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9B19D012

Jessica LEE: Dealing With Course Evaluations

David Wood wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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At the end of May 2017, the course evaluations (see Exhibit 1) for the previous semester had just been released at Balsam State University (Balsam State). While Associate Professor Jessica Lee knew that the term had not gone particularly well, she was still surprised by the poor ratings that her elective course in forensic sciences had received (see Exhibit 2). Lee had been teaching at Balsam State for nearly seven years, and this course, Field Forensics, had previously scored well during evaluations. The fall term was due to start in a few months, and Lee needed to determine what changes, if any, she needed to make to the course.

Jessica Lee

Lee joined Balsam State seven years ago and had recently been promoted to the position of associate professor. The forensic sciences department was small, with only 280 students, but demand for this field of study was increasing, largely due to its focus on experiential learning and its use of the case method, field studies, and a work placement program.

Lee was well respected at her institution and had previously received an award for her teaching. The students who had nominated her had made particular note of how engaging and rewarding her Field Forensics course had been. However, she had received those accolades three years earlier. Since then, Lee had taken on additional responsibilities, including an administrative position. Her growing workload made teaching a smaller part of her role.

Field Forensics

Lee began teaching Field Forensics shortly after she joined Balsam State. Field Forensics was a fourth-year elective course that had been popular among students under the previous professor. When Lee took over the course, she felt that the material was dated and the concepts were no longer in line with the current scientific methods employed in the forensics field. Because of this, she took it upon herself to update the material, revising assignments and re-evaluating the teaching approach. It took a few years to make all of the changes, but the results were worth the effort; students were generally pleased with the course.

After Lee had redesigned it, Field Forensics was an almost exclusively case-based course. It asked students to read, analyze, and make determinations based on the evidence found in the cases. The cases covered a wide range of criminal investigations and built upon the knowledge students acquired in their required courses in their first three years of study.

The course was relatively difficult, but students seemed to appreciate the challenge. Field Forensics was routinely wait-listed, and in the most recent school term, Lee was asked to increase enrolment capacity. She agreed reluctantly, and the school made additional seats available in the class. This event highlighted the growing popularity of both Lee and Field Forensics.

Participation

Students’ grades in Field Forensics were based on class participation and a number of short case assignments. Participation during the classroom discussions accounted for half of students’ overall grades. While the weighting for participation in the course was higher than in some other courses in the forensics sciences department, it was not unusual.

In the previous term, Lee felt that both she and the students had struggled with the classroom discussion. The students seemed well prepared, but they struggled to support their conclusions with scientific analyses. When Lee challenged students’ investigative findings, the number of students who volunteered responses declined dramatically. The students who did respond were able to support their positions only by using facts found in the cases themselves, rather than through reference to additional analyses they had done on their own. This lack of participation was not the norm, and Lee wondered why it was happening: were the students poorly prepared, or had the larger class size perhaps had a negative effect on participation?

Students had also expressed concerns regarding classroom discussions. One student approached Lee after only the second class and confessed that he had signed up for Field Forensics in large part because of Lee’s reputation as one of the best teachers in the department, but added that he was “disappointed in the classroom discussion, and expected more from someone with your reputation.”

Written Assignments

While the first half of a student’s grade in Field Forensics was based on classroom participation, the second half was based on a series of short field reports students composed on each case. Students were expected to complete four field reports during the course.

The field reports helped ensure students were better prepared for class, and they gave Lee some perspective into how the students were doing in the course. Each student’s field report had to be less than 500 words and had to detail the student’s investigative findings, based on the student’s analysis of the evidence in the case. Although the papers were relatively short, they took a considerable amount of time for the students to write and for Lee to grade.

Given Lee’s additional administrative role and the increase in enrolment for Field Forensics, Lee decided to enlist a doctoral (PhD) student to grade the field reports. The PhD student who graded the papers was asked to attended classes to ensure that he had a good understanding of the assigned cases. The grader then provided both a grade and feedback on students’ papers, typically within one to two weeks. If there were any concerns over the grade assigned, Lee would review the graded paper and make a final determination.

Conclusion

Field Forensics had previously received student ratings of 4.6 or higher out of 5.0. This year, the student rating had dropped to 3.7, but Lee could not identify the reason. The course content had not changed, and neither had the teaching style; even the class schedule was the same as in previous years. Could it be that the reason for the lower evaluation had more to do with the students than the course? Were these evaluations on their own reason to be concerned?

Exhibit 1: Field Forensics coURSE EVALUATIONs



Source: Institution files.

