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# Where the Students Do the Grading: A Content Analysis of *RateMyProfessors.com*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Sociology
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## Table of Contents


Abstract ii

Introduction 1

Chapter One: The Institution 4

Chapter Two: The New College Student 9

Chapter Three: Teaching Evaluations 14

Chapter Four: *RateMyProfessors.com* 19

Chapter Five: Methodology 31

Chapter Seven: Findings 39

Fun/Boring 41

Caring/Callus 43

Explicit/Vague 45

Easy/Hard 48

Chapter Eight: Discussion 53

Conclusion 57

References 61

**Where the Students Do the Grading: A Content Analysis of**

***RateMyProfessors.com***

**Mlisa A. Manning**

## ABSTRACT

*"I would have been better off using the tuition money to heat my apartment last winter."*

*"Three of my friends got A's in his class and my friends are dumb."*

*"The movies are so bad, even he has to leave the room."*

These are just a few of the *"Funny Ratings"* from a page on *RateMyProfessors.com*, a web site dedicated to providing information to students so they may "make a difference in (their) education" (http://www.*RateMyProfessors.com*/faq.jsp). The online evaluations differ in origin, use and content from traditional teaching evaluations as they are the result of a virtual atmosphere created for students and perpetuated by students, where comments and ratings are instantaneously available to anyone with Internet access for application and critique. This paper includes a review of literature on the rationalization of the university system, on the image of students as reluctant consumers, on the use and future of traditional teaching evaluations, and on previous attempts to obtain data from web sites.

Through a content analysis of *RateMyProfessors.com*, I observe evidence that students have discovered a new way of participating in their education. Instead of being the property of professors and schools, these online evaluations reveal for anyone some popular ideas of what constitutes a good course and a good professor. The categories created by the students differ in subtle but important ways from traditional teaching evaluations. While traditional evaluations give professors and administrators insight on teaching effectiveness, these online evaluations act more as advice columns and mini-syllabi for future students. In light of the current university system's atmosphere of customer service, grade inflation and competition, these evaluations provide insight into the college student culture that has emerged where students treat their education as any other consumer good: a thing to be researched, purchased and rated. I have simply scratched the surface with this study, as these ratings provide volumes of data for both qualitative and quantitative studies in the future.

## Introduction

*"Emotional scarring may fade away, but that big fat F on your transcripts won't"*
*"Not a very nice woman. I'd even have to go as far as to say she's frightening."*
*"Teaches well, invites questions and then insults you for 20 minutes."*
*"Bring a pillow."*
*"Your pillow will need a pillow."*

These are just a few of the *"Funny Ratings"* from a page on *RateMyProfessors.com*, a web site dedicated to providing information to students so they may "make a difference in (their) education" (http://www.RateMyProfessors.com/faq.jsp). It is obvious that the senders of these messages knew that they would have an audience and that because of anonymity, there would be no retribution for the comments. Traditional evaluations are also anonymous and can also contain funny remarks that seem to crave publication, however, the evaluations on this web site differ in origin, use and content. The online evaluations are the result of a virtual atmosphere created for students, perpetuated by students, where comments and ratings are instantaneously available to anyone with Internet access for application and critique.

My literature review begins with higher education and the changes this institution has undergone over the past sixty years. What type of student has emerged through these institutional changes? How have the professors changed? What type institutional changes emerged around the new students and professors? I have focused much of my research on

the structural forces of rationalization, or the progressive stomping out of chance and inconsistency in social organizations, whereby those within the institution must regard the four principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and mechanization as the only things that matter (Elwell 1996). More specifically I use McDonaldization, which looks at control more than mechanization, but I also touch on historical factors such as WWII and the Baby Boom to better understand what is happening on today's campuses.

This leads me into discussions of social forces which "shape" the subjectivities of students. Again, consumerism is a large part of this discussion, however, there are some other interesting explanations for the change in students' academic behaviors, such as waves of change in pedagogical styles. My next section addresses the research done on traditional student evaluations, primarily for the administration and the professors' eyes and use. Finally I quickly look at research on the Internet and introduce the web site *RateMyProfessors.com*, a new type of teaching evaluation, online, for and by students, which has not yet been examined in academic research.

The methodology section addresses my data collection and analysis choices. Through a content analysis of *RateMyProfessors.com*, I observe evidence that students have discovered a new way of participating in their education. The question I begin to ask when looking at the data from the web site is this: What can the comments posted on *RateMyProfessors.com* teach us about the current day undergraduate student's tendency to see herself as a particular kind of education consumer? One way to address this is to sort out the putative values of students and find what they seek out in a professor. I identified numerous themes from the sample of 400 evaluations. Ultimately, these ratings revealed a collective idea of what makes up a desirable course and a desirable

professor. I end this paper with a theoretical discussion of students' mindset operating when they negotiate for higher grades, rate professors online, and generally give off a "disengaged student" guise. I also turn back to the notion of McDonaldization and point out how students on this web site are attempting to make their education predictable, controllable, calculable, and efficient.

How is this research relevant to current problems in higher education? Conventional wisdom suggests current students differ from past students in the following ways:

> Students refuse to read assigned materials, study time has dropped significantly, attendance has dropped, rude behavior has increased, students show up to office hours mainly to complain about grades [also known as grade-grubbing], students are increasing their time at work and their time socializing, and their participation in organized campus activities has decreased (Flacks and Thomas 1998).

Considering the existing research on teaching evaluations, education, the Internet and consumerism, coupled with our understanding of the current university system's atmosphere of customer service, grade inflation and competition, I believe these evaluations can provide insight into changes in college student culture. In general, I find evidence that students treat their education as any other consumer good: a thing to be researched, purchased and rated, and web sites like *RateMyProfessors.com* provide a mechanism for carrying out that consumer activity.

## Chapter One:

## The Institution

It is important that I set the stage for this paper with a brief explanation of how our consumer society has engulfed the university system. Weber's concept of rationalization is the progressive stomping out of chance and inconsistency in social organizations, whereby they regard the four principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and mechanization as the only things that matter (Elwell 1996). This resulting bureaucratic form best fits the needs of capitalism for organizing people and organizations as efficient, predictable businesses that will make more money with less uncertainty.

> For Weber, the archetypical manifestation of this process was the *Bureaucracy*; a large, formal organization characterized by a hierarchical authority structure, well-established division of labor, written rules and regulations, impersonality and a concern for technical competence (Keel 2005).

Higher education is an example of a bureaucracy and this progressively increasing process can be seen on campuses around the country. In a rationalized society, enchanted things become disenchanted. Education is seen as a commodity no different from any of the other more mundane commodities. It has lost its sacred character, and professors are quickly losing their aura of special authority. Universities and colleges have changed, as have students and professors.

Coupled with the rationalization, a quickly summarized historical account of education's transformation goes something like this. "At the turn of the 20th century, one percent of high school graduates attended college; that figure is now close to 70 percent" (Twitchell 2004). The G.I bill after WWII and the population explosion, now known as the baby boomers, caused universities to expand.

> Universities expand easily enough, but with tenure locking faculty in for lifetime jobs, and with the general reluctance of administrators to eliminate their own slots, it's not easy for a university to contract (Edmundson 1997:43).

Mark Edmundson of the University of Virginia goes on to say, "(this) is a matter of demographics and (surprise) money" (1997:43). U.S. colleges were stretched to their limits, and when enrollment fell off, the marketing process began. Now, enrollments have risen beyond all previous levels. An article by Douglas B. Twitchell, called "Higher Ed, Inc.," which originally appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of Wilson Quarterly explains,

> The explosive growth of Higher Ed. is evident in increasing enrollments, new construction, expanding statewide university systems, more federal monies and changes in the professorate (Twitchell 2004).

What has this growth meant to the institution of higher education? The atmosphere of marketing has set the stage for (as predicted by Adorno and Horkheimer) a "dumbing-down of art and culture, the concentration of cultural producers, and the spread of an entertainment society" (Schor and Holt 2000:x). Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt support this argument when they write:

> Doubts (are) reemerging at the end of the twentieth century about consumer society for many reasons, including, but not limited to the relentless commodification of all areas of social life, the rise of market values, and how previously public institutions, such as health care and education, are now given over to private corporations who produce them for profit, as if they were ordinary consumer goods (2000:viii).

In "Whimpering into the Good Night: Resisting McUniversity," Hayes and Wynard explained that university and corporate interests are becoming indistinguishable from one another. "The imposition of managerial practices from the service sector, (is) leading to an increasing bureaucratization of academic life" (2002:117). According to Edmundson, higher education is showing signs of McDonaldization or "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant, efficiency, calculability, predictability, and greater control, are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (Ritzer 1993:1). Ritzer sees these four principals of McDonaldization occurring on campuses, albeit at a slower and more graduated pace then in other aspects of our lives.

> McDonaldization affects not only the restaurant business but also education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family and virtually every other aspects of society. No longer content to dominate the strip malls that surround many college campuses, fast food restaurants have moved onto many of those campuses (Ritzer 1993:2,8).

