

COMPETING PERSPECTIVES IN THE CLASSROOM: THE EFFECT OF SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF "BALANCE" ON EVALUATIONS*

"Balance" in the classroom has been the subject of recent debate in academic and public spheres, with some calling for legislation to prevent instructors from "indoctrinating" students. The debate over balance is important to sociology because the discipline is sometimes characterized as overtly liberal and activist; but the implications of balance for teaching and learning remain unclear. In this article, we present the results of a study in which we operationalized balance as students' perceptions of whether instructors discussed points of view other than their own and invited criticism of their ideas. Using OLS regression on undergraduate classes' quantitative evaluations of sociology instructors at Indiana University during the 2002-2003 academic year (N=99 classes), we asked whether classes perceived their sociology instructors to be balanced and whether positive perceptions led to better evaluations. We also asked about the relative influence of sociology classes' perceptions of balance compared to other influences. We found that most classes perceived their instructors as balanced and instructors who were perceived as being more balanced received better evaluations. However, we also found that balance was not as important as other factors in influencing evaluations. We discuss implications.

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AMERICAN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS are increasingly becoming battle sites in a war of words, scholars and media critics suggest. Some suggest that the casualties are college faculty whom students accuse of presenting an "imbalanced" view in the classroom. D'Souza's (1992) *Illiberal Education*, for

example, details instances of students reporting what they perceived as faculty's slanted and derogatory stances on gender and race to campus newspapers and administrators, leading to student ostracism and administrative punishment. Others suggest that it is students who are most hurt by faculty bias in the classroom. A new website,

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<http://www.noindoctrination.org>, for example, allows students to document their professors' biases and describe how these affect them (Bartlett 2002). An anonymous student on the site wrote that as a result of taking a sociology course with an instructor whom he/she perceived as imbalanced, "I learned very little besides what the professor's personal beliefs were and the transparent ways she attempted to indoctrinate students" (posted July 17, 2003). Though critiques of liberal professors and a liberal slant to education are presently more common, claims of conservative bias have not disappeared. For example, professors are implicated in maintaining a "chilly classroom climate" for women (see Crawford and MacLeod 1990; Hall 1982) and facilitating—or at least failing to challenge—a classroom tone where racist assumptions and comments flourish (see Lesage et al. 2002; Willie 2003).

Lately, some have gone so far as to propose legislation prohibiting instructors from "indoctrinating" students. The recent "National Campaign to Take Back Our Campuses" attempts to address students' complaints of bias by pushing for an "Academic Bill of Rights" to be passed by federal and state legislatures (Hebel 2004). According to its author, David Horowitz (2003), this bill is "designed to take politics out of the university curriculum and to protect the rights of students to get an education rather than an indoctrination." Some scholars, media critics, and students identify the perceived bias as a matter of imbalance—often political left-leanings—of the professorate within departments at universities (see Klein and Stern, forthcoming; Lipset 1982, 1994). Others refer to instructors' lack of ideological balance in the classroom, as the above quote from a sociology student suggests. This latter meaning has been subject to less research than the former. Although popular and academic writers lament the lack of balance in college classrooms, the meaning of the term itself remains unclear and underdeveloped.

This debate takes on added importance in

the humanities and social sciences, where topics are often explicitly value-laden and political.¹ In fact, the "Academic Bill of Rights" targets the humanities and social sciences. It states, "Curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting sources and viewpoints where appropriate" (Horowitz, n.d.). Among the humanities and social sciences, sociology is particularly vulnerable to politicization. Sociologists have traditionally been more activist and liberal than their counterparts in other humanities and social sciences (Lipset 1982, 1994). Moreover, one study shows that about 97 percent of sociologists surveyed indicate that they have voted mostly Democratic in the last ten years (Klein and Stern, forthcoming).

