

## Doing course evaluation as if learning matters most

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This paper investigates barriers for using course evaluation as a tool for improving student learning, through the analysis of course evaluation practices at The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), a technical university in Stockholm. Although there is a policy on development-focused course evaluation at KTH, several stakeholders have expressed dissatisfaction with its poor results. Interviews were conducted with faculty and student representatives to investigate the perceived purpose and focus of evaluation and its current utilization. Results show that evaluation is teaching- and teacher-focused. As course development is not in the foreground, evaluations merely have a fire alarm function. It is argued that course evaluation should be regarded as a component of constructive alignment, together with the intended learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment. Finally, the concept *system alignment* is proposed, extending constructive alignment to the institutional level.

The evaluation task can generally be said to be:

1. to describe what actually happens in that which seems to happen
2. to tell why precisely this happens, and
3. to state the possibilities for something else to happen.

(Franke-Wikberg & Lundgren, 1980, p. 148)

**Keywords:** course development; course evaluation; evaluation policy; system alignment

### Introduction

#### *Current evaluation policy*

Since 1997, The Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm has a policy stating that a course evaluation, called *course analysis*, must be undertaken for each course (*KTH Handbook 2*).

A course analysis consists of:

- Quantitative data (number of students registered, completion rate).
- Students' views on the course, appropriately documented, for instance through a questionnaire, minutes from a meeting with student representatives, or interviews.
- An analysis by the teacher, with a brief comment on the quantitative data and the results of the survey, including proposed measures and deadlines.

The course analysis should clearly show a course's development from one year to the next.

The course analysis should be communicated to the vice dean of education and the dean/board of the school.

However, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the course evaluation system.

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- In 2005, the student union invited management and educational developers to discuss the results of course evaluations. The student representatives wrote: ‘The feeling among the students is that the results of course-level quality processes are small in relation to the effort spent by teachers, students and administrators.’ (Lindbo, 2005)
- The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education criticised KTH when investigating course evaluation practices (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2006). The agency found a lack of feedback of evaluation results to students and identified a need for guidelines to be applied consistently across the university.
- Many teachers complained that the compulsory evaluations constitute a meaningless burden. Some suffer from being exposed to inconsiderate student comments, even to the extent that it can be a workplace health issue.<sup>1</sup>

### *The igniting spark for this study*

The author teaches a staff development course in which faculty develop their own courses using the concept of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003). It contains a workshop around the motto: ‘Evaluation is often viewed as a test of effectiveness – of materials, teaching methods or whatnot – but this is the least important aspect of it. The most important is to provide intelligence on how to improve these things’ (Bruner, 1966, as cited in Ramsden, 2003, p. 223). Participants bring their own evaluation questionnaires to the workshop. These almost invariably have a focus on teaching, especially the teachers’ performance, often asking the students to *rate the teachers*. At the workshop, participants formulate new questionnaires intended to inform course development. Drawing on what has been studied in the course previously, the focus is now on investigating what the student does; for example, volume, timing and appropriateness of studies, and indications of approaches to learning.<sup>2</sup> Evaluation can then be seen as a tool for course development.

The first time this workshop was planned, the author considered it a straightforward application of ideas and principles, of which the participants already have shown a firm grip. But participants were very surprised and excited over this novel way to use course evaluation. One participant exclaimed: ‘This takes the venom out of course evaluation!’ The episode sparked the author’s interest in how evaluation practices influence conditions for teaching and learning, and the present study is a first step in learning more about views on and utilization of course evaluations.

### *Investigation*

Interviews were undertaken with two elected student representatives and six teachers, two of whom are or have been directors of study. Two additional teachers were interviewed but they were not included in this analysis as they had participated in the author’s staff development course. All respondents were active in the same engineering programme. The study was an open and explorative investigation into the views on course evaluation held by teachers and students, and there was no intention to classify individual respondents according to any pre-existing model or theoretical framework.