I found examples of this on my own campus. The University of South Florida certainly has mass classes (at least 200 enrolled) in many departments, with some classes held in the local mall's movie theatre to accommodate the enrollment numbers (Persaud 2002).

Of course, well-known fast food chains are pervasive on campus. We also have "shopping mall-like choices (for courses) available to students so that faculty members and institutions appear to be hawking their wares and competing with one another to attract students" (Shepperd 1997:333). The appearance of mall-like structures on campus, fast food and retail tie-ins make students feel right at home. Mark Gottdiener mentions this in his book, *The Theming of America*: "Increasingly, the culture and values of the mall are coloring the culture and values of the university" (2001:135).

The reduction in state support for higher education which began in the early 1980's has also contributed to the "student as consumer" atmosphere. E. Thomas Dowd, Professor of Psychology at Kent State University, was quoted as saying "Universities must now compete to attract and retain students in order to get the tuition revenue that pays an increasing share of the bills" (Panczyk 2001:1). Twitchell has an alternative explanation. He argues that for large institutions, "getting the brand out and the contributions in" is paramount. Tuition is the least important of the four basic revenue streams, whereas "what passes through the development office is the most remunerative." According to him, competition for the students is not for their dollar, but for their brand loyalty (2004).

> Woe to the state without a special funding program (with the word *merit* in it) assures middle-class kids who graduate in the upper half of their high school class a pass to State U. College has become what high school used to be, and thanks to grade inflation, it's almost impossible to flunk out (2004).

Enrollments must be high enough to indicate to potential sources of funding that the schools are, basically, popular. Twitchell also emphasizes the dumbing-down of

education and labels it "grade-inflation." Delucchi and Smith, in an article in *Teaching Sociology* write, "this growing culture of disengagement embraced by many college students seems rooted in a pervasive belief that the main purpose of higher education is economic" (2002:100). But they warn,

> Consumer sovereignty in higher education conflicts with the goals of effective pedagogy. An undue emphasis on customer service inverts the professor-student relationship by vesting authority in students as customers (100).

A picture of the modern university system begins to come into focus. It is an institution that has become steeped in consumerism, fundamentally altering its image and use in our society. I shall now take a closer look inside the institution and how these changes have affected students.

## Chapter Two:

## The New College Student

From the students' perspective, McDonaldization involves the pursuit of a degree and knowledge in the most efficient, predictable, calculable way, with the most control over all aspects. It is arguable that most instructors, from those at community colleges to Ivy League schools, would agree with Delucchi and Korgen when they write:

> The teacher-student relationship is not intrinsically economic. There can be no fixed preference in advance, because learning represents an essentially creative and unpredictable process (2002:106).

However, as previously discussed, consumerism has come to characterize virtually every aspect of our lives, including education. We are looking at an institution that has been at least partially McDonaldized, if for no other reason than to preserve itself within this rationalized society. As we have seen, Ritzer describes the four tenants of McDonaldization as efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. He argues that these four outcomes have a positive influence on the consumer/student. What has been the effect of this change on the student-teacher relationship? Think back to list of "disengaged-student" attitudes and behaviors.

> Students refuse to read assigned materials, study time has dropped significantly, attendance has dropped, rude behavior has increased, students show up to office hours mainly to complain about grades (also known as grade-grubbing), students are increasing their time at work and their time socializing, and their participation in organized campus activities has decreased (Flacks and Thomas 1998).

What could be an explanation for this observation? I have found research asking "Are college students coming out of the consumer culture too sensitive for truly critical thinking?" Other research implies critical pedagogical practices are to blame by making students feel that all potential comments or points are equally valuable. Twitchell reminds us,

> It's no accident that you hear students talking about how much the degree costs and how much it's worth. That is very much how the schools themselves talk as they look for new sources of research or developmental funding. In many schools there's even a period *called shopping* [his emphasis] around, in which the student attends as many classes as possible looking for a 'fit', almost like channel surfing (2004).

In light of this emphasis on school as a commodity, how do students value higher education? Delucchi and Korgen found "(students) demand a level of 'entertainment' from faculty commensurate with the price of tuition" (2002:104). David McCabe of Colgate University claims that students "see a university degree primarily as a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world" (2000:445). It was reported that students attending college to "gain a well-rounded education and to formulate their values and goals declined from 71 percent in 1976 to 57 percent in 1999" (Delucchi and Korgen 2002:100). The "list" of how students differ today from students in the past within the

context of consumer society has a very gloomy tone. Paul Trout, an English Professor at Montana State University writes, “A sizable segment of students now entering college does not love to learn, is not used to working hard to learn, and does not have anything resembling an intellectual life” (1998). In an article entitled, “Examining Loss of Soul in Education,” an even more esoteric view is presented:

> [When we look at students] we find idle bystanders content to remain distant from formal instruction and from their hearts. Too often they remain dazed, passive consumers, window-shopping the mall of education. Education becomes something to get through with a grade or a degree rather than a clearing for deep experience (Peterson 1999:9).

Richard Flacks, a professor of Sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara and Scott L. Thomas, an assistant professor of educational administration at the University of Hawaii at Mano, sum up the laundry list of students’ symptoms with the term "disengagement” (1998). Theoretical articles about students’ engagement with education are relatively easy to find. It is difficult to find studies designed to understand or explain how this engagement/disengagement can be observed empirically.

One such study, published in *Teaching Sociology,* used a survey to get at questions such as “Do contemporary college students view higher education as a commodity they purchase in exchange for tuition payments?” and “Are students more concerned with obtaining high grades than learning?” (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002:103). The most telling of this study’s findings was that “over 42 percent of (the) sample believes that their payment of tuition 'entitles' them to a degree” (104). Delucchi and Korgen believe their study “support(s) the characterization of a student culture

subscribing to the idea that higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace" (2002:104).

Mark Edmundson offers the explanation that teaching and evaluating practices are influenced by, and are influencing, students. He argues, "the Socratic method--the animated, sometimes impolite give-and-take between student and teacher--seems too jagged for current sensibilities" (1997:45). He does acknowledge that the politically correct atmosphere was invaluable because it was responsible for "raising the standard of civility and tolerance in the university." However, another result may be that "students now do not wish to be criticized, not in any form." Edmundson writes that the culture of consumption never criticizes students, at least not overtly (47).

In response to an article in *Teaching Sociology*, Anne F. Eisenberg (1997:328) suggests that what Delucchi and Smith capture as a student culture emerging from a consumeristically charged postmodern society is actually the result of changing, more progressive teaching strategies. She argues that "Educators' changing pedagogical philosophies seek a more liberatory process of learning and more critical outcomes for their students" (330). This results in a change in the "subordinate/super ordinate relationships between students and teachers" (330). What some are regarding as the by-product of consumerism in education, Eisenberg sees as an outcome of teaching practices. Kenneth R. Stunkel of Monmouth University criticizes interactive pedagogy and interactive learning theory because of the way authority is taken from instructors' control, which in turn deprives them of the ability to create a disciplined class capable of learning (Smith 2000:67).

Another conservative critique of modern teaching practices comes from Harland G. Bloland, Professor Emeritus from the University of Miami, when he writes, “as intellectuals become associated with popular culture and identified with it, they begin to lose their hierarchical station as experts” (1995:538). His view is that when instructors try to relate to the students, and bring in popular culture, cartoons, and clips from films and TV, they may actually be further destabilizing the already disintegrating boundaries that are in place between education and the rest of society. Some scholars agree with this assessment. For instance, William J. Smith of Georgia Southern University believes that authority must be reclaimed in the classroom in order to “reshape the organizational culture of academia” (2000:70). Jerry W. Shepperd from Austin Community College writes “attempts to 'relate' material to the lives of students rather than expecting students to relate to the material reinforce the 'student-as-consumer' behavior” (1997:333).

We see that students are getting consumer messages from the institutions, which compete for their enrollment, and from the professors, who compete for their attention. In a rationalized society, enchanted things become disenchanted. Education lost its enchantment, and students see it as any other commodity. They also see those associated with the institution as ordinary customer services representatives. If at the undergraduate level, as Twitchell (2004) suggests, universities are now in the business of delivering consumer satisfaction, how does one rate the consumer’s satisfaction? We give them a piece of paper upon exit and ask them to please rate their experience. The next section will explore traditional teaching evaluations in light of the McDonaldized education system.

## Chapter Three:

## Teaching Evaluations

Evaluations, usually done on or around the last day of class, are ubiquitous with college courses. This is a decisive moment for some students, as they spend time carefully filling in the bubbles and painstakingly constructing their comments. Granted, others just look at it as time to zone-out. Ultimately, who will see evaluations anyway? As an undergraduate, I always figured that the professor and maybe an administrator would see the evaluation, then it goes in a file…and that would be the end of its useful life.