Exhibit 2: Field Forensics coURSE EVALUATION Comments

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| **Course Evaluation** |
| Program: Forensic Sciences Field Forensics |
| Ac Year: 2017 Instructor: Lee, Jessica Enrolment: 71 |
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| **Supplementary Comments on the Course** |
| More in-depth class discussions would be beneficial to the learning of class materials. |
| All the cases were very interesting and a great learning experience. However, I did not like that there were so many ballistics cases. |
| A very good class. Jessica knows how to manage the class pace and is very good at the case method of teaching. |
| The cases chosen are very good; they were very new cases and diverse. |
| I don’t like the field write-up part . . . too much work and limited improvement. |
| Add one mandatory teamwork. |
| I had a difficult time understanding why my marks were the way they were. I think more feedback on debriefs would be helpful. Also, showcasing that the approach to a case can be different, depending on the assumptions you make, is important (since everyone thinks differently). |
| The course should be structured so that students know what to focus on. They should be rewarded when their learnings reflect the key objectives of the course. The evaluations in this course were confusing: there was minimal feedback (even when solicited) about how students could improve, and there was little alignment between how the assignments were marked and how the classes were taught. |
| I enjoyed all the cases that were selected for the course. It covered a range of topics that were well organized and presented. I found it challenging at the beginning to understand what you were specifically looking for in the case analysis, so it would be beneficial to use a class to go through an example of the analysis you’re expecting. |
| Most of the discussions were very interesting, and I found them useful to help me think of field forensics from a holistic perspective. I do think we got clogged up in the flow of ideas sometimes. A few of the cases were very difficult to solve, and maybe the text writing could be improved to make the evidence more realistic. |
| I enjoyed the entire course, as I was able to learn several aspects of field forensics. |
| To further improve this course, it must be offered in third year, in conjunction with the core program. |
| More modern cases—something to do with DNA sequencing or alternate light photography or digital fingerprints—should be used. Fewer ballistics cases: they were too niche and boring. More guest lecturers or skype calls. |
| Thinking was very different from typical cases. Really pushes your limit in terms of how you think. |
| The chemistry was sometimes confusing to understand, and that took away from the investigation findings. |
| Fewer field reports. I think the field reports made some of the learning difficult due to students pushing for certain answers. |
| I like the real-world applications. |
| Too many case facts. |
| Try having one or two people summarize the case and have a more engaging discussion. |
| I liked studying how to use technology to solve previously unresolved crimes. |
| If possible, more guest speakers for the cases (this was very valuable in my opinion). |
| Jessica does a great job of integrating all the concepts of forensic sciences. I really liked her classes. I just hoped she would focus a little less on case facts. |
| I really appreciate when investigators share their thoughts during the time the investigation occurred; this provides deep insights other than purely theoretical discussions. |
| Too many assumed facts: too many assumptions were made in the analysis, which made it highly unreliable and meaningless. |

Exhibit 2: (continued)

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| Good variation in cases. Field reports as an evaluation method ensured students came to class prepared. |
| I believe the large class size decreases the overall quality of the class. To be clear, this is a great course; I just find large class sizes in electives lower the overall level of conversation. |
| Teach it twice over different elective periods. Have two sections of 35 to 40 students. This will increase class quality. |
| Update some of the older cases to show some modern technology being implemented in the world (DNA sequencing, for example). Along those lines, maybe some limitations of technology implementation in the field. |
| Field reports are an excellent way to increase participation, as it is quite evident that cases with a brief had better participation than others. |
| Recaps of the class were not very valuable. |
| In-depth discussion of cases was very useful. They motivated me to apply the learnings to real life. |
| I did not get a chance to speak a lot in this class given my seating arrangement and the professor’s position during lectures. I would have loved to contribute much more. |
| Case analysis was great—thorough and understandable. |
| Too many case facts. Spending two hours on case facts is not necessary. |
| Fewer case facts, more analysis. Would love to hear more about different methods investigators use to solve difficult crimes. |
| The most valuable part of this course is to promote students’ thinking in various and broader dimensions, which is in line with the concept that field forensics should be co-ordinated with different departments during an investigation. |
| This is perhaps a capstone course that everybody needs to take. |
| The number of field report opportunities was limited to four; we should have been able to do more field reports. |
| Really helped me to understand the complete field investigation cycle. |
| Need less emphasis on case facts and newer cases. |
| Overall, I liked this class. I think it was good, although there were too many case facts and not enough that we can use in the future. There needs to be more templates, like the six-step investigative procedure. This was probably the best learning of the whole course. A review of the cases in this class needs to be done. A couple of cases are from the 1980s; this really turns off the students. It is irrelevant to our situation. Secondly, there are at least two to three cases that were only case facts and nothing else—no learnings. Although I understand that case facts are necessary to set up a case, they could be done quicker. Everybody read the case; let’s do this part quickly and move on to the analysis! Not enough analysis, especially when 50 per cent of the grade is on participation. Overall, a good teacher, but needs to move away from the teaching notes and be open to a broader discussion with more analysis. The way you approach a case is always the same, and sometimes this lacks analysis and relies too heavily on case facts. Be open to discussion and have more than one way to get to the end of your discussion. Review the case pack, and change some cases that are mostly case facts. Thank you! |
| The breadth of cases was good; I saw lots of different industries. The subject matter of the course has so much potential. |
| Classes were very case-fact heavy and felt scripted, with little opportunity for discussion. This deterred from engaging with the content effectively in class. |
| The class size should be capped at 40 to 50 people to enable better discussion in class; provide articles/readings/textbook to complement cases; did not get framework to support approaches to dissect cases in advance of discussion of case in class. |
| I enjoyed the use of field reports. It made for better, in-depth class discussions and ensured a good portion of the class was prepared. I would try to encourage more case facts be brought up earlier in the class so we may properly analyze the cases, as I felt too much time was spent on these. |
| The prof made sure to go around the room so everyone was able to speak up. |
| Would be nice to have cases that are newer, post-2000. |