Respondents were asked to bring a course evaluation questionnaire (teachers and students) and their latest course analysis document (teachers). These documents were on the table during the interviews and were read and discussed as part of the interview. The purpose of using their own course evaluations as a starting point for discussions was to focus on respondents’ actual practice (theory-in-use), rather than their general views on things (espoused theory). Inspired by Kvale (1997, p. 122), interviews were conducted as loosely structured conversations using open questions such as: ‘Please take me through the evaluation data and explain it to me’; and ‘How do you think the course could be improved?’

The underlying research questions were:

- What *purpose* are course evaluations perceived to serve?
- What *focus* are course evaluations perceived to have?
- How are course evaluations *utilized*?
- What are the respondents' *views* on teaching and learning?

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. From the transcripts, recurring themes were identified through a process of iterations between describing the themes and revisiting the transcripts. Finally, quotes were selected to illustrate the themes.

## Findings

### *Teacher ratings*

The object of evaluation is predominantly the teaching and the teacher. When the students are asked to rate the lectures and there is more than one lecturer, this question is always split so that each individual teacher's lectures can be rated separately. The same is true for problem-solving tutorials and other types of learning activities. This suggests that it is actually the individual teacher who is rated, even when the question concerns the learning activity.

In the questionnaires there are no criteria and, often, not even labels for the rating, and there is little reflection among students or teachers on what the rating actually means. When the student representatives were asked to explain the meaning of a low or high rating, they explained that it corresponds to the teacher's attitude. A feel-good factor is rewarded.

'Well you must be able to catch people's interest, be happy and positive and show that you want to be there...it depends mostly on your will to teach.'

KE: Good or bad in what way?

'Well...No but just generally that is.'

KE: OK, what is it about [a teacher with high ratings] that is good then?

'I think it is his interest in [the subject]. And he shows that he, he likes it. He is passionate about it. He is good at teaching it out (sic). Yes.'

The teachers have plenty of thoughts about what results in a low or high rating.

'This will benefit a course which is welcoming, a bit pre-schoolish...'

'The problem is, if you have a difficult exam they will be annoyed...'

'Many write comments like...“They seem generally irritated, and want to write something mean.”'

'If you have a bad reputation it doesn't matter much what you do, because they enter with the wrong views, so to speak.'

### *Teaching-focused view*

The total impression from the interviews is that teachers and students both express a *teaching-focused view*, where transfer of content in lectures is the central activity. The teacher's role is to lecture. This is consistent with the practice of rating teachers as lecturers because, according to this view, the key to learning *is* the individual teachers' performance in lectures.

The teaching-focus is expressed even in the language used. Almost consistently among the teachers, the words *talk about* are used to mean *teach*.

‘This topic is much more fun to talk about’; ‘They haven’t understood what I talk about’; ‘Is it worth it to talk about it if nobody understood?’; ‘Did I talk in the right way?’; ‘A colleague was criticized that what he was talking about was too elementary’; ‘But don’t assume that they know this, what I have talked about’.

### *Students’ own work: nothing to do with evaluations*

When students’ own work is discussed with the teachers, it is obvious that surface approach to learning, low time-on-task and procrastination are widespread problems. These problems are *attributed only to the students*. ‘Blame-the-student’ thinking is commonly expressed. Many teachers spontaneously suggest a percentage of students who should not have been accepted into the programme.

‘I would start by accepting 20–30 per cent fewer students...’

‘We have here a motley crowd...’

The teachers show little awareness of how to influence students’ work through course design, and evaluation is not seen as an issue related to student learning. In several interviews the teacher expresses the view that the students’ work is a *completely different topic* to discuss, unrelated to course evaluation or to course development. Respondents were surprised that the interview was to cover this topic ‘*too*’.

KE: So what you are saying is that the students must start studying earlier in the course and not just for the exam?

‘Yes. Not that this has anything to do with course evaluation, though.’

### *Course development is not in the foreground*

The espoused purpose of evaluation is development, at least every single respondent mentions development when asked directly. But, to the teachers, course development is in the foreground only when the course is new. After that, evaluation turns into a completely empty, but still compulsory, routine.

