

A I've just discovered a new US website. It's called "Rate My Professors", and it puts students' evaluations of their teachers online. More than four million college students use it every month. I think we should have a website like that in this country.

B Yes, I've seen it, and in my opinion it's a bad idea. Why should the whole world be able to see what students think about their professors?

A Colleges and universities have long used students' assessments of professors, for things like employment evaluations, quality control, and student satisfaction. But the new website gives a public forum for students' praise or discontent. It's the same when you make a new investment or buy something, a new car or a fridge, say. People want to make informed decisions, so they look at reviews online to compare the products. Rate My Professors is also a public review of a commodity. When college students sign up for classes taught by specific professors, they're consumers too.

B University education shouldn't be considered part of consumer society. Education isn't a commodity like a fridge.

A Whether they're a commodity or not, there are good and bad professors just as there are good and bad fridges. In Ohio State University, for example, state residents pay about five thousand dollars a semester. If they take five classes, that works out at a thousand dollars a class. Wouldn't you want to be sure you had a good teacher for that course? A teacher who can teach and inspire? One who is value for money? A student would be foolish to trust blindly that the class they're enrolling in is taught by a professor who is a good teacher, don't you think?

B But there are problems with this. All the research shows that students with more extreme views are more likely to complete an evaluation of a teacher, and this distorts the validity of the findings. A second issue is that people's opinions change according to whom they're talking to. That's not an objective view.

A Don't you think a strong point in favour of the website is that there needs to be some feedback to people who teach in universities? A good professor will appreciate constructive criticism, and improve their communication skills. I understand that if reviews are anonymous, some students will use them to get revenge on a professor by posting a very critical rating, but at least this allows students to express their frustrations in a peaceful venue.

B There's another problem with these reviews. Evaluators are more likely to rate physically attractive people more highly than people thought to be unattractive. And there's the question of gender bias as well.

A What do you mean by that?

B One academic who has done research on the Rate My Professors website has observed a difference in the criteria on which men and women seem to be judged. Men are much more likely to be called 'smart' than women, but also much more likely to be called 'idiot' than women. Men are also often called 'arrogant', or more positively, 'cool'. Men are also more frequently praised for being 'humble'. But women are often evaluated on different criteria - the comments are more to do with being 'organised' or 'disorganised', 'helpful' or 'unhelpful', 'friendly' or 'unfriendly'. Generally speaking, men are judged on intelligence, as perceived by the student of course, and women more on presentation. Other evaluations, outside colleges and universities, tend to show the same biases.

A There's one further positive point, though: the evaluations are anonymous. This reflects tolerance and the acceptance of different ideas and perspectives. Anonymity means that people can say what they think without any fear of retaliation.

B I disagree. In fact anonymity means that people don't have to take responsibility for what they write. They can be vicious and negative and no-one knows who made the comment.

A It's better than the alternative, where students would turn to Twitter or Facebook to express their discontent. You can easily hide your identity there and write some really nasty stuff. Remember, too, that lots of evaluations are positive. Rate My Professors provides an organised meaningful venue to view all the data, so that educators can reflect on their teaching practices and students can share their learning experiences anonymously.

#### Outline

The "Rate My Professors" website, which gives students in the US the opportunity to evaluate their teachers, is apparently successful as it is used every month by four million college students. The first speaker thinks this is very positive: education is expensive, and as a consumer the student has the right to make an informed decision. Ratings are anonymous, so students can be honest. The second speaker holds that university education should not be considered part of consumer society: education is not a commodity. Anonymity means that people don't have to take responsibility for what they write. Further problems are the different kinds of bias which means that the results published are distorted by the students' subjectivity.

#### Questions

1. Would such a site help you to make your choices in education?
2. Should evaluations of teachers be anonymous?
3. Most universities ask students to evaluate their teachers: should these evaluations be made public?
4. Are a person's subjective views of no value?