



RateMyProfessors.com: Gossip or Useful Information?

Kellian Clink

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) is a database that allows students to voice and share their opinions about their university and college teachers. The evaluation website allows students to rate their teachers after the student identifies the class, the level of interest the student has in the class, and the date they are posting the evaluation. They can rate the professors on difficulty, helpfulness, and clarity and post general comments.

Online since 1999, RateMyProfessors now contains over 4,200,000 ratings for professors from 5242 schools. Students do use this source, but should they? Is it just gossip or does it have useful information for students choosing their courses? Should advisors lead students to this database? Do students use it to inform their decisions or merely to plan workloads in upcoming semesters? What motivates students to post entries? What motivates students to use the database? What teacher qualities are they trying to avoid? Is the database electronic gossip? Does it matter? I wanted to explore student opinions about RateMyProfessors.

Research Methodology:

400 freshmen and sophomores were surveyed using zoomerang software. I chose these two groups thinking that juniors and seniors have less leeway in their choice of teachers, once the major program is in place. Students were asked to describe their use of the database, identify their gender, and indicate their college. Students were asked which categories they consult: (easiness, helpfulness, clarity), and then asked to answer open ended questions. Are they screening for particular teacher characteristics? Do they trust the information there? Do they recommend the website to their friends?

Literature Review

Teacher evaluations have been studied extensively for reliability, utility, and their role in promotion and tenure. Teachers and students may differ in their concept of good teaching. One study found that positive attributes for well-regarded teachers included a variety of teaching methods and sense of humor, resulting in an enjoyable class. Class organization and good student-teacher interactions were frequently mentioned as positive attributes. Conversely, less well-regarded traits included poor organization, monochromatic teaching style and perceived lack of interest in students. (Fortson & Brown, 1998, p.572) One study that looked at the difference between online and in-class teacher evaluations found that students worried about anonymity in online evaluations” (Dommeyer, Baum & Hanna, 2002). Research shows that the grade expected has a correlation with student evaluations of their teachers (Isely & Singh, 2005, p. 40) Gender makes a difference. One study looked at male/female student ratings of female/male teachers. “Female instructors tended to teach differently; they lectured less than males and used discussions more. It may in fact be these differences in teaching style that caused female teachers to get higher ratings on the scales that reflected communication, interaction, and feedback, although this was only by female students” (Centra, 2000, p. 23).

A study of 1,229 students at a Canadian University, University of Calgary, found that about half of the students used student ratings of instructors to make course selections and that while faculty members found them useful, they did “not generally use them to make changes in their teaching.” (Beran, Violato, Kline & Frideres, 2005, p. 49). An article in *College Teaching* examined students and faculty differing opinions about evaluations at a Midwestern university relying on 250 student questionnaires

and 81 faculty questionnaires. “Findings indicate students were much less likely to agree that student evaluations of teaching encourage faculty to grade more leniently, that they have an influence on a faculty member’s career, or that they lead to changes in course and/or teaching styles. Faculty members believed that students rate easy, entertaining instructors more highly” (Sojka, Gupta, and Deeter-Schmelz, 2002, p. 44) an article in *Trace (university newsletter)* compared ratings of all Distinguished Teacher Award winners with RMP ratings. “Of the 16 Award winners rated in late July, 15 were rated in the high-quality category. That is, generally, university instructors are rated above average on course-evaluation instruments” (*Trace*, 2001).

But does RateMyProfessors.com more closely resemble teacher evaluations, or gossip? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines gossip thus: To talk idly, mostly about other people’s affairs; to go about tattling. (OED), which is defined as tale-telling. Is it inappropriate for students to share their impressions of their teachers in a public space? What is gossip, and as one article put it, “What’s wrong with telling the truth?” The writer of that article, Margaret Holland, distinguishes gossip from “indiscretion, rumor, denunciation, and chatter” (Holland, 1996, pp 199-200). She concludes that gossip ‘contributes to a culture of censure, involves treating others in a manner which one would not want to be treated oneself’ (p. 206). Another philosopher uses a utilitarian approach to create a decision tree to determine the relative ethics of gossip. Gossip, Westcott (2000) writes, is not a lie, does not violate someone’s rights, and does not disregard anyone’s legitimate claims. Gossip, Westcott argues, is talk that, while it goes against someone’s hopes, promotes more good than harm, and gives as one example “Expressing a low opinion of work that a person had presented to the public”

(Westecott, 14, p. 72). RateMyProfessors is very much like expressing a low opinion of public work.

Rules of Engagement

Students can evaluate their professors using the in-class evaluations. They are anonymous and go directly to the teacher. The audience is the teacher, and research seems to indicate that teachers don't necessarily change their teaching based on their evaluations and perhaps tend to think of bad evaluations as being a reflection on the characteristics of the students rather than a reflection on their teaching. The audience for RateMyProfessors is other students. The website warns: "Professors Beware: Students Are Doing the Grading," so the producer of the database is intentionally 'turning the tables' on teachers who usually have the role of sitting in judgment of students. Guidelines are posted describing what to do:

- Be honest.
- Poor spelling WILL NOT cause your rating to be removed; however, poor spelling may result in your rating being discredited by those who read it.
- Limit your comments to the professor's professional abilities. Try not to get personal.