Exhibit 2: (continued)

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| The class size was restrictive to my learning experience. Having Jessica Lee as the prof will always attract a crowd. Perhaps you could consider offering the course in two electives. |
| I like the videos at the beginning of class to set context. |
| Although the cases were long, I did appreciate how each case had a clear learning point. |
| Some of the content in the cases was a little boring. |
| To improve the segment, I recommend that there be more readings or a textbook provided. Because we did not have “units” per se, I was unaware of how to approach each case. I was not sure what issues I was supposed to tackle or what lens to view the case through. In the core forensic science classes, there was often an assigned text reading; this made it more valuable to me to approach the case with a certain objective. I found this frustrating when approaching a field report because I was not sure what the instructor wanted out of it. I found Jessica to be enthusiastic and a good instructor. I enjoyed the last class especially. I would have liked to hear more about her personal experiences and to spend less time on case facts. Overall, I enjoyed the class and found Jessica to be an effective instructor. |
| I found the course in general to be quite valuable; it helped expand my understanding on lots of the investigative concepts we were taught in core classes. I felt that many of the cases did seem quite similar. I would have liked to have seen some other crimes explored, and I would have also liked to have seen the introduction of some frameworks we could consider using. |
| The class was very well structured. There were more case facts as part of the discussions than I anticipated; however, that might be the way the class was designed to be. |
| Jessica explained topics well and showed how complex a field investigation can be, as well as the need for a clear determination. |
| The most valuable aspect of the segment was the investigative procedures, as well as the speech in the last class, as it exposed us to the real duties of a forensic investigator. |
| Jessica clearly cares deeply for the students and about making a difference in our lives; however, her management of the classroom could see several areas of improvement: the largest area was in the dependence on case facts. One of my favourite parts of the case method is hearing people relate the case to their past experiences. I feel that this aspect was lost in the class; we focused primarily on case facts. It made me lose interest in the course. |
| I think the segment could be improved if more detailed cases were used. Many of the case analyses required sweeping assumptions and generalizations. Many cases required going outside of the readings to pull data from external sources. I think that a realistic approach to field forensics needs to include an element of data analysis. When we are looking at an investigation, we will have massive quantities of data available. Perhaps incorporate cases with large data sets to reference and use in analysis. |
| I found the forensic report requirement very helpful. It motivated me to prepare for class in more depth than usual. I would suggest that a little more guidance on how the professor wants us to start an analysis of a field investigation would be helpful in directing the efforts of students. |
| I enjoyed Jessica’s enthusiasm, practical nature, and leadership of the case discussion. I thought the general topic areas for the course were appropriate and that the content was tied together well. I did find, though, that most of the cases were out of date and that there was a lot of focus on the case facts discussion. I did enjoy that Jessica would push for next-level insights and didn’t shy away from the true complexity of the subject matter being discussed. |
| Class was of an acceptable quality, but it honestly did not meet my expectations. I enjoyed the application of investigative practice to a real case. |
| I was interested in field forensics because it enlarges the idea that forensics can affect the entire investigation of a crime. While I felt the cases largely were able to provide this context, I will admit that they were not always the most interesting, and that many were very traditional cases that I wouldn’t foresee myself working on. I did not enjoy the field reports as a form of evaluation for three major reasons: (1) the cases that we were allowed to do were limited, and this caused operational issues with returning cases back promptly; (2) the grading and evaluation was not communicated clearly in a way that would help me improve for the next ones; (3) it was expected that they would take approximately three to four hours, but in reality, they took over eight hours to complete. |

Source: Institution files.