Evaluations' main claim to fame continues to be their measurement of teaching effectiveness. "No method of evaluating college teaching has been researched more than student evaluations" (Centra 2003:495). Most studies have concluded that in-class evaluations are

> (a) Reliable and stable: (b) valid when compared with student learning and other indicators of effective teaching: (c) multi-dimensional in terms of what they assess: (d) useful in improving teaching: and (e) only minimally affected by various course, teacher of student characteristics that could bias results (Centra 2003:496).

Having said that, what else can evaluations measure? Topics such as grade inflation, the dumbing-down of curricula and the atmosphere of student disengagement have all

appeared in research that uses evaluations as data. If we accept the notion that the university system is McDonaldized, then what does that mean for the validity of in-class evaluations? The notion that education is catering to the "lowest common denominator" and evaluations somehow contribute to that is evident in the literature. Finally, I will explore how students have historically been denied easy access to in-class evaluations and how currently, two web sites exist which fill that void. The rationalization of higher education has brought about this trend toward the universal availability of information.

In a study by Charles F. Eiszler, he asked the question: "Has the use of student evaluations of teaching effectiveness been a contributing factor to a trend of grade inflation…"(Eiszler 2002:483). He concludes that,

> Although generally valid as measures of teaching effectiveness, college students' ratings of instruction may be used in ways that raise questions of consequential validity, specifically by encouraging grade inflation (483).

Eiszler also blames institutional policies that define a 'student as customer' orientation as a likely contributing factor in grade inflation and cites the use of student evaluations of faculty teaching as one such practice (2002:486). Of course, this is only possible because administrations continue to rely upon these evaluations to assess teaching effectiveness. Also, consider the article "Will Teachers Receive Higher Student Evaluations by Giving Higher Grades and Less Course Work?" by John A. Centra. He writes, "some college teachers believe a sure way to win student approval is to give high grades and less course work" (Centra 2003:495). Professors "further believe that this will translate into higher student evaluations of their teaching, a kind of quid pro quo" (Centra 2003:495). He asked faculty members at a major university "What would most likely bias student

evaluations?" 72% said course difficulty, 68% reported grade leniency, and 60% reported course workload (Centra 2003:495). This study produced results contradictory to those assumptions when it found that, "courses in natural sciences with expected grades of A were rated lower, not higher" (495).

When one places in-class evaluations within the context of consumerism, where the "customer is always right" attitude prevails, it reduces students' evaluations of teachers to nothing more than the survey card handed to us when we leave McDonalds. If the student is the consumer, then perhaps we should think of professors as customer service representatives. Delucchi and Korgen write that evaluation forms sometimes read "more like customer/student-satisfaction surveys" than assessments of teaching ability (2002:105). They go one to say that the forms themselves may contribute to this problem:

> Students' evaluations of faculty members measure a variety of factors such as personality and expressiveness, which may or may not be related to learning, but are salient criteria to student consumers (Delucchi and Smith 1997:324).

Paul Trout of Montana State partially blames the "dumbing down" of education on what he calls "student-satisfaction surveys," read 'evaluations,' that allow students to "give poor evaluations as payback (for poor grades)" (1998).

All of the energy invested in evaluations relates to their usefulness to instructors and institutions.

> Few topics in the popular and scholarly literature of higher education have attracted as much attention over prolonged periods of time as have the question of the validity of student evaluations of college teaching effectiveness … (Eiszler 2002:483).

I can find no emphasis placed on the usefulness evaluations have or could have for students. Most schools do not exactly advertise access to in-class evaluations. As I began research for this paper, I discovered that here at USF, the quantitative totals for each professor are in binders in the library, and could be used by students when making choices for the upcoming semester. During a visit to our library, I asked the reference librarian for help in finding the qualitative comments connected to these quantitative scores. That information is unavailable in the library. If students do not have access to the evaluations, then they are not useful to them.

There are those in higher education who are frustrated by the "anti-intellectualism and role confusion" they say is brought on by student consumerism (Smith 2000:68). The prevailing negative tone implied in much of the research I have cited so far does not give us a full picture of the college student of 2005. These studies show us students who are disengaged from their education, for reasons ranging from student consumerism to teaching practices. But as I have shown, students are not fully incorporated into the university system's evaluation process, and so are unable to access the very data they help create. Informal networks of information passed on through word of mouth sometimes overcome this lack of access. Sororities and Fraternities are probably the largest storing houses of documents and information, such as old tests and notes, passed down only to "brothers and sisters". Student publications have also played a role in

student choice, but fear of retribution, and lack of data limit their usefulness. As we have seen, traditional evaluations have been somewhat guarded by administration, professors, and staff. Students are now getting in on the act and sharing information on the web. The Internet has great potential to alter social patterns, including student behavior. It is:

> A rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the Internet, (which links millions of people together in new spaces that are changing the way we think, …[the] form of our communities, our very identities (Turkle 1999).

There are now two (down from four in 1999) major web sites, which allow students to rate their college professors, RateMyProfessors.com and ProfessorPerformance.com. Although professors will not lose their jobs over the posted ratings, they are public, which could be satisfying for the "disgruntled customer" (Capp 2002). "Easily and quickly, anybody with web access can rate and comment on any professor in the United States or Canada" (Westhues 2004). The final section of the literature review looks at *RatemyProfessors.com,* the largest most well know of these web sites.

## Chapter Four:

## *RateMyProfessors.com*

This final piece of my literature review focuses on what little existing research could be found about the *RateMyProfessors.com* and on Interent studies in general. *RateMyProfessors.com* looks similar in design to so many other web sites out there. There is banner advertising down the right side panel, a picture of five happy students, front and center, the main menu, and then places to click. You can search for evaluations by school, state, or professor. There are links across the top of the page: *Help/FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)/Press/Forum/About/Contact/Gold, and* a menu down the left side of the page: *Canada, What's New, Forum, Most-Rated Schools, Press, Login, Funny Ratings, Help/FAQ, and RMP Shop*. *RateMyProfessors.com* is the most used, most comprehansive, oldest and largest among the current sites, with 3,740,460 evaluations, on 573,548 professors and 4,660 colleges, and counting (http://www.RateMyProfessors.com/index.jsp. July 15, 2005.) The site's catch phrase is "Where the Students do the Grading."

Founder, John Swapceinski, said he created the web site in 1999 because students need to know what other students think about their professors. In a 2003 article on *Univercity.com*, he explains his motivation for creating the web site.

> After taking a class with a particularly dastardly professor while attending San Jose State University, I realized that if a site like *RateMyProfessors.com* had existed I wouldn't have had to suffer through three months of torture, Swapceinski says. “I could have taken the class with a better instructor" (Brennan).

The link at the bottom of the page, *Advertiser Information*, intended for potential advertisers, implies a certain level of respectability and legitimacy. It also reminds us that this site is not in existance for purely altruistic reasons. An article for the Toronto Star in 2002 quotes Swapceinski as saying the site was still costing him money, but he hoped that one day it would be self-sufficient (Black 2002). The *What’s New* page is a timeline of sorts that shows the site’s growth from *TeacherRatings.com* on June 6th, 1999 to *RateMyProfessors.com* on May 7th, 2001 to their 3 millionth rating March 1st, 2005. They joined the RateMyNetwork in 2001, which links them with an entire community of ratings sites available on the Internet.

> The RateMy  Network covers the entire spectrum of interests and includes several fully integrated web sites, such as ratemyanimal.com, ratemywheels.com, ratemyrecipe.com, and the site that started it all—ratemyface.com (http://ratemynetwork.com/index.cfm).

By the looks of the growth the site has undergone, it is a safe assumption that it is now running in the black.

Another source of income for the site is generated from *Gold Memberships*. Unlike other web sites that use gimmicks to obtain email addresses from users for future sale, *RateMyProfessors.com* does not require a visitor leave a name or email address (Chilargi 2005). There is a place for anyone to register at no cost, which is probably

designed to track user information for advertising purposes, but it also allows the user to email comments to other raters, still anonymously. Casual voyeurs can become professionals with a *Gold Membership*. For $9.95 a year, you are granted access to every evaluation written since the inception of the web site. Non-members are allowed only the most recent 10 for each professor (most of the professors in my data set have upwards of 150 evaluations.). The web site reminds users: "You spend a tremendous amount of time and money on your college education. Isn't it worth a few dollars to get the most out of it?" This takes us back to the idea of higher education becoming McDonaldized. Revenue can come from ads on the site for commodities of interest to students. Students are extending their school participation to outside the classroom and the campus, to a virtual, rational community that values their insight and their dollars.

Navigating the web site reveals many places in which to observe students being educational consumers. In addition to the evaluations, I accessed all the helpful spots on the site, designed to assist the visitor, such as *FAQ, About Us, Press, The Forum, Advertsing, Gold Membership,* and *Rating Categories,* and took screen shots of the home page to ascertain what it looks like to a student who evaluates a professor. *The Forum* is an area of the web site available to all visitors, not just paying members, that has an abundance of comments, which look beyond the initial purpose of the site and provide some additional data relating to the validity of the site itself. For example, we find professors (self-identified) writing about the very notion of publicly accessible evaluations. Similar to the articles found in a large number of university based papers, professors sometimes condemn the site, with reasons varying from privacy violations to unethical practices. Other times, they applaud its ingenuity and recognize its usefulness.

