

Narrative Evaluations and Educational Culture

by Students for Evaluations Reform

There is a reason why there has been such a groundswell of student engagement in pedagogical debate surrounding the issue of Narratives and their reform. It is a commitment to the educational culture that brought many of us here in the first place, that has helped keep us here, and that will help us move forward productively once we leave. This commitment has motivated the participation, the extended dialog, and the organizing that so many of us have been engaged in.

And after a year, despite the various changes in the contours of the debate, student commitment to the NES as the primary and central evaluation system of the university has not diminished. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that what is at stake is the distinguished character of undergraduate education at UCSC, of which the NES is an indispensable centerpiece.

An Argument for Culture

The narrative evaluation system, even when supplemented by grades, provides for an educational culture that emphasizes educational content and quality. Too often, the entire educational tenure of a student is seen as the means towards a transcript which is incommensurably separate from the educational experience of the student. Narratives work decidedly in the service of a different and more reasonable relationship to the learning process: one in which we see our education as its own culminating goal. The narrative evaluation system privileges learning over ranking and thereby makes learning our highest priority at all stages of our student career.

It is essential that the narratives be recorded as our official transcript, not only because it sets a standard for a nuanced portrait of student involvement, but because this official inclusion changes the focus of a student's relationship to their professors. Multidimensional evaluation as an unofficial mode of communication between faculty and students would become the secondary focus for students' interactions with faculty if moved to the background in an institutional culture prioritizing ranking. Narrative evaluation as the central institutional tool for the evaluation of students focuses student-faculty communication more toward substance, away from the quantitative expedients implicit in a grades-only system.

This has not changed with the presence of letter grades, since it is still evident that the narratives are the only institutional outlet for the expression of some of the most crucial components of a student's work throughout the quarter. Beyond the artifacts of student performance that are averaged to come up with a grade, a student's learning during a quarter consists of work done in the process of engaging in the course.

The daily class activities – the ability to hold fruitful discussions, to formulate and fine-tune provocative and stimulating questions, to participate in the education of colleagues – are the invisible substance of a strong education, made visible by a narrative evaluation transcript. Personal relationships among students and between students and faculty are encouraged, nurtured, and expressed as part of the work of an institution with a strong narrative evaluation system.

Cultural Solutions

The types of priorities that narratives set for UCSC lead us to believe that the flaws of the NES can be dealt with culturally. Just as narratives are a versatile evaluation of student performance, they are capable of being adapted to the type of teaching and learning environment they are employed in. Narratives are not gutted by a diversity of formats and applications. Some classes will tend towards more detail, some towards less personal and more general evaluation.

This versatility is a strength of the evaluation system, but it is the possibility of an evaluation with great detail and personality that makes the system vital. It is also, incidentally, what makes the NES a system that attracts some of the best and brightest students, who very quickly outgrow the narrow parameters of a quantitative scale of ranking.

Powerful Motivations

Throughout our year of organizing around narratives, we have had substantial discussions with students whose support for narratives is motivated by diverse perspectives we think it important to incorporate in the discourse of evaluation reform. Although the most common motivations have been spelled out above, and now just as ever before the commitment to the culture of narratives is a prime student concern, less common perspectives often tell a more concrete story of the impact of narratives. These include, among others, the testimony of women in the sciences (a field in which women are commonly underrepresented) who cite the NES among other factors that have contributed to their excellence in UCSC science departments.

In addition, students who are the first in their family to gain higher education often credit the evaluations with demystifying expectations they would not otherwise have understood. Other students claim that the narrative evaluations were a precondition to the creativity they were able to bring to their field.

Common to these is a motivation that the narratives serve to strengthen. It is the motivation of those who understand the fragile complexity of an educational project. The narratives help students recover an interest in learning for its own sake, after many of us experience the damage to our educational motivation that derives from the priorities we experience at most high schools.

We students are interested in supporting the centrality of a different, more reasonable method not only for our four years of learning, but in the hopes that the NES will make impact on the pedagogical culture of the country. Commensurate with this, we support the current CEP and Rogoff-Ladusaw proposals as the best avenues to achieve these ends. We encourage you to look upon this vote as an opportunity to reaffirm UCSC's commitment to a form of assessment that promotes an exemplary culture of learning.