‘I don’t really need to hand out [the questionnaires] because we already know what they will answer. Maybe it’s meaningful the first and second year when a course is new. But after that it’s just going through the motions because I know exactly what they will say.’

One barrier to course development is that teachers think it would always be more expensive or require more work to organize the course in any other way than it is done presently. Given the current resources, they can’t see any alternatives. They sometimes don’t even see the opportunity to think about potential development.

‘Every course must break even. This locks us in. And the mere thought of reorganizing the course scares people off, because it is so expensive.’

KE: You mean just to pause and consider?

‘Exactly.’

When asked how they would like to develop the course, many respondents express that the key to better teaching is for teachers to develop their lecturing technique, but they had almost no concrete ideas on how to improve this aspect.

‘Well...I could try to vary my voice more.’

This suggests that a development-focused evaluation loses meaning when the teachers lack the intention to develop the course. Several possible reasons why course development was not in

the foreground were exposed, including that it is not considered necessary (problems are attributed to the students), and it is not considered possible because of the lack of resources (even time to think) or lack of ideas on how to go about it.

### *Negative course development*

There were a few signs that evaluations put pressure on the teacher to develop courses in directions that might be questionable from a learning perspective. The use of detailed lecture handouts attracted positive comments in evaluations but seemed to make literature superfluous (in the narrow sense that students can pass the course without reading the course book). Another example came from a course using a peer-teaching method, an uncommon learning activity in this programme. As could be expected, a small minority of students expressed a preference to being lectured to properly. This teacher had no problem standing up for this teaching method within the course and with the students but still expressed concerns about what colleagues and the director of study might believe if they saw these negative comments. It obviously requires strength for a teacher to do anything that might attract negative comments.

### *'Fire alarm' function only*

The student representatives undertake a separate mid-course survey, the result of which is shared with the teacher. Unless the result is exceptionally bad the student representative does nothing more. Towards the end of the course the teacher distributes another questionnaire, creates the course analysis document and sends it to the director of study. Directors of study mainly collect the documents and consider the utilization of evaluations as the responsibility of the individual teachers. Many teachers comment on a perceived lack of feedback.

The student representatives, teachers and directors of study all seem to regard evaluations as having mainly a 'fire alarm' function. If ratings are extremely low, they may investigate the causes, although no party claims to do that systematically. Their use of evaluations is limited to their function as a fire alarm.

'So this works more like an emergency...to see if there are any big problems in a course.' (Student representative)

'Well, if something is totally disastrous, you will usually find out here.' (Teacher)

## **Discussion**

### ***Purpose of evaluations: audit or development?***

The two classic purposes of evaluation are audit and development. The same dichotomy also has been referred to as accountability and improvement (Bowden & Marton, 1998), appraisal and developmental purpose (Kember et al., 2002), judgemental and developmental purpose (Hounsell, 2003), or quality assurance and quality enhancement (Biggs, 2003).

The relationship between these two purposes is discussed by Bowden and Marton (1999), who state that 'if improvement is addressed properly, evidence for accountability will be developed automatically. The reverse is not necessarily the case' (p. 228). A similar idea is expressed through the concept of *audit through self-audit* (Franke-Wikberg, 1992).

The purpose of an evaluation process must be determined at the outset. On a practical level, audit and development need rather different investigations. As Patton (1997) observes 'The same data seldom serves both purposes well' (p. 78). But more fundamentally, there is, *in this case*, a tension between audit and development *because teachers are themselves responsible for performing the evaluation of their own work*. If the purpose is development, teachers will want to

investigate aspects that can be improved – such things are also known as problems. If, on the other hand, the purpose is audit, the task is to create a basis for fair judgement. Then it is disadvantageous to focus on problems, as this critical stance can be turned against the teacher. If the audit and development purposes are combined in the same evaluation activity, the inherent forces of the audit risk undermining, or even completely overriding, the development purpose.

And it doesn't matter much what the institution's *intended* purpose is. What is important is what the individual teachers *perceive* to be the purpose. It is sufficient for the developmental purpose to be undermined if the teachers think they are being subjected to an audit. Therefore, when a course evaluation system is intended for development and not expected to be an audit, it must be expressed very clearly.