I have also observed professors use the site much like the students do, as a form of communication. I found threads from professors asking students and fellow professors for advice and opinions on all sorts of topics.

There are basically two ways to use the website. One could simply browse though the list of schools, professors, evaluations, and all the other areas of interest. These types of people are sometimes called "lurkers" in cyberspace (Harmon and Boeringer 1997). They enter the site, use it for whatever purpose, and then leave without anyone knowing they were there (Creators of the site are aware of their presence because servers keep track of hits, and sometime establish cookies in the visitor's browser.)

The other way to participate in this web site is to rate a professor. Although not all professors and all schools are listed on the web site, you can quickly and easily add a school and a professor and then begin rating. To rate a professor, you link to a sheet designed to assess the teachers on *Easiness, Helpfulness, Clarity,* and *Your Interest*. There are also fields for *Prof Status: Still Teaching-Retired/Gone, Appearance (Just for fun): Hot* or *Not,* and *Class*. Finally, an area is provided for comments, up to 350 characters, increased from 255 characters in February of 2003. When you are finished rating the professor, the numerical score is calculated on clarity and helpfulness only, ranging from 1-5. The result is a frowning, neutral, or smiling face corresponding with the numerical *Overall Quality* score: a blue ☹ for 0-2.5, a green 😐 for 2.6-3.5, and a yellow ☺ for 3.6-5.0, with or without a chili pepper. Professors will receive a chili pepper when the appearance category has received at least one hot point.

There are links to the *FAQ* page in order to understand some of the criteria Swapceinski used in developing the rating system. He wrote on November 20th, 1999

"due to popular demand, a teacher's *Overall Rating* no longer includes the teacher's *Easiness* rating when it is computed." Later he changed the prose of *Overall Rating* to *Overall Quality*. The *Hot* or *Not* category has an additional link to understand the "deeper significance"(rmp.com) behind the addition of this category. It connects to an article from the *New York Times* entitled, "The Hunk Differential" (Varian 2003). Based partially on a study by Daniel Hamermesh , a labor economist at the University of Texas and Amy Parker, an undergraduate. "The bottom line is that better-looking professors get higher teaching scores, all else being equal" (Varian 2003) *RateMyProfessors.com* began including the *Hot or Not* choice in 2001.

There are some legal questions surrounding the site. The Swapceinski claims that in the beginning they were threatened with legal action "on a daily basis." Teaching evaluations in general fall into a sort of legal limbo. Edward Pettit, Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences at Augusta State University was quoted as saying that "these evaluations (traditional, in-class) are technically covered by the Freedom of Information Act, at least in part…" (Lohr 2003). But adds that these public records are typically part of a personnel file" (Lohr 2003). On the *FAQ* page, Swapceinski explains how the urge to sue the web site will be met with opposition. He cites "47 USC Section 230, the federal law that permits many entities to 'host' other people's content without being liable for defamation/libel etc." Additionally,

> "The Supreme Court of the United States has held that anonymity of speech is protected under the First Amendment to the Constitution…and United States courts also have consistently recognized that the right to speak anonymously extends to speech on the Internet" (http://www.RateMyProfessors.com/faq.jsp).

There have been numerous articles about *RateMyProfessors.com*, many of which are posted as links on the *Press* page. Some of these focus on the dichotomy of the site: "Students can post a raving review for their favorite professor, or rant in revenge for their undeserving grade with a horrendous rating" (Chilargi 2005). While others give insight for how the students can use the site constructively: "The site will allow students to obtain a preview of a teacher, a useful tool for students considering a course taught by one of the more controversial teachers" (Chilargi 2005). Many of these articles focused on the general validity of the site's existence. When determining how representative this site would be for investigating the education consumer, I concentrated on the schools, the professors, and the ratings.

How well does this web site represent the university system in the United States? According to an *Advertiser Information* link *RateMyProfessors.com*, the site has 53.7% female visitors, 46.3% male visitors. The Census reported that men account for 45.2 percent of college enrollment, while women account for 54.8 percent (Census 2000). One might expect the top ten most rated schools to include only the largest schools in the country; however, this group includes schools with enrollments ranging from 13,962 to 42,837. The top ten most rated schools also represent various geographic areas of the nation, including Michigan, California, Delaware, Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, New York and Maryland. While the site may not be a place to gather exact information on specific professors in order to create statistical models of the professors' effective/ineffective teaching methods, the information is useful for giving insight into the expressed values and preferences of students who have access to computers and choose to rate their professors. Some may suspect the site to be skewed with either too

many or too few positive or negative evaluations, which would result in ratings that are well above or well below average. The *FAQ* section claims that 65% of the ratings on the site are positive, which we can asume means with a score of 3.6 or greater. How does this compare with traditional evaluations? TRACE, the Teaching Resources and Continuing Education center at the University of Waterloo performed a simple test and found the ratings found on *RateMyProfessors.com* were consistent with ratings from the university's teaching evaluations (http://www.adm.uwaterlooca/infotrac/tm sept01 .html). They looked at all UW professors rated on the site and found the

> Total number of instructors rated in the high-quality category was 124, 72 were rated in the middle category, and 54 in the low category. This was consistent generally with the way instructors are rated on course evaluations. (http://www.adm.uwaterlooca/infotrac/tm sept01 .html).

They also examined the 15 out of 16 possible Distinguished Teacher Award winners' ratings available on the web site. All 15 were "rated in the high-quality category (yellow, smiling face." We also see from Kenneth Westhues' article in *The Record* that "for most professors, the web site results conform closely to those obtained on in-class questionnaires" (Westhues 2004).

Kenneth Westhues, a sociology professor at the University of Waterloo and a winner of its distinguished teacher award, worries about how seriously the average student will take the ratings. He offers some advice when navigating the site. His main concern is with the identity and intentions of the senders. He warns "there is no way to tell which ratings come from bright, hard-working students and which ones from insolent slackers" (Westhues 2004). He also warns of the possibility that "a determined handful of

malicious raters, or even just one, "can basically skew an entire professors' ratings, to their desire." He admits there are cookies and filters in place to prevent this, but feels that there are those individuals out there that can bypass such hurdles. Westhues next concern relates to the monitors for each school. They may or may not take their job seriously, so inappropriate comments may not get screened out. Additionally, inaccurate ratings can be missed by the monitors, as in the case of Laurel Graham here at USF, who was rated for a class she did not teach. Finally, he writes, "despite all the possibilities of error and abuse, the bulk of postings to the site are the plain, unvarnished sentiments of ordinary students who have taken the courses identified and posted just one rating per course" (Westhues 2004). An article in The Toronto Star quotes Henry Mandelbaum, executive director of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, as agreeing with this account:

> We would support anything which helps inform the students as they go through their academic learning career. All the universities have student evaluations where the form is something negotiated to assure it's fair and objective (Black 2002).

He adds "the only caution we would give to students is that they understand the purpose of the Web site is to offer some entertainment value and not to look at it as a serious resource" (Black 2002).

These sentiments are not in the majority. More often than not, articles I found presented professors and organizations that agree with the American Association of University Professors.

> (They) give a failing grade to those and other teacher-rating sites, some of which are specific to a single school. The traditional in-class evaluations used by most colleges and universities are good enough (Associated Press 2003).

Jonathan Knight, spokesman for the AAUP says he does not believe evaluations *should* be for students. "These kinds of postings will inevitably focus on student gripes and have no credibility. The purpose it should be designed for, helping the quality of education, is completely lost" (Associated Press 2003). Some worry *RateMyProfessors.com* is another example of how education today more and more plays to the masses and will reach its lowest common denominator: an education system set up to entertain and appease the student/consumer. As Westhues (2004) asks, in what other industry are employee evaluations accessible worldwide? I think they have ignored the notion that this web site has a different intended audience, who has limited access to traditional evaluations.

For the purposes of my study, the data available at *RateMyProfessors.com* can provide a window on what students value in a course or professor, regardless of how valid they might be for judging teaching effectiveness. The students who provide the ratings expect their audience will be other students, which is completely different from the traditional in-class evaluations. They are also assured of complete anonymity, unlike in small classes where the professor could guess the identity of a particular evaluator from the style of the comment or complaint. Even though it offers the comfort and safety of anonymity, it would be wrong to assume that students can just express their 'true, uninfluenced selves' in their ratings of professors. We cannot think of this web site as an unmediated source of data for and by students. Students are social beings, influenced by

the structure of the site, the styles of comments found there, and their own particular purposes in evaluating a professor.

