisions. By providing a more objective 'middle ground' with tangible criteria, the faculty member can more objectively gauge whether an application is appropriate or inappropriate. Similarly, those charged with such decisions are provided with a set of criteria which, while they do not totally eliminate subjectivity, reduce it dramatically; the focus is on specific contributions rather than on personal opinions or subjective estimates of performance by either the faculty member or evaluator.

A fundamental assumption of this paper has been that faculty are interested in improving their teaching and contributing more broadly to the teaching mission of their university. An outcomes-focused system responds to this professional need and interest by providing a framework which not only gives specific meaning to the concept of effective teaching, but also releases a set of motivational forces to stimulate faculty involvement. Though the approach requires adaptation and 'reinvention' in each institution, it is an approach to improving teaching which deserves serious investigation. ❑