At this point evidence of students' perceptions of balance or of the *consequences* of students' perceptions of balance in the classroom is almost entirely theoretical or anecdotal. Given that student evaluations of instructors may be useful in assessing the accountability desired by some in this debate, we chose to examine issues of balance as they relate to instructor and course evaluations in sociology, a field that has often been characterized as imbalanced. While much research suggests that evaluations are multidimensional, relatively reliable and valid, and influenced by student, course, and teacher characteristics (Cashin 1995; Hobson and Talbot 2001; Marsh and Roche 1997, 2000), this research sheds little light on the issues we raise here. We ask: (1) Do sociology classes perceive their instructors to be balanced in their presentation of mate-

¹Of the course postings accessed at www.noindoctrination.org on March 16, 2004, about 10 percent were for sociology courses. About another 10 percent of the course postings were for courses that might be described as sociological in content and/or taught by sociologists (women's studies, black studies, racial/ethnic relations, American studies, and cross-listings).

rial and in allowing criticism of their ideas? (2) Do classes that perceive their instructors as presenting a balanced view in the classroom rate their instructors and courses more favorably? (3) What is the relative influence of sociology classes' perceptions of how balanced their instructors are compared to other influences?

Nascent theory and limited empirical work suggest divergent answers to these questions. We addressed these questions using descriptive, correlative, and regression analyses on classes' quantitative evaluations of sociology instructors at Indiana University during the 2002-2003 academic year (N=99 classes). Answers to these questions will help to clarify contentious theoretical and policy debates and provide practical benefits to both students and instructors.

POLICY, THEORETICAL, AND STUDENT VIEWS ON "BALANCE"

The definition of a "balanced approach" to teaching is in its early stages of development. Contemporary policy and theoretical debates, as well as students' views, however, provide some conceptual framework for understanding how perceptions of balance may be defined empirically.

In terms of policy, Horowitz (2004), for example, suggests that balance can be achieved at two levels: at the university and in the classroom. Horowitz's (n.d.) "Academic Bill of Rights" emphasizes "intellectual diversity" at the university level to be achieved by prohibiting the hiring, firing, and promotion of faculty on the basis of political beliefs. In the classroom—which is the focus of this paper—Horowitz's view of a balanced approach involves professors "exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses." Balance further entails allowing students to criticize professors' presentations of facts and opinions (Horowitz, n.d.)

In the theoretical literature, balance also takes on a range of meanings. For Brand

(1996), a balanced approach involves "access to course work or other instructional opportunities that acquaint students with the major and reasonable positions and methodologies of key subject matter areas" (p. 11). Specifically this means that "alternative approaches are taught" (pp. 12-13). Brand argues that advocacy, unlike coercion and proselytizing, is a characteristic of good teaching because teachers make frequent normative judgments about the content of their courses and the "transference of knowledge" (p. 16). Gardner (1998) largely agrees, but asserts that a balanced approach does not involve advocating ideological positions. Strossen (1996) adds that a balanced approach is one in which "students are permitted – or, even better, encouraged – to ask questions about, and to express disagreement with, points made in assigned materials and in the teacher's presentations" (p. 81). Yet, if and how the goal of being balanced should be achieved is a major source of contention among experts in higher education, with some arguing that balance can be achieved by being "objective" (e.g., Himmelfarb 1996), while others assert that this form of balance cannot be obtained (e.g., Moglen 1996; Myers and Tronto 1998).

The number of postings from sociology students on websites such as <http://www.noindoctrination.org> suggests that sociology students are concerned about balance; the content of their postings indicates that some are so concerned about balance that they may penalize instructors whom they perceive as imbalanced. One example comes from a student at Elon University who alleges that her sociology professor, a self-identified feminist, "would state her opinion on the subject in a seemingly factual manner." The bigger problem, as the student presents it, is that the professor did not present alternative views at all in the readings and rarely (and only in a "dehumanizing" way) in discussion, and did not permit her ideas to be questioned. According to the student, the professor would "curtail the discussion [that was] contrary to