This web site skews the window into the student mindset in a variety of ways. Both the sender and the audience have access to a computer and are computer literate. The sender is presumably a student who has attended a class with the professor. They may express emotions, such as joy or anger about the experience they had in the class. They may try to convey information they feel needs to be offered to other students or maybe just to the Internet world. They may want the system of choosing a professor to be more rational so that no one has to put up with bad courses anymore. As I have already pointed out, they could also be venting or ranting to simply 'see' their own voice on the web site. Whatever the case, we can safely presume that in the vast majority of cases the sender is a student and the information he or she conveys is in truth an expression of their opinion. The web site is self-correcting over time if there are enough other comments entered because when a comment is completely ridiculous, students point out the folly, and the numerical weight of the "rant" is overpowered.

Another deliminating factor is that students who enter the web site inevitably review evaluations already there. When you enter the web site, you have no idea who left the ratings and no one knows that you are there. However, the vocabularies students adopt on *RateMyProfessors.com* are undoubtedly influenced by the categories presented on the site as well as the types of categories normally used in traditional evaluations. As there is little empirical literature directly related to my topic, I looked at the research conducted on other Internet issues, such as articles entitled "How Edge are You?" and "Cyberspace and Identity" (Williams and Copes 2005 and Turkle 1999). They focused

on identity construction. *RateMyProfessors.com* is different from other web sites studied in these articles because unlike chat rooms, newsgroups and blogs, there are no descriptors of the sender for each message, other than on the *Forum*. The comments or

> "Post(s) (are) conceptualized as sub-cultural artifacts that outlive the moment when they are created, build up a discursive environment, interactional domain characterized by distinctive ways of interpreting and representing everyday realities" (Williams and Copes 2005).

As the intended audience is students, what they view frames their vocabularies for what they will write and how they will use the information on the site.

The *Forum* reveals that the set of visitors looking at the comments is more diverse than the set of visitors leaving evaluations. The latent observers are the web sites creators, the moderators, some professors, prospective professors, perhaps parents and the press. From George Ritzer's point of view, much of the audience is rational and searching for a way to increase efficiency and gain control over the irrational process of registration. By increasing the predictability of a class, they can more readily obtain the results they desire. A less rational observation is that there is an almost voyeuristic feeling when you read many of the communications between students, especially when a running stream of comments are obviously linked by strong emotions.

Although many scholars choose to focus on the negative ramifications of student consumerism, such as grade-grubbing and refusing to read assigned materials, we must acknowledge its ability bring about a new availability of information about instructors over the Internet. It is unclear what percentage of American college students currently uses *RateMyProfessors.com,* but it is clear that the site is becoming increasingly popular.

Much like William Smith claims "students feel empowered by their position as consumers to bargain for grades and degrees" (2000:70), this web site gives students the power to make more satisfying decisions about which professors and courses to take. Although it may not be as statistically valid as in-class evaluations, students are increasingly making use of it and that makes it a significant part of the story regarding how higher education is changing. Of course questions still remain: What do students today consider a satisfying educational experience? What can this web site tell us about the college consumer? According to the theory of McDonaldization, consumers/students should feel great comfort from the control that they can gain over their purchases/education through the efficiency, calculability, and predictability of the system (Ritzer 2002:17).

As I have shown with the bulk of this literature review, students who are grade grubbing and treating their education like any other commodity have been elusive to study. In order to witness the actively engaged student, as opposed to the "disengaged student," I have traveled to cyberspace, where many of today's students are comfortable and proficient. Due to the scope of this site and the type of community it solicits, *RateMyProfessors.com* is a great place to observe students participating in their college careers. I will now explain how I came to choose my sample and conduct my content analysis.

## Chapter Five:

## Methodology

It is clear that educational change, consumerism on campus, the practice of in-class evaluations, and the rise of the Internet all impact students in complex ways. My initial read-through of the evaluations on *RateMyProfessors.com* reminded me of the style of communication that occurs from informed consumer to less-informed consumer. What does this web site say about the students who use it and what they value? How can it address the question of consumerism among students? I've boiled down my research question to look something like this: What can the comments posted on *RateMyProfesors.com* teach us about the current day undergraduate student's tendency to see herself as a particular kind of educaton consumer?

An exploratory review of existing data, specifically a content analysis, is appropriate for this difficult to observe phenomenon. A general definition of content analysis is a

> Research method that is used to analyze social life by interpreting words and images, contained in documents, films, art, music, and other cultural products and media (Johnson 200:60).

Content analyses must follow some basic guidelines in order to produce a solid outcome. I first had to consider manifest and latent content of the analysis. According to Berg (2001) manifest elements are those "physically present and countable" while latent

elements are "extended to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physically presented data" (225). I will be using both elements in my analysis, although the manifest elements of evaluations are a larger percentage. When I do introduce latent elements, I will provide "examples of each" (226).

Is a content analysis a good choice for this project? My study is not focused on the teaching categories the web site sets up as important, nor is it a place to see how closely the categories represent outcomes in traditional evaluations. And unlike traditional in-class evaluations, I am not interested in assessing teaching effectiveness. This study is designed to view the evaluations on *RateMyProfessors.com* and see how they can illustrate what students are looking for in a professor. A content analysis will be a good tool for this because it is unobtrusive, cost effective, and captures students' comments over an extended period of time (Berg 2001:243-4). However, it is important to remember that this type of study cannot show any casual relationships between variables. In other words, I will not be able to identify the underlying motives of students' comments or whether race or gender enter into the value judgments students leave in their comments about professors.

In order to assess written documents, such as the evaluations available on this web site, "researchers must first decide at what level they plan to sample, and what units of analysis will be counted" (Berg 2001:228). As I mentioned, the web site has over 3,740,460 evaluations, on 573,548 professors and 4,660 colleges. With the vast amount of data at my disposal, how could I produce a manageable sample? A stratified sample seemed to be the best choice in this instance, as I needed to ensure that I had enough evaluations to work with which would be representative of a particular professor. The

website provided a link to the *Most Rated Schools.* I chose the top ten most rated schools from that list to create my first stratum. Then, I sorted the list of professors under each school by number of ratings, and took the top ten most rated professors, which created my second stratum. The web site automatically provides the ten most recent evaluations for each professor rated, which resulted in 1000 evaluations, my original sample. Out of the 1000 evaluations now available, I made the choice to cut down the sample to 400, partly for time constraints, but mainly because I found codes repeating so much during my preliminary read through that a smaller breakdown would be sufficient for my purposes. I accomplished this by taking the ten professors rated for each school and sorting them by *Overall Quality* from lowest to highest. I then took the professors with the top score, bottom score, and two middle scores from each school.

In order to assert that the ratings in my sample are representative of the web site's ratings, I looked at the *Overall Quality* score provided by the web site. The *Overall Quality* score on the website for the ten most rated profesors includes all evaluations ever done on a particular professor (in the group I selected, that was as high as 367 ratings.) I then calculated the *Overall Quality* for my original sample of 1000, where each professor only had 10 evaluations. The web site overall average for the 10 most rated professors at the ten most rated schools is 3.45 out of a possible 5. The average for the scores in my original sample was 3.52, a fairly comparable figure.

Is my sample reliable? According to the Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology, reliability is the "degree to which a measurement instrument gives the same results each time it is used, assuming that the underlying thing being measured does not change" (Johnson 2000). I sampled my first 1000 comments and began this project in September

2004. By July 2005, my second, final sample was pulled, and I found the themes, language and basic content had not noticably changed, even though many of the professors had.

In an article entitled, "Techniques to Identify Themes in Qualitative Data," Ryan and Bernard explain that "In the early stages of exploration, nothing beats a thorough reading and pawing through of the data" (2003). This method is recommended for "novice researchers." I considered the theories and results from research on traditional evaluations as I went through the data. Armed with the knowledge that traditional evaluations are frequently conducted for internal review only, the evaluations on the web site, for and by students, probably have some striking differences from those conducted for and by a university. Although I was not comparing and contrasting the two, I kept in mind the different perspective a student may be coming from when typing comments specifically for other students.

As previously mentioned, this is not the kind of place where students speak to each other through online personas, except on the *Forum*. There are no standardized indicators of the students' gender, age, ethnicity, or health status when an evaluation is conducted. The professors' gender, age, ethnicity, and health status are also not indicated when their category is created. However, embedded within the evaluations could be indicators of the above categories. Such as "she was a good professor", "his accent was annoying", "she was a nice old lady", or "he will be missed." The existing research on traditional evaluations sometimes looks at gender as a mitigating factor in evaluations. Susan A Basow wrote, "Best and Worst Professors: Gender Patterns in Students' Choices." She writes that "most of the research on student ratings is based on

quantitative ratings…and has not directly examined the qualities students either value or dislike in their professors and whether these qualities vary by gender of student or gender of professor" (Basow 2000:408.) I cannot see what gender each student/evaluator is, but I can usually tell what gender the professor is.

Basow also writes that overall 'worst' professors are described as disorganized, unclear, and indifferent, and are rated particularly low on expressive-nurturant traits. "Best" professors are rated highly on both expressive-nurturant and active-instrumental traits and are described as caring, dynamic/enthusiastic, and knowledgeable" (416). This will become important when analyzing my data.

