Memorandum

To: Mark Seasons, Professor and Chair, Course Evaluation Project Team

From: Kate Lawson, Chair, Department of English Language and Literature

RE: Report of the Course Evaluation Project Team

Date: 25 November 2016

Thank you for distributing the Report of the Course Evaluation Project Team. I am writing on behalf of the Department of English, which has discussed the report and which wishes to offer its comments.

We ask that you distribute our response to the other committee members.

3.0 Course Evaluation Design.

We believe that questions should be clear, designed to avoid bias, should not be open to misinterpretation, and should ask students for information about which they can reliably report.

Draft question: “I knew what I was expected to learn.”

This question is open to multiple misinterpretations by students and unfairly limits the kinds of knowledge that good teaching unlocks.

1. When did students come to be in a position to say “I knew”? At the beginning of the course? The end of the course? The question does not make this clear.

2. The question confuses student learning with instructor teaching since the words “I knew” can apply equally to the course material (“By the end of the course I did figure out how to do differential equations”) and to the learning outcomes (“I knew right from the beginning of the course that I needed to learn how to do differential equations”).

We assume what is meant is the latter, but equally a student might think, “I knew what I was expected to learn because I did learn how to do differential equations (through doing the assigned work, going to class, etc.)”; or, “I already knew what I was expected to learn, i.e. I already knew how to do differential equations”; or, “I never came to know what I was expected to learn, even though the instructor told me what I should learn it and attempted to teach me it.” The latter case could be a failure on the part of the student, not the teacher.

3. The question as written does not allow for serendipity, for creativity in learning, for students learning more or different things than the explicit learning outcomes stated by the instructor. At a university, courses should not be narrowly bound only to outcomes stated in advance. This draft question seems to construe learning very narrowly.
Draft Question: “The instructor returned graded work in a reasonable amount of time.”

1. Principle 6. in the report states that “evaluation questions should focus on instructional elements that students can reliably evaluate.” With regard to this question, students may not understand what is “reasonable” and thus not reliably evaluate it. As English professors, we can report receiving forty-eight-page essays on a Monday and students asking on the Wednesday if they are graded. The question as drafted could well be answered by students with this unreasonable expectation in mind.

A “reasonable amount of time” could be specified. For example, “The instructor returned graded assignments within two weeks of when they were handed in.”

2. If professors make giving students grades quickly a priority, they are of necessity—in English courses certainly but also in humanities courses in general—spending less time on assessment. Good assessment of written work takes time, as it involves substantive feedback on the content and form of the assignment, engages with the ideas the student has generated, and provides suggestions for future work in the course.

Draft Question: “The instructor was a clear communicator”

We address the problem of bias specifically below; this question seems especially prone to biased results based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, or disability. How would we expect a deaf teacher, a teacher with a speech impediment, a teacher with an accent, a young female teacher to be fairly evaluated? Experts in communication in our department know that phrases like “clear communicator” have been used for many years as vehicles for bias.

The inclusion of this question alone makes us wonder whether the problem of bias has been carefully considered and meaningfully addressed in this process. We believe the Course Evaluation Project Team needs to map each of the proposed core questions against considerations of possible bias, to show how the proposed questions are less biased than the alternatives, just as has been done to compare the core questions against existing question sets.

6.1. The Issue of Bias

We are pleased that the report notes that “course evaluation exercises can be compromised by factors such as bias (e.g. gender and race) in perceptions of course and instructional quality.”

However, questions remain regarding:

1. The claim that the instrument itself has been designed to reduce bias. What questions were rejected or modified to achieve less biased results? How? Which specific questions have been shown to reduce bias?
As noted above, we suggest that the committee map each of the proposed core questions against considerations of possible bias, to show how these questions are less biased than the alternatives.

2. The tacit suggestion that “training and education programs for students, staff and faculty” might address bias. What will be communicated to students that will reduce possible bias? What evidence is there for the efficacy of this type of “training and education”?

3. The suggestion that chairs/performance review committees/Promotion and Tenure committees “need to acknowledge the importance/role of bias.” How exactly is bias to be acknowledged and remediated? What concrete steps are chairs and committees to take in reaching career decisions that take into consideration “the importance/role of bias”?

6.4. Data Management

The draft report is surprising opaque with regard to what information it proposes be make available to students and other members of the UW community.

The sentence—“Numeric information should be made accessible after authentication by the WATIam system and should be available at the individual course level”—seems to suggest that anyone with a WATIam login could view an individual faculty member’s student course evaluations. Is this the intent of the report?

Supposing it is the intent, are students, for example, free to copy and paste course evaluation results into sites such as UWFlow or Facebook? What could prevent them? Can all staff and faculty members peruse course evaluation results from every course and every instructor?

While the opening paragraph makes note of privacy concerns, is the report suggesting that “transparency and accountability” mean that course evaluation results are, to all intents and purposes, public documents? If so, arguments are needed to support a devaluation of privacy in favour of almost total “transparency.”

Before we can comment on the wisdom of this part of the report, we need further clarification of what it is that the committee is suggesting. But as written it seems as if respect for privacy is essentially nil.