her own views” and that this led “numerous students [to quell] their opinions for grades sake, including myself” (posted May 9, 2003 on <http://www.noindoctrination.org>). Many of the postings from sociology courses suggest that professors present their own one-sided views, without acknowledging other points of view. Some students claim that if instructors acknowledge other perspectives, they disparage them rather than encourage open discussion and debate. According to a student in a sociology course at the University of California-Riverside, “This is a pathetic reminder that in higher education today, it’s not about what you are thinking or learning, it’s about who you (pretend to) agree with” (posted July 17, 2003 on <http://www.noindoctrination.org>). This student complains of unfairness (in terms of grading), but his/her major complaint is about what he/she perceives as the instructor’s lack of a balanced perspective. This posting, like others on <http://www.noindoctrination.org>, also suggests that students who perceive that they have been penalized for openly objecting to their instructors’ ideas may penalize their instructors on evaluations.

Thus, the two common themes regarding balance in the classroom that emerged from contemporary policy and theoretical debates are paralleled in students’ postings. First, balance involves instructors being open to students’ *reasoned* criticisms of their presentation of data and opinions. What constitutes reasoned criticism and who (if anyone) should have the final word on the topic is not clear.

Second, balance entails instructors discussing points of view other than their own. Scholars and students appear to agree that “other points of view” refer to a “spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints,” as in the text of the “Academic Bill of Rights” (Horowitz, n.d.) For example, a claim that the Holocaust did not happen is not a significant scholarly viewpoint (Brand 1996). Among the points of contention is how one decides (and who should decide) what is a significant scholarly viewpoint and whether

a teacher should ensure balance by allocating equal amounts of class time to each perspective.

BALANCE AND STUDENT EVALUATIONS OF TEACHING

The above discussion raises the question of the consequences of sociology students’ perceptions of “balance.” The postings on <http://www.noindoctrination.org>, for example, suggest that students who perceive their instructors to be imbalanced may rate them unfavorably on teaching evaluations. Most current research indicates that teaching evaluations tend to be relatively reliable and valid (see Cashin 1995; also see Greenwald 1997 for a summary of validity concerns). Research finds teaching evaluations to be relatively consistent from one student to another, particularly in larger classes. They are also fairly stable and generalizable across courses. And while the validity—or the appropriateness—of teaching evaluations is difficult to gauge, comparisons between students’ evaluations, instructor’s self-ratings, and colleague ratings suggest that students’ evaluations are appropriate measures of teacher effectiveness (Cashin 1995; Hobson and Talbot 2001; Marsh and Roche 1997, 2000). Moreover, regardless of whether evaluations are reliable and valid, they have important implications in some educational settings since they are used for promotional and tenure decisions.

Although the long list of bias complaints on such websites as <http://www.noindoctrination.org> might suggest that students’ foremost concern is that their professors be “fair and balanced,” the limited empirical work on evaluations suggests otherwise. In one study, only about 2.5 percent and 1.1 percent of 750 first-year business students, cited fairness and being “open-minded,” respectively, as the most important things they expected from professors. Students in this study were most concerned with professors being “interesting” (Chonko, Tanner, and Davis 2002).

The limited scholarly research on con-

cepts comparable to or included in the above definition of balance has produced mixed results. For example, Kim, Damewood, and Hodge (2000) found that business school professors who were open to criticism and could admit to being wrong earned higher ratings. In contrast, Murray (1983) found that psychology professors who were perceived by student observers to “state their own viewpoints on issues” or judged as being “tolerant of other viewpoints” were no more likely to receive favorable evaluations.