I moved to a more inductive approach and began to create categories and codes from the students' comments. This was when I realized that the value judgment openly expressed for a particular kind of teaching trait was not as important as the mention of that trait. For instance, when a student would write that "this professor gives you tons of reading," unless they give some other comment like, he totally sucks" or he "totally rocks," I was only able to determine that "tons of reading," according to this student was good or bad by looking at the numerical rating given. More importantly, tons of reading was something talked about and so it deserved noticing. Some comment sections were blank, others were too brief to be helpful, but many others had much to reveal about students' values. I felt early on that if a student had plenty to say, it was all equally important and carried equal weight, and so students' comments could be coded to multiple categories.

I began by identifying themes that were reoccurring between schools and professors, such as students looking for an easy A or students who want a professor to

teach in a way that limits the student's effort. They were helpful in navigating the data in the beginning, but eventually, these themes expanded into as many as 25 categories. I realized that I wanted to distinguish among particular targets of the students' comments. For instance, students wrote about the exams, lectures and professor. Sometimes they would describe the exams as hard, the lectures as boring, but the professor as a good teacher. I tried separating them by parts of speech, where nouns were the top tiers, and all adjective and adverbs fell somewhere behind. Then I flipped them, and looked for the adjectives and adverbs as the top tier. I encountered difficulty in coding in this way because it created too much chaos. Every evaluation was yielding numerous codes, and the data I was producing were no easier to analyze than the raw data.

Three areas that I did not see as terribly important to the determination of a good or bad professor were professors level of attractiveness, generally positive or negative comments with no explanation, and whether or not a student would recommend a professor. While the web site included that area for *Hot or Not*, I found that this was of little or no consequence on most of the evaluations in my sample. The negative *Overall Quality* scores are much more likely than positive *Overall Quality* scores to have little or no commentary attached to them. Susan Basow from Lafayette College writes, "Students have much less to say about their worst professors than their best ones" (2000:416). However, the brief comments that were either positive or negative added little to my analysis. "She was Awesome!" or "He was Terrible, avoid at all costs!" really did not tell me anything I could use. Finally, when evaluations included "Two thumb up!" comments, but had no descriptions of how the professor came to receive that rating, I did not code those.

This initial look at the data suggested some insights about the range of qualities students desire in a professor and a class. The quest for an easy A would probably be my biggest category. I could also see that students were interested in those customer service traits, such as attentiveness to their needs, pointed out in the literature review. The professor's personality was also important as many students made note of whether the professor was nice or mean. It was also clear that as the literature suggested, students are interested in a certain level of entertainment. This led me to build more general ideas out of the many categories I had created and read between the lines of some comments, either contextually or through my own experience as a college student, in order to better understand the comment's meaning. In this manner I used what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called "grounded theory":

> "The process blends deductive reasoning, which goes from general to specific observations, with inductive reasoning, which begins with observations and builds more general statements from them" (Johnson 2000).

After finding identifying patterns in the data through grounded theory and trying out numerous taxonomy systems, I finally made the decision to cut my themes and categories down to four continuums: Fun/Boring, Caring/Callus, Explicit/Vague, and Easy/Hard. Although I am loosing some of the specificity of the comments and my categories could easily be broken back down into smaller, more potent areas of interest, I chose to make the areas very broad because the way students write about their experience is extremely interconnected. Pulling comments apart too much seemed to deconstruct them down to categories not implied in the data. The web site already asked about the easiness, clarity, and helpfulness of a professor, and those exact words certainly appeared

with some frequency in the comments. What I looked for was a description and elaboration of what those terms meant to the raters. I felt that this was a strong representation of what the students value in a professor and a class. They are certainly considering aspects of the class such as homework, exams, reading and the professor, but what became more important to me as I continued through the 400 evaluations was how easy, fun, specific and/or helpful were the course and the professor.

The ratings and comments posted on *RateMyProfessors.com* are stylized ways of talking about classes and professors, in an online-mediated form. I discovered trends in language and content within many of the comments, especially when viewing the ten recent evaluations of a particular professor. The methods I am using fit the goal of making sense of what students say they value in a course and professor because content analyses are a good way to "examine artifacts of social communication" (Berg 2001:223). As I have shown in my literature review, web sites such as this have not been well examined in the research world. My sample of 400 evaluations pulled from the ten most rated schools on *RateMyProfessors.com* will help me discover what the current day undergraduate student values in a professor and a course. I will now be considering how the evaluations indicate a level of McDonaldization, and represent an education consumer craving efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.

## Chapter Seven:

## Findings

As higher education has been incorporated into the larger process of rationalization, changes have occurred in the subjectivities of students who populate our colleges. One way of gaining insight into students' subjectivity is to examine closely what they say they want in a course and a professor. This will give us their expressed values. On the surface, this web site exists for one purpose: To tell a student logging on if the professor in question is a good choice or bad choice. Upon closer examination, the researcher can choose to ignore the strength of a rating as good or bad and focus instead on the types of properties that students have bothered to rate at all. This reveals the properties of a course or professor that students find to be important or valuable. If you like professors that allow extra credit and do not make you buy a book, Prof X is your pick. If professors who lecture straight from PowerPoint, put their notes on Blackboard, and give 3 multiple choice tests are more to your liking, Prof Y is your pick.

This is a pilot study of a new phenomenon, which is a promising source of data. I wanted to give the reader an idea of the experience of students as they peruse the web site, and condense the types of things that students think other students should know. I created four continuums in which to place all 400 evaluations: Fun/Boring, Caring/Callus, Explicit/Vague, and Easy/Hard. After coding all 400 evaluations, I counted the total number in each category and then gave a representative percentage to

each. Students are telling other students what is useful or important to know about a professor before taking a course. By using the web site to give voice to their experience, they are placing these opinions in view for public consumption. I believe they are also participating in this discourse in order to help other students make educated choices about their education, much as they would pass on information to a potential consumer of a cell phone or car.

I must again state my goals and research question for the record. I am trying to discover what kind of evidence exists for the notion that the university system has become McDonaldized. By looking at the comments posted on *RateMyProfessors.com*, I will observe the current day undergraduate student's tendency to see herself as a particular kind of education consumer. Through students' comments, I can ascertain their values concerning a good professor and a bad professor. I will then compare the values included in this kind of consumer to those demanded of a McDonaldized educational system. As I read what they value in a professor, I can make inferences about how the four principals of McDonaldization are influencing those values.

*Fun/Boring*

From my literature review, with its emphasis on the entertainment factor, I expected the Fun/Boring area of interest to have a greater prevalence. However, it was the smallest, with only 122 or 16% of the comments containing allusions to how fun or boring a course was. I thought of it as the flavor of the class.

> *"nice lady, and funny, don't go to class because tst come straight from book, made the same grades on tests when I went as I did when I didn't. she does make you laugh if you enjoy a few minutes of laughing."*

Students seemed to judge professors on their ability to maintain interest. Mark Edmundson writes for Harpers:

> "Is it a surprise, then, that this generation of students-steeped in consumer culture before going off to school…see the books they read as a string of entertainments (sic) to be placidly enjoyed or languidly cast down" (1997:46)?

The professor that is funny seems to be the most important aspect of this category. Being boring is bad, but not always the kiss of death. Some students will put up with a boring professor as long as the lectures are straightforward and appear on the test.

> *"Really nice guy! Boring class but only b/c there's so much material to go over. Study notes and you'll do fine. Highly recommended!"*

Where do these comments fit into the McDonaldization theory? What does the student expect to gain from a fun class over a boring class? Put another way, does the student lose anything if a class is either fun or boring? And if unpredictability is one of the key components of comedy, how can a student calculate the comedy and decide if it is worth the time spent?

If getting a grade is the number one goal in a class, instead of learning or expanding your mind, then why not spend your time being amused. The efficient student would argue that getting the grade in the most enjoyable way is important, and being forced to be bored while receiving the grade is a waste of time. I think the best way to understand these comments is to think of the students controlling and predicting what they want in a class and presenting for other students what they can expect. Within the class, the Fun/Boring category may not be part of the McDonaldization construct, however, when choosing a class, a dynamic professor is more desirable than a boring professor and being able to predict those qualities is important.

*Caring/Callus*

Caring/callus, the second smallest category at 143 comments, 19%, included many ideas of how a professor could be nice or mean, such as the concepts of fairness and helpfulness. Again, I could have separated Fair/Unfair and Helpful/Unhelpful (and did in an early version of the coding), but I felt these types of comments were similar enough to keep together. Professors may be "cool, give extra credit, curve tests, return emails," etc. What the students were basically writing about was whether or not they liked this professor. Were they "easy to talk to" or did they "make you cry?" Again, based on the literature review, customer service attributes and emotion work attributes were not as common as I first thought they would be.

I thought this continuum would clearly be one where students prefer one professor to the other, or nice over mean. But what constitutes "nice?" I'm reminded of Mark Edmundson's comment, "students now do not wish to be criticized, not in any form. The culture of consumption never criticizes students, at least not overtly" (1997:47). This idea may also contribute to what is a "mean" professor.