### ***What is the intended purpose of the KTH course analysis policy?***

The policy on course analysis was the result of an investigation. The working group identified the tension between evaluating the teachers' performance and evaluating for course development. In their report, they coined the term *course analysis*.

To many teachers and students the concept of course evaluation is associated only with questionnaires to the students at the end of a course. These traditional course evaluations often focus on the performance of the individual teacher. Experience shows that they are of limited value for long-term improvement of the course. The working group is introducing the concept course analysis, which includes more than the traditional course evaluations, although these can be part of the data. (Proposal for Course Analysis, 1995, p. 2)

The intention behind the KTH policy is apparently course development, as indicated by the phrases 'proposed measures including deadlines' and 'clearly show a course's development from one year to the next'. The procedure to send the course analysis upwards in the organization might suggest that there is also an element of audit (or audit through self-audit).

Nonetheless, the matter is complicated by another policy. The much later policy on appointment and promotion (*KTH Handbook 4*) states that 'course evaluations should be included' in teaching portfolios used for evaluating teaching merits for teachers seeking promotion. It is not known what they are expected to show by including course evaluations in the teaching portfolio, as there are no public criteria for the assessment. Although the intentions behind the course analysis policy clearly *oppose* a 'focus on the performance of the individual teacher', in the promotion process, the individual teacher is a necessary and legitimate focus. Is the term course evaluations used on purpose (rather than course analysis), to indicate that *here it is* – the rating of the teacher's performance that should be presented? Perhaps ratings are seen as a reasonable proxy for teaching excellence? Then teaching excellence is restricted to stage performance and charisma, on which the ratings probably focus.

The main problem is that this new use of evaluation data injects uncertainty as to the purpose of course evaluation – maybe the purpose is appraising teachers rather than developing courses? The system for appointing and promoting faculty is a powerful instrument for shaping the culture of the institution. Its influence should not be underestimated as it carries dramatic consequences for individuals, who can be recognized, selected and rewarded – or rejected.

Although the two policies both serve the same long-term aim – to improve the quality of education – they are not aligned, and the course evaluation policy risks being undermined by the promotion policy. It is argued in the present paper that the course evaluation system has been hijacked because its data are being used for another purpose. The irony is that the actual implementation of the teaching portfolio therefore can, in fact, counteract its own long-term aim. If the teaching portfolio policy was consistent with the course analysis policy, the teachers should, instead, be asked to include their course analyses in their portfolios, in order to show their ability

to analyze the student learning experience and the quality of student learning outcomes, and to improve these through adequate course development measures.

### *Teaching or learning focus?*

What is the object of evaluation? What is being evaluated? It seems reasonable to suppose that the focus of evaluation should be what is perceived as the keys to the quality of the education. So, by looking at evaluation practices, we may catch glimpses of the present theory-in-use for teaching and learning. In teaching-focused evaluation, objects that could be evaluated are the teacher and the teaching (process). If evaluation is learning-focused, possible objects to evaluate would be learning outcome or process. These four possible objects of evaluation are discussed in turn.

#### *Teaching (teacher)*

The investigation showed that evaluation questionnaires always included rating of teachers, and that ratings seemed related to a feel-good factor. But popular teachers cannot be conflated with good teaching, so teachers can do much better than settle for being popular. How does the widespread teacher rating influence the teaching and learning climate at the institution? Does pressure help teachers develop? Is there anything one can actually do with a score? As the rating seems related mostly to teachers' personal charisma, it must be very difficult to know how to improve. Good ratings could maybe serve as general encouragement, but bad ratings will hardly help teachers improve their teaching.

No one is going to be frightened into becoming a better teacher by the threat of student-ratings. ... Lecturers who feel anxious about their teaching – perhaps because they feel under pressure to do it better, perhaps because they know they do it badly – are the least likely to change. (Ramsden, 1992, pp. 232–233)

It is argued in the present paper that the stress created by the focus on the teacher as individual is detrimental to the development of courses and programmes, and that this taken-for-granted practice is created by, and subsequently helps uphold, a teaching-focused culture at the university.

