Rating Teachers: A Job for Journalists?
The *Los Angeles Times* and "Value----Added" Analysis
Teaching Note

Case Summary

Holding powerful officials to account has long been one of journalism's primary goals: we take for granted that such scrutiny is essential for rooting out corruption and ineptitude among our government representatives. But when it comes to scrutinizing less powerful public employees— teachers, for instance—journalists' role is much less clear.

This case examines that role through the lens of the *Los Angeles Times*' project to design a system for rating public school teachers. In spring 2009, *Times* reporters discover that most states, including California, rely on unsophisticated procedures for evaluating teachers and that the results are rarely made public in a usable form. Their research reveals that an evaluation procedure called value----added analysis might be an effective way to rate teacher quality on a large scale. The method, which involves tracking how much a teacher's students improve on standardized tests over time, is not without its critics—some argue that it is reductive and excludes important variables that affect student performance—but the reporters conclude it is still the best available method for performing this long overdue public service.

The paper obtains the necessary test score data from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and hires an expert in value----added analysis from the Rand Corporation to custom----design a rating system. When the team tests an early version, they discover that results do not match their own observations in the classroom, raising alarming questions about just how effective this method is. However, after fine----tuning and re----testing the results, the team concludes that the rating system is accurate enough to produce reliable teacher evaluations.

Doubts then arise over whether or not to publish the names of the teachers along with their ratings. There is disagreement over whether publishing the names is an invasion of privacy, or essential for holding public employees accountable. Some hold that the paper's mission is to inform the public, including parents. Others feel that naming individuals is overstepping.

While they are confident in the results, the reporters are not experts in education evaluation or in value----added analysis. Are journalists correct to enlist research methods in fields about which they are not themselves expert? Should news organizations conduct independent research in specialist areas? How can the *LA Times* know whether value----added is a fair and accurate way of rating teachers? Moreover, the team knows some errors are inevitable in a study of this size. Is it right to publish nonetheless for the greater good?

Over these doubts looms an even larger question: is it a news organization's place to rate teachers? Should the *LA Times* instead prod the school district to conduct such an evaluation? Or has the job—whether for lack of funds, political will or inertia—defaulted to the press? What is the proper role of government and public agencies versus the media? Where do their responsibilities diverge and where do they overlap?

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussion about whether it is appropriate for news outlets to rate public employees—especially using a rating system of its own devising; how journalists should weigh the responsibility to expose information about public institutions against concerns about the privacy of individuals; and about how journalistic institutions can make large amounts of data available to the public.

Begin by asking students to weigh the various arguments for and against publishing the names of the teachers. Does publishing the names constitute an unfair invasion of privacy? Or is the real question not one of privacy but of accountability? Encourage discussion about the *Times'* responsibility to the general public versus its responsibility to avoid unnecessary harm to individuals.

Even if students agree that the teacher rating system is justifiable because these are public employees who must be held to account, the individuals in question are not elected officials accustomed to public scrutiny. The issue is not just individual privacy, but also potential harm. This question becomes even more difficult when reporters realize that the study will never be perfectly accurate, so some teachers will unfairly suffer the consequences of a bad rating. Ask students to consider whether such a rating system would be appropriate if the individuals in question were firemen, for example, or other public employees.

Is it the place of a news organization to commission a study like this to rate public sector workers? Students should consider whether the *Times* is overstepping its traditional mandate to tell the truth, expose wrongdoing and hold public employees accountable. By taking this step, is the *LA Times* no longer simply providing facts, but interpreting them to make value judgments— and is that wrong? If so, what might be an alternative approach that would provide the public with the necessary information?

For example, reporters discover that LAUSD had ignored an internal report that recommended doing a similar value----added teacher evaluation. A more traditional approach to the problem would be for the *LA Times* to pressure the LAUSD by exposing this, or advocating in an editorial for a teacher audit. Students should debate whether this or some other investigative tactic would be a better option. Would it be more ethical, and a better use of resources, to write articles calling on the school district to perform its own evaluation? Or is that simply an easy way out?

Students should also debate whether the *Times* staff does all it can to ensure that the rating system is fair and accurate. The case makes clear that the journalists take steps to test the system by going into classrooms and observing teachers, but how trained are they to determine a teacher's competence? What else might they do to ensure the fairness and accuracy of the rating system?

The case also works well for discussing data journalism more generally. Encourage students to discuss whether and how news institutions provide data sets to the public. Technological developments are making it possible for news outlets to provide access to large collections of raw data, and to interpret them in new ways, such as data mashups and innovative visualizations. For example, perhaps the *LA Times* would better serve the public (and avoid some of the dilemmas raised in this case) by providing access to the raw data and allowing the public to analyze and interpret it as they see fit. They could even provide a forum for parents to discuss the data along with their first----hand knowledge of individual teachers.