> *"Mean rude lady who does not help you if you go to her office, doesn't respond to emails…she is so mean she made me cry one day when I went to talk to her about my grade."*

Susan Basow also writes that overall, 'worst' professors are "rated particularly low on expressive-nurturant traits …and 'best' professors are rated highly on expressive-nurturant traits and are described as caring…(2000:408.)"

> *"She is a very nice lady and cares about her students. If you have a problem talk to her and she will help. She is very accommodating and concerned…"*

Then there is the flip side of this coin, where a student warns other students of the professor's quirks, but still recommends him.

> *"Weird in a funny way. Gets mad when you ask questions and furious when you are late to class. But overall he is a great math teacher."*

Again, unlike studies of traditional evaluations, I was not as interested in the value judgment placed on the particular traits, as much as what kinds of traits the students write about. However, these categories were not set up in a hierarchical, good/bad way because, as one can see, students all place different values on these qualities.

While students look for traits that seem to be very personal and unmechanical, they are still trying to predict this behavior and control their experience in the classroom. The comments they leave suggest a need to attend classes with professors who will treat them in a way to which they are accustomed, whether or not that is in a nice way or a mean way is inconsequential to this study.

*Explicit/Vague*

Whenever a student classified an instructor's teaching proficiency, it went into the Explicit/Vague category, the second largest group. This was a serious concern among the raters, garnering 207 comments, 27% of the comments coded. Students often made connections for future students about how to navigate a course which otherwise may be confusing. Comments often times combined ideas of how the professor taught with the kinds of things they did in the classroom. The continuum included "knowledgeable, stupid, consistent, he repeats himself, the material relates to the tests, and speed of delivery." All of these comments pointed to the distinction between explicit and vague classroom instruction. This category also included any comments which state, "teaches well" or "does not teach at all."

The predictability and calculability of this category is obvious. Students do not like to be surprised by the content of tests. They also want a professor to be specific with the information conveyed in lectures. Their time is valuable, and they see listening to lectures that either repeat the reading, or are not on the tests as a waste of time and effort. They want to calculate how much time will be involved in studying, based on what the professor tells the class.

> *"Worst teacher I've ever had. Gives homework and tests on things not even close to what he describes…"*

Or

> *"Presents everything you need for the test."*

McDonaldized students would also value those things that are calculable, like grades, over those things which are not as calculable, such as a change in perspectives or the enrichment of her life from the contact with a knowledgeable person. I think there is also something interesting about expectations of professors and their teaching ability. I know that during my time as undergraduate, I did not know that professors did not have to have any teaching training.

> *He makes no sense at all, almost as if he's talking to himself instead a large class."*

Not all students on *RateMyProfessors.com* agree on these points. Some actually remark on the change in their perspective, but again, the crucial point is that they are discussing this aspect of a professor's teaching proficiency. Also, those who appreciate the higher-order learning, also comment on more mundane aspects of the class.

As consumers, we come to expect those who serve us to be versed in the art of service in their given field. We are disturbed when someone is "not doing her job." What students classify as a professor's "job" is varied, but when a professor does not meet the student's expectations, there is usually a negative evaluation associated with that evaluation. As Gioliotti (1987) suggests, students will give a professor a lower rating when that professor has violated the student's expectations.

The efficiency of the classroom experience is also important here. Comments which complained, "I only learned when I read the material myself." What is wrong with that, especially in light of the notion that students are consumers? We feel right at home serving ourselves at restaurants, grocery stores, banks, and gas stations, which are all

places where we used to expect to be served. It is counterintuitive to think that in this one place in our lives, we would expect to be led by the hand through the halls of knowledge. Some raters have a clear intention to explain not only the amount of work that will be required, but also the amount of independent thinking or critical work.

> *"He is a GREAT teacher…he is interesting, really funny and tells you exactly what you need to know. As long as you listen and take notes you will be fine. I missed 5 days in the semester and still got a high A. He is the best teacher I've ever had."*

Entertain me just enough to keep me awake, and then tell me exactly what I need to know to get the A, which I'm willing to work for, a little, but I want to work efficiently.

> *"Teaches you only what you need to know."*

What exactly does one "need" to know? This is another interesting sentiment I read more than once in articles about student consumerism. Students are the only consumers who want as little as possible for their money. Cancel class, happy students. Teach the minimum, happy students. Try to give them their moneys worth, not so happy students.

*Easy/Hard*

Finally, the Easy/Hard category is a continuum of what it takes to get through the class. It was the largest with *265* comments, or *38%* of the comments mentioned something about the level of work expected in the class. This included any comment that mentioned the ease or difficulty of things like "grades, amount of work, tests, attendance, and reading assignments." These findings suggest that the difficulty level of a course is very important to many students, but for different reasons. For example,

> *"Even though the class isn't a breeze…this is college now…it's still a good class and if you follow XXX's 'regimen' for studying and learning you should be fine…if you apply yourself you'll do fine."*
>
> And

> *"Extremely difficult class, I studided so much for this class and wound up getting a C-. If your not an accounting major dont even think about taking him."*

The dumbing-down of college education and the disengaged student were key pieces of my literature review. They envision students who are looking to get through college doing as little work as possible, who want to share their "research" into this endeavor with other "easy A" hunters, and are searching for professors who are willing to provide just such a class. While "final grades in a course are typically not known to students at the time they complete traditional student evaluation forms" (Centra 2003:496), students often know their grades when using *RateMyProfessors.com* (there

are examples of students who rate professors during the semester, but they are a very small percentage.)

> *"A word to the wise: take him no matter what!!! I'm the worst science student in the history of the world and I still got an A. I think it was by far the easiest class of my entire college career. You can be brain dead and still get an A in this class."*

Although many of the comments do resemble the above example, the value judgment connected to "*total easy A"* was not always positive. Some students were using that comment as a way to denigrate the professor, even though it was a very small percentage (9=<1%).

> *"It is so easy a monkey could get an A, and some do. What a waste of my tuition dollars. If everybody gets an A, why bother having the class? I think Mrs. XX should think about actually challenging her students. I am here to actually learn something, not be given a grade."*

Conversely, the difficult courses were not always rated poorly. In other words, the idea of the lowest common denominator, where students on this type of web site would always praise the easy A, did hold universal truth. I would argue that these students are still being efficient in their choice, because their goals are different from students who are looking for the "easy A." The long-term goal of learning about a subject because it will benefit them in some way, out ways the desire to do less work for the same grade.

From a McDonaldization point of view, the comments in this category were about efficiency. If the class was categorized as hard, then that means more time needs to be spent, more effort must be exerted. In order to get through this class efficiently, what should a student know about the professor? The mention of homework, tests and quizzes, and attendance were a major commonality, as was study time, amount and kind of reading, and whether or not to listen to lectures.

Just because I could not help myself, I also created a place for Worth/Not Worth Time/Money (22 comments=3%), but decided that ultimately, students were addressing the effort to be exerted, which belongs in this category. These blatantly consumer driven comments were few and far between, but they are present.

> *"Boring class-completely pointless and wasted both my time and book money."*
> *"…the book is a waste of $100.00..."*

> *"Dr XX.. is great. He is caring and nice. However, he can be snappy. So don't sleep in class. Overall a great teacher, I am a happy customer."*

Admittedly, this paper is steeped in consumerism rhetoric and so these comments are really fun to encounter. However, they are not the backbone of the data. The education consumer is most obvious and blatant in this small category. Students have placed their education online with purchasing a cell phone or a car or a house. They are happy with their purchase, or frustrated by the apparent waste. They stand out and are certainly relevant in the construction of a good professor, but this is really a small piece of the puzzle.

To recap, I present the cycle of a student online rating a professor, keeping in mind another student whom is choosing a professor. Efficiency is the optimum method for getting from one point to another. How will I get this degree as quickly and painlessly as possible? How can others get through 'Chemistry 101'? I must maximize my time in the classroom by choosing a professor who will act and react in a manner to which I am accustomed or that I desire. Others will need to know that the professor will expect certain things that are not spelled out in traditional ways.

This is where predictability comes in. I need a professor who does things the way I like. I want a class with some lecture, as long as it is on the test, some movies, as long as they are interesting, and multiple-choice tests. That way, I can predict what kind of grade I will get.

This is where calculability comes in. How much time will I have to devote to this class? What skills will this professor expect of me? I need time to do all the other things expected of me, like work, family and fun. If I can balance everything then I can satisfy all my responsibilities. I also need to be able to calculate my GPA before I even register for a class in order to maintain my scholarships.

This is where control comes in. I can control the outcome of this semester and get all A's, as long as I do what is expected and instructed. According to Ritzer, "Control is exerted over the people who enter the world of McDonaldization." Here, one can read, 'enter the world of the professor or enter the world of the university.' However students are attempting to exert control over that world which controls them. If I can control the outcome, I can get the desired effect in an efficient time frame - a four-year degree in four years (plus summers.)