#### *Teaching (process)*

The investigation showed that it is common to focus on the teaching activities *as such*, and ask students to rate items such as lectures, labs, recitations and course literature. These data are turned into histograms, showing, for instance, that the first lab scores an average 3.35 and the second lab scores 4.15 on a 1–5 scale. But then what? Can such data be used productively to inform improvement? (See also Bowden & Marton, 1998, p. 230.) As shown above, a fire alarm function is the main outcome – a pitiful result of the whole evaluation process.

In addition to the quantitative rating, evaluations solicit qualitative comments. It is obvious that many teachers will do what they can to eliminate negative comments. But although comments – positive or negative – *can* be useful for inspiring improvement, following student comments is no fool-proof strategy for improving student learning. The interviews provided the example of courses in which the use of lecture handouts generated positive student comments, creating a situation whereby handouts were virtually replacing the literature. It can be counter-productive to shape teaching according to the wishes of students with a passive or surface approach to learning (Kember & Wong, 2000) or with less mature attitudes toward knowledge (Edström et al., 2005).

What about asking the students to suggest how teaching activities could be improved? This will provide teachers with many ideas for development. But suggestions must be interpreted

carefully, as it is not always appropriate for teaching to conform to student expectations. Often, student suggestions will reveal their views on teaching and learning (valuable information, indeed) and, as a bonus, some of the suggestions may be very useful. There is still a risk, however, when evaluation focuses on teaching in itself, to confirm the views of students who see themselves in a (passive) consumer role.

### *Learning (outcome)*

It would be possible to ask students to rate to what extent they think they attained the intended learning outcomes. But the function of determining student learning outcomes is performed by assessment rather than evaluation. Therefore, we must recognize that evaluation is by no means the only input. It may be more relevant to take the quality of learning outcomes as the most important starting point for course development. As one participant in the author's staff development course (not a respondent in the study) reflected:

The irony is that course evaluations don't show the weaknesses [of the course], as students are generally satisfied and positive to the content and lectures. But we see in reports and in exams that the students have difficulties making conclusions from their results or assess how reasonable an answer is. When students come back a year later to do their thesis project, it is not uncommon to discover that they display abysmally poor understanding.

Based on the quality of student learning outcomes, we should ask: What can explain the results we see today? What improvement in student learning do we desire? How can the course design help the students do better?

### *Learning (process)*

The respondents in this investigation were taken aback when asked about the students' own work – it was not seen as something the teachers have much influence on. But, as Thomas J. Shuell states (as cited in Biggs (2003)):

If students are to learn desired outcomes in a reasonably effective manner, then the teacher's fundamental task is to get students to engage in learning activities that are likely to result in their achieving those outcomes...It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does. (Title page)

With this view, evaluation can contribute to finding out about students' own work so that learning activities and assessment can be improved to better support the desired learning. Evaluation should investigate the learning process, in a wide sense (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). This includes time on task, distribution of work over the duration of the course, appropriateness of learning activity, indications of approaches to learning, how students perceive the demands in the course, students' conceptions of learning, and approaches to learning. Evaluation is then a form of systematic inquiry. 'The evaluation task can generally be said to be: 1. to describe what actually happens in that which seems to happen; 2. to tell why precisely this happens; and, 3. to state the possibilities for something else to happen' (Franke-Wikberg & Lundgren, 1980, p. 148).

### ***The classical utilization problem of evaluation***

How can we explain the student union's view that 'the results of course-level quality processes are small in relation to the effort spent' (Lindbo, 2005); a view which is certainly consistent with the findings of the present investigation. Utilization, or rather the lack thereof, is an important theme in evaluation literature, and there are various views on how or whether utilization can be improved.