Some online news organizations have made providing searchable databases of public information part of their core mission. Should this be the job of news outlets? Are these and similar data----based projects journalism? Encourage students to consider whether the *LA Times'* resources would be better spent as they have been in the past: paying reporters to comb through the data and make sense of it for the public without publishing the database itself.

Class Plan

Use this case in a class on ethics of journalism; public service journalism; data journalism; editorial decisionmaking; or newsroom management.

Pre----class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Should the *LA Times* publish the names of the teachers? Why or why not?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The

instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80---90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) What are the arguments for and against publishing the names of the teachers? List on board.

b) Is reporting the number of effective and ineffective teachers at each school a good alternative to publishing the names? Why or why not?

c) Is it the place of news outlets to rate teachers and other public employees? Compare the case for rating teachers to rating, say, policemen or medical professionals. Are these qualitatively different?

d) Do you agree with reporter Song that "in general information about public employees should be disclosed?" Is there a meaningful difference between disclosing information about public employees and devising a system to rate them?

e) The journalists in this case decide that value----added analysis is effective at rating teachers. Do the reporters and editors have the necessary expertise—in either education or the value----added method—to make this call? What additional steps might they take to be certain?

f) *LA Times* editors know that with a data sample this large their results will contain at least some errors: some inept teachers will be deemed effective while some good teachers will be rated poorly. Knowing this, is it responsible for them to publish the teachers' names? Justify your answer.

g) Consider the issue of privacy in this case. Do you agree that the imperative to inform the public about teacher effectiveness outweighs concerns about teacher privacy or potential harm? Why or why not?

h) Might there be alternatives to devising their own rating system that would allow the *LA Times* to serve the public equally well—providing raw data, for example, or a forum in which parents could discuss teacher effectiveness? Brainstorm alternatives.

i) Is it journalism to publish a database? What about creating a visual representation of that data? What should a news outlet's job be when it comes to presenting large troves of data to the public?

Suggested Readings

"Grading the Teachers: Value----Added Analysis," *Los Angeles Times.*

SYNOPSIS: This continually updated page includes all of the *LA Times* resources related to their teacher ratings, including a FAQ about the value----added method and all recent articles related to it. You may find it helpful to familiarize yourself with the ratings database itself, which allows the public to search by teacher or school and lists the highest and lowest rated schools. Of particular interest is the "teacher responses" section, in which any teacher who was rated is invited to address his own rating. Many cite specific reasons the study is flawed, such as the omission of individual student attendance records. Others note that the database incorrectly lists them as having taught classes they did not teach. Their critiques provide good fodder for discussion.

http://www.latimes.com/news/local/teachers----investigation/

Jake Batsell, "Lone Star Trailblazer; Will the Texas Tribune transform Texas journalism?*" Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2010.

SYNOPSIS: This article takes an in----depth look at the *Texas Tribune*, a nonprofit online news outlet reporting mainly on Texas politics. The website has been at the vanguard of providing databases of public information directly to readers. As author Jake Batsell notes, "the *Tribune's* biggest magnet by far has been its more than three dozen interactive databases, which collectively have drawn three times as many page views as the site's stories." Batsell argues that while there is little doubt that these databases have proven popular, their journalistic merit is as yet unclear: is raw data journalism? Use this article to review the arguments for and against news organizations' devoting resources to building and hosting databases.

http://www.cjr.org/feature/lone_star_trailblazer.php

Paul Grabowicz, "The transition to Digital Journalism: Databases, Data Visualizations and Map Mashups." Online tutorial, Knight Digital Media Center, updated June 4, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: In this online resource, Grabowicz discusses the rise of data journalism and the growing trend for news organizations to provide access to complete databases as well as new ways to reconfigure, organize, and visualize that data. The site also provides a bibliography of online tools and articles related to data journalism.

http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/digital----transform/databases/

Cynthia McCabe, "Critics Cite Flaws in Los Angeles Times Teacher Ranking." *National Education Association Today*, August 20, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this blog post for the National Education Association's website, McCabe aggregates links and briefly summarizes some of the main criticisms levied against the *LA Times* after it published the teacher ratings.

http://neatoday.org/2010/08/20/critics----point----to----flaws----with----los----angeles----times----teacher----database/

Andrew J. Rotheram, "Rating Teachers: the Trouble with Value----Added Data." *Time*, September 23, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this thoughtful piece for *Time*, career educator Rotheram weighs the pros and cons of the value----added approach for evaluating teacher performance. He argues that most states are not nearly as proactive as they should be about evaluating teachers, and that the *LA Times'* discovery that the LAUSD had access to relevant data and had done nothing with it is a good justification for the paper to take the project into its own hands. However, he argues that publishing the teachers' names goes too far because the rating system is not a comprehensive look at teacher performance. He suggests alternative evaluation methods that would include, but not be limited to, a value----added approach.

http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2020867,00.html