My coding produced categories which illustrate how a student informs others students about a particular class and professor. It also illustrates how students on this web site have come to embrace the four principals of McDonaldization when rating their professors on their classroom experience. *RateMyProfessors.com* is a place where the students are the experts. They are in class almost every day for 4-5 years, and now someone values their knowledge. My next section will take a closer look at the very act of rating a professor online and what that says about the raters.

## Chapter Eight:

## Discussion

Do my findings support the notion that students are coming to act more and more like McDonaldized consumers? I believe my data give a compelling snapshot of the education consumer which future studies of longitudinal data will confirm. From the students' point of view, these online evaluations are legitimate, with more tangible results than in-class evaluations, which I have shown hold little or no meaning for the rater. In general, students value easy courses with nice teachers who attend to their needs and present material in a straightforward manner and in an entertaining way. While some still want to work hard, very few want to be treated unkindly, be misled or be bored. If the students participate in this discourse in order to make their education, and the education of others, more predictable, calculable, efficient and controllable, much as they would pass on information to another potential consumer of a cell phone or car, what does that tell us about those students? While it is not my intent to show what students are thinking, I will speculate as to the larger structural forces in action when students rate their professors on *RateMyProfessors.com*.

Although venues for this rating activity are becoming more widespread, it is still relatively uncommon for students to get on *RateMyProfessors.com* and carry out these ratings. Still, the very fact that it is growing in popularity suggests something about students and the university system. Remember, many scholars look at today's students

and try to determine what has gone wrong. They see the consumerism and "disengaged" behaviors, such as grade grubbing, as something new, but also something bad. Bad, not just from the perspective of the professors, because they do not like dealing with these new students, but also bad FOR the students. Previous research seems to imply that sub-standard education will be the outcome of the current trends. However, I am concerned with students' attempts to subvert the McDonaldized system and how the acts of these students may actually be strengthening the iron cage of rationalization that surrounds them (Elwell 1996).

Why are these so called disengaged students spending time on the Internet doing what is for many their second evaluation of a professor? Students rating their professors online are bypassing tradition, which says that a class and a professor should be a mystery, because the university system knows more than you do and has the authority to tell you what you need without your own input. Students deny that, especially in this information age, and so strive to take control over the irrational process of enrollment. But what is really happening when they rate a professor? While the students are attempting to exert control over their education through *RateMyProfessors.com*, the web site exerts control over them. The web site controls students by limiting the number of characters they have to evaluate a professor. Additionally, the web site is a for profit machine, with advertisers and *Gold* members. The perpetuation of the site is only possible if students continue to value what they find on the site, and therefore make it legitimate.

In addition, as the university system enlarges classes, reduces students' choices, and competes for students' enrollment dollars, and some students come to rely this web

site in order to take control of the enrollment process, we can see the irrationality of rationality invade the process of online rating (Ritzer 2002:20). Ritzer tells us that "rational systems inevitably spawn irrational consequences" (2002:20). While students attempt to free themselves from the iron cage of the rationalized university, they confine themselves even more by rating and choosing professors who conform to their every whim, and do not challenge their paradigms of education and the classroom experience. They reproduce the system we have seen produced the education consumer, by embracing the very traits associated with "the customer is always right." When we look at the larger process of McDonaldization at work, we see the slow, gradual process in which efficiency, calculability, predictability and control become paramount within all institutions. Students' behaviors and attitudes may be tactics to trip up the collegiate system, rebelliously exerting their limited power and showing their dissatisfaction with traditional institutional limitations (Fiske 1989). However, the institution has not become less McDonaldized because students do this, it may become even more so.

The general trend toward supplying student consumers with more information seems impossible to stop. What will be the next development in the education consumers' bag of tricks is anybody's guess. I will take this one hypothetical step further. I started to get an image in my head of perhaps the next generation of education consumerism: Personal pages.

> *"Student seeks Prof who teaches well and doesn't waste my time. MUST NOT bore and should definitely tell what to study for the exam."*

Or perhaps:

*"Prof seeks student to be enlightened. Must enjoy great movie clips, stand up comedy for lectures, and straightforward multiple-choice exams. Will consider high maintenance student who needs extra credit."*

How far off is this from the reality we see on the ratings web sites? Students contributing to the web site are taking the time to place their opinion in public, for anyone who is interested. Those students who go to the site to predict the upcoming semester's classes need a place to gather information and formulate decisions. I only present the extreme of this situation in order to make the point that these online evaluations are still in their infancy. The web site limits access because it is not directly affiliated with any colleges or universities, and so it cannot be used by all students everywhere. However, "The unyielding presence of *RateMyProfessors.com* may induce universities and colleges to publish the results of in-class questionnaires on their own web sites" (Westhues 2004).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the current university system is in many ways, McDonaldized. I have also argued that students within this system are taking its lead and acting as consumers of their education, especially those students who evaluate professors on *RateMyProfesors.com*. The content analysis I preformed showed us that students value the level of effort required, the clarity of the information presented, a pleasing personality of the professor, packaged in an entertaining structure. I framed those arguments within the existing research on the institution of higher education, consumerism, traditional evaluations, and the Internet. The attempts by students to enhance their education through this web site, seem to illustrate the irrationality of rationality which

On the web site, I found loads of explanations for many of the "disengaged" behaviors that concern scholars and professors. Students refuse to read assigned materials when they know they will not be tested on them. Study time has dropped because they are efficient with their time and only want to exert the necessary amount of time in order to receive their desired grade. Attendance drops in classes where no one cares if they attend, which they deduce from the professor's attendance policy. Rude behavior has increased, or at least what professors perceive as rude behavior, because the position of professor is being de-mystified and students are more likely to treat a professor with less reverence and more reality. Students show up at office hours to

negotiate for grades when they are frustrated by the unpredictable nature of a professor's grading scale and/or policy. Students have increased their time at work and decreased their time in social activities as have the rest of the population of the United States.

These data tell us something about the type of student who now populates the nation's colleges and universities. This student reacts against the older image of higher education as a special domain where nothing but knowledge matters. Instead, they treat it instrumentally: This is a place where you pay a fee to get a service and a credential, which will in turn, get you a job. Students on this site are participating in a form of "active involvement" in their education, even in cases where their ultimate goal is to be passive in the classroom.

Through a content analysis of *RateMyProfessors.com*, I observed evidence that students have discovered a new way of participating in their education. Whereas course evaluations were once the exclusive domain of professors and schools, these online evaluations revealed for everyone collective ideas of what makes up a good course and a good professor. The categories created by the students differ in subtle but important ways from those in traditional teaching evaluations. The comments posted on *RateMyProfesors.com* teach us about the current day undergraduate student's tendency to see herself as an educaton consumer. When there are enough ratings of a particular professor, the information provided for the curious student is set up to allow any type of student, from slacker to overachiever, to find a professor that is a good fit. Whether or not they can choose between particlular professors, they can be prepared and make a class more predictable and efficient by having the insider information provided by previous student experts.

*RateMyProfessors.com* in its present form could not become a useful tool for evaluating teachers. There are ambiguous comments that often seem caused by a student's inability to rate on worth of teaching. This is a difficult issue for entire departments and major universities, so I am sure the creators of the web site put some thought into it. As time goes by, the creators do update the site. Since the evaluations are anonymous, perhaps the creators should consider putting the grade received in the formal evaluation screen. As indicated by research, what grade a student received may influence their ratings. This may give even more insight into the comments. Numerous raters do this on their own as sort of "proof is in the pudding" postings of their grades. Also, as some of the comments suggested, "what year is the rater?" Students question the maturity of the rater when they do not agree with previous evaluations. I also think the question, "Would you take another class with this professor?" would be very useful for future students. Some evaluation indicated that although they got through the class OK, they would not be taking another class with that particular professor.

It was also clear that the on-line atmosphere created by the anonymity frustrated experienced web surfers. They treat this site like so may others, a place where they can "chat" about an issue that bothers them or that they have something to add. The creators have tried to accommodate these students by introducing the *Forum*, and making it possible to email a rater. I think that the *Forum* would be a great place to conduct another content analysis. Sometimes strings have nothing to do with education, but many times they are direct links to themes which I have presented. Professors are a group represented there that would provide additional insight into the education consumer puzzle.

If much of the research cited in this paper is more right than wrong, more and more often, we will be hearing, and even saying, "Students are the only consumers who want less for their money" (Panczyk 2001). However, when we take a closer look, they want less boring classes, less wasted time in classes when professors read from PowerPoint, less impossible grading structures, where great effort gives little reward, and less biased professors, who play favorites and belittle comments. The value judgments placed on the students' behaviors and apparent attitudes need to re-evaluated. To approach this issue from the "disengaged student" perspective does not give them enough credit as experts in their fields. They are on the front lines of the education's transformation from hallowed hall of learning, to corporate giant of earning. I have simply scratched the surface with this study, as these ratings provide volumes of data for both qualitative and quantitative research in the future.

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