A stimulating perspective is given by Dahler-Larsen (2005), who asks why evaluation, despite its poor track record in terms of results, is such a taken-for-granted thing to do. He quotes James March, who calls evaluation a *protected discourse*, impossible to question. Drawing on modern organizational theory, Dahler-Larsen argues that we cannot understand evaluation using a *logic of consequentiality*. It is simply not the results that motivate its existence. But, using a *logic of appropriateness*, we see that evaluation fits in a normative way; it is expected in our culture. Evaluation is portrayed as a ritual whose main role is to create an *appearance* of rationality and accountability. Dahler-Larsen points out that this is not to say that evaluation does not have effects. Even as a ritual it will influence reality, contributing to what constitutes the organization's culture, individual's self-understanding, and so forth. Dahler-Larsen's picture of evaluation certainly rings true when we consider the results of the present investigation. We recognize the meagre results of evaluation. We also recognize the interplay between evaluation practices and, for instance, teachers' self-understanding or students' views on the teacher's role.

Kember et al. (2002) report that in a university in which a standard student feedback questionnaire was used for audit purposes, feedback data were compared over time and it is shown that no improvement takes place. Some of the possible reasons discussed are faculty's perception that there is little incentive to improve teaching; that the process focuses on audit, which is detrimental to the developmental role of evaluation; and that the questionnaire lacks flexibility and appropriate focus, that is, it is teaching-focused and not applicable to more innovative forms of teaching and learning. Kember et al. (2002) argue for a system in which teachers are encouraged to devise their own ways of evaluating their teaching innovations. It is interesting to note that the course analysis policy at KTH was designed to be exactly such a system, but practices still suggest that the theory-in-use lags behind. It seems that changing the policy alone has not achieved the intended shift in how the system is used.

There are studies (Piccinin et al., 1999) that show improvement measured in terms of higher student ratings in a setting where teachers receiving student feedback (ratings) are given individual consultations with a staff developer. At the University of Sydney (Barrie et al., 2005), the quality assurance system has both an assurance *and* improvement purpose. Starting in 1999, the quality processes at different levels were aligned with each other, and with an explicit student learning perspective. On the level of the individual unit of study, a questionnaire (Unit of Study Evaluation) is devised centrally for the whole university, but it also has space for instructor's own items. An important feature has been the strategic and systematic use of quality assurance data within the university. Recently, the quality assurance system has started to show signs of improvement in the quality of the student learning experience (still measured as student ratings). These cases suggest that improvement is possible when evaluation is combined with interventions, such as support to teachers, or otherwise is used as part of an aligned set of strategies. Then it is not the evaluation system in itself that has produced the positive effects.

### ***The weak connection between evaluation and development***

The idea that evaluation should be an integral component of course development is hardly new. But how to make evaluation, in practice, support development is far from trivial. 'Collecting data is not the same as improving or judging teaching' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 232). Why is the connection between course evaluation and course development so weak at KTH? What are the barriers to using course evaluation as a tool for course development?

First of all, there seems to be some confusion as to the purpose of evaluation. The course analysis policy clearly states a development purpose and the teachers claim that their purpose is course development. Still, the questionnaires used look like they were rather designed for audit, and the data have little value to inform development. Why is that? It seems difficult to

find inspiration elsewhere, as most evaluation questionnaires described in the literature (Richardson, 2005) are quantitative ratings of dimensions of teaching and seem better suited to serve an audit purpose. In fact, the theory-in-use could be that, after all, the purpose of evaluation is audit. The practice of rating teachers and the requirement to include ratings in teaching portfolios can be contributing factors in shaping such a theory. This is a barrier for using course evaluation as a tool for course development, and the very least that must be done at KTH is to *align the policy on teaching portfolios* with the developmental purpose of the course analysis policy. Rather than ratings, teachers should be asked to include their *course analyses* in the teaching portfolio in order to show their ability to analyze both the student learning experience and the quality of student learning outcomes, and to improve these with adequate course development measures.

However, the main barrier seems related to the underlying views on teaching and learning. For course evaluation to become a tool for course development, there must be an idea of what development is possible and desirable, something like a theory for teaching and learning. What variables teachers and students will regard as possible and acceptable to manipulate (Vedung, 1993, p. 230) will depend on, and especially be limited by, their views on teaching and learning. The potential for development will depend on how phenomena are interpreted, what is seen to cause problems, and what interventions are seen as possible and desirable. The interviews clearly show that there is a limited view on how courses can be developed, which is related to a limited view on teaching and learning.