Guidelines also include things not to do:

- Threaten to harm your professor. Not only will the rating be deleted, but we will notify the authorities of your IP address and the time you rated.
This is enough information to identify you.
- Talk about your professor's sex life. This includes:

- Claiming that the professor sleeps with students, even if he or she has slept with you.
- Claiming that he or she is homosexual.
- Direct racist, sexist or homophobic remarks at your professor.
- Post ratings for people who do not teach classes at your school.

STUDY RESULTS

The zoomerang survey was posted in February of 2006. 400 students were invited to participate and 69 completed the survey. Basic data in percentages:

49 percent had used RMP, 43 percent of them freshmen, 57 percent sophomores. 61 percent of the respondents were female, 39 percent male. 58 percent had used RMP for 1-4 teachers, 23 percent had used it for 5-8 teachers 10 percent had looked up 9-12 teachers, and 10 percent had used it to look up more than 12 teachers. The breakdown by colleges:

College of Arts & Humanities: 12 percent

College of Allied Health and Nursing 20 percent

College of Business: 17 percent

College of Education 10 percent

College of Science, Engineering, and Technology 23 percent

College and Behavioral Sciences: 17 percent.

About 60 percent looked at all three categories of easiness, helpfulness and clarity.

32 percent had used it to determine which courses to take. Some of the comments:

- to choose between sections.

- to see if it will be a hard semester, what kind of homework, how strict the teacher is.
- It's obviously a great way to compare teachers. The opinions are usually pretty consistent and have always been accurate. Students know more about the teachers than anyone else so it's good to use. If I'm going to take a class and it says the teacher is a jerk, there is a good possibility I would wait and take it another term.

Others had either a/never used it or b/had comments like "curiosity" and "boredom". One student only wrote "I don't use it because I feel a student should choose their classes by schedule time." Also one student wrote than an individual student "thinking a teacher is easy or difficult can be very different from another student."

I asked what characteristics interested students in the comments section. Most frequently students were looking for helpfulness (6 of 24 comments), clarity (4 of 24), and what kinds of tests professors use (5 of 24). Some characteristics were personality related: a student who didn't want teachers "who play favorites," one was looking to see "if their personality will work with mine," another was looking for "anything funny about the teacher." One was checking out to see if anyone had noted a difficulty understanding the teacher because of a foreign accent. One student used it to see if the required textbook was utilized.

I was intrigued to see what motivated students to enter in an evaluation themselves. The responses were divided. Many were purely motivated to be helpful to other students. There were others that were expressly entered to warn students about teachers, such as: "some professors are horrible teachers, it's that simple," or "really disliked how a teacher treated her students. Some wanted to put in an

alternative opinion “because I felt that a prof was good and most of the comments were negative,” or “I believed the evaluations were not fair, so I had to put one in of a different opinion.” One person commented that “Haven’t been overly mad or overly excited by any teacher. Seems that he only time you use it.” One person named the specific teacher she was defending in her evaluation; someone she felt had gotten particularly negative evaluations and she wanted to present an opposing viewpoint.

The final question was why students would or would not recommend RMP to their friends. Seventy five percent of the students would recommend RMP, although the comments were mixed. Twelve of the twenty six students who responded to this question thought RMP was helpful. Only two had negative things to say such as the student opinion of a teacher is solely based “on how good they did in that class,” and “a lot of people use it to complain about bad grades.” Two had neutral sounding responses, such as “If they are unsure or if they need that extra confidence that the course they take won’t be too difficult,” and “sometimes teachers change their teaching styles or material which can greatly affect a class.”

Discussion

I wanted to examine student attitudes towards RateMyProfessors to see how they were using the database. The results are mixed. Clearly some students view the evaluations without much a filter, accepting the comments as objective truth. Some students don’t really trust the evaluations, and think that people put them there have a negative reason for doing so. Should advisors lead students to this database? I have decided I feel okay about leading students to this RMP, with the caveat that they should ask other students what they think of an instructor as well. All of the information in RMP is subjective, and I say that to students. Teachers respected by

some are shunned by others. Students have various learning styles and professors various teaching styles.

I thought it would be interesting to do some comparisons between schools to see what I would see. I looked at four schools, just comparing the three most generic ratings visible on the screens: a teacher can get a happy face, a neutral face, and a grimacing face.

	Happy Face	Neutral Face	Grimacing Face
School A:	58%	21%	21%
School B:	68%	20%	10%
School C:	68%	14%	17%
School D:	50%	30%	20%

These were randomly selected schools and without a more elaborate mathematical sampling, it at least indicated to me that student's ratings aren't homogenous, school to school. This could be because of the dispositions of the students as readily as the performance of the teachers, but I wanted to see if there were, in fact, differences. Student happiness with their courses may or may not be any reflection on the effectiveness of the teaching. The explanation page of RMP notes that about 65 percent of the responses are positive, and this mini-study verifies that. If the ratings were more routinely negative, I would feel more conflicted about recommending this website. One of the criticisms about gossip is that, as Holland puts it, "it involves treating others in a manner which one would not want to be treated oneself." Students probably wouldn't want their professors' impressions of student skills to be posted in a public sphere with no recourse, so it's certainly not fair play. But does it serve a greater

good, as Westecott puts it, by promoting more good than harm, if it is good for students to have a sense, in advance of taking a class, of the volume of homework, the nature of the tests, and possible sources of discomfort with their professors.

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