Åkerlind (2007) identifies five qualitatively different approaches to developing as a teacher:

- (1) Building up one's content knowledge (improving *what to teach*).
- (2) Building up practical experience (improving *how to teach*).
- (3) Building up a repertoire of teaching strategies (becoming more *skilful as a teacher*).
- (4) Finding out what strategies work for the teacher (becoming more *effective as a teacher*).
- (5) Increasing one's understanding of what works for the students (becoming more *effective in facilitating student learning*).

These categories are hierarchically inclusive. In the first three levels, student feedback is treated as an indicator of success or lack of success in teaching. It is not until level 4 that teachers see *student satisfaction* as important *input for active teaching development*, and only in level 5 do teachers see actual *student learning outcomes* as the primary indicator of teaching effectiveness. The teaching-focused views revealed in this investigation are mainly consistent with the earlier levels and no respondent shows a focus on student learning. Although teachers describe many problems related to student learning (the quality of both the learning outcomes and process of studying), they simply lack a framework to make useful interpretations of these problems and, consequently, they have almost no course development strategies with which to address them.

## Conclusions

### *Blame-the-students thinking and rate-the-teacher practice*

The practice to rate teachers, and the blame-the-student thinking displayed by teachers, appear as two sides of the same coin. A student may attribute success or failure to good or bad teachers, much as a teacher attributes the results to good or bad students. These thought patterns allow students and teachers, respectively, to focus on the other party's contribution in the teaching and learning process and shy away from discussing (or even seeing) their own responsibilities. Changing the course evaluation practices means challenging these comfortable positions and, therefore, resistance may be expected.

### ***Evaluation is a component of constructive alignment***

When we look at a student's situation within a course, we know that factors like the students' conceptions of learning, together with how they perceive the situation and context (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), will influence how they go about their studies. *Constructive alignment* (Biggs, 2003) helps us design the course so it will bring about appropriate learning activity. The main idea is that the course *as a whole* should encourage the student to take on their studies appropriately, adopting a deep approach to learning. This is supported by the purposeful design and relation between the course components, notably intended learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment. The constructive alignment concept represents *a system view* on courses.

A conclusion of this paper is that course evaluation is also a part of that system; it is also a component that should be in constructive alignment. One aspect of constructively aligned course evaluation is that the expectations on students and teachers that are communicated indirectly through evaluation must be aligned with appropriate roles. If we see the teacher's role as facilitator of learning, but then ask the students to rate the teacher as lecturer–entertainer, that evaluation is clearly misaligned. Another aspect of constructively aligned course evaluation is that evaluation practices must support the improvement of student learning.

### ***System alignment***

The present case study showed how two policies related to course evaluation are in conflict and, therefore, on the level of the individual teacher, the purpose of evaluation is made unclear. Is the purpose to improve student learning, as the course analysis policy suggests, or is it to judge teacher performance, as suggested by the teaching portfolio policy? If, instead, the policies were aligned, they could potentially reinforce each other and better further their mutual long-term purpose – to improve student learning.

In parallel with the view of the course as a system, the author proposes the idea to consider the *university as a system*, whose components must be tuned to influencing *teachers* to take on their teaching appropriately. The concept *system alignment* is proposed, a parallel to constructive alignment *on the system level*. The system components of a university are any macro-level structure, such as organization, infrastructure, work processes and policies, especially those that regulate issues where the rubber meets the road, such as hiring, promotion and funding.

The system alignment concept may help us analyze the different processes at the university from a student-learning perspective and identify clashes that need to be addressed. The components that create the conditions for teaching and learning must be in alignment with each other and with the long-term direction in which we wish the university to move.

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### **Notes**

1. Oral communication, KTH Human Resource office.
2. Inspiration is taken from sources such as Gibbs (1999) and the investigative tools of the Formative Assessment in Science Teaching project.

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