In summary, theoretical and policy debates, as well as students’ views, suggest that balance in the classroom includes whether instructors accept criticism of their ideas and discuss points of view other than their own. Theory and policy discussions cede a great deal of importance to balance and some empirical work shows a positive relationship between students’ perceptions of a balanced or fair view and instructor ratings (Kim et al. 2000; Stapleton and Murkison 2001; but see Murray 1983). Still, the question of the relative influence of balance on evaluations remains unanswered, given that numerous course, student, and teacher characteristics (e.g., course level, grades, and perceptions of teacher knowledge) are related to evaluations. In this article we consider: (1) whether students in sociology classes perceive their instructors to be presenting a “balanced” view, (2) whether these perceptions influence teaching and course evaluations, and (3) whether these perceptions influence teaching and course evaluations, once other factors are taken into account. We explore these issues in sociology, which is a discipline often seen as liberal and activist.

DATA AND METHODS

Undergraduate classes’ course evaluations of sociology faculty and graduate student teachers at Indiana University (IU) during the 2002-2003 academic year² constitute the data for this project. IU is a Doc-

toral/Research-Extensive Institution (formerly, Research I University) according to the Carnegie Classification. Set in a small city, IU enrolls approximately 30,000 undergraduates, approximately two-thirds of whom are from the state of Indiana (Indiana University 2004). While no one university can represent the range of postsecondary institutions in the United States, we believe that a public flagship university like IU is a good place to begin to examine the notion of “balance” in the classroom since a large proportion of students in the United States attend similar types of institutions.

The course evaluation data we used are in summary-level format *by class*. Marsh and Roche (1997, 2000) view the course as the proper unit of analysis because even in small classes evaluations are fairly reliable (see Cashin 1995). Like most course evaluations, these are generally given at the end of the semester and are administered with the instructor out of the room. Approximately 78 percent of enrolled students completed the evaluations in 2002-2003.

Because global measures, such as teaching effectiveness and overall course evaluations, have been found to account for a majority of the variance in other global measures, such as amount learned (Cashin 1995), and these measures are used for promotion and tenure purposes, we used the class-average instructor effectiveness and course evaluation items as our dependent variables. The evaluation form asks students to comment on the “Instructor’s teaching effectiveness, in general” and asks “What is your overall evaluation of this course?” Possible responses for both items are “excellent” (=5), “good” (=4), “satisfactory” (=3), “below average” (=2), or “poor” (=1). Students’ responses within each class are tallied and then divided by the number of students who answered these questions in that class to form a class-average, effectively continuous, variable, with high scores indicating more

²We chose not to use available Summer 2003 data since it would have posed anonymity problems.

favorable evaluations.

The key independent variables are classes' perceptions of whether instructors present a "balanced" view in the classroom. The measures are based on questions that ask students to evaluate their instructors on the following two criteria: "Discusses points of view other than his/her own" and "Invites criticism of his/her ideas." The response categories are "almost always" (=5), "often" (=4), "sometimes" (=3), "rarely" (=2), "almost never" (=1). High scores indicate students' perceptions of a more balanced view. Some theory and policy suggests a positive relationship between "balance" and global evaluation measures.

Following previous research on teaching evaluations, we also controlled for course, student, and teacher characteristics that are related to evaluations. Research has shown that students rate more difficult courses more favorably than less difficult courses (Greenwald and Gillmore 1997a; Jacobs 2000; Marsh and Roche 2000). Therefore, we included the class-average of workload and coded it so that the highest value indicates that students said they did a "great deal" of work for the course. We also included course level as an ordinal variable coded 0=100-level, 1=200-level, 2=300-level, and 3=400-level, since upper-level courses are often rated more favorably than introductory courses (Cashin 1995; Jacobs 2000). We also included class size, which represents the number of students who *filled out* evaluations, primarily to control for the fact that evaluations in larger classes are more reliable (Cashin 1995; Jacobs 2000; Marsh and Roche 2000).

We included two student characteristics as controls: prior interest (as measured by the percentage of sociology majors in the class) and the class-average expected grade (calculated using the standard scale, where A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0). We included the first variable because students who display prior subject interest tend to give higher ratings (Cashin 1995; Jacobs 2000; Marsh and Cooper 1981). We included the second variable because some previous research has shown a small but

positive correlation between expected grades and evaluations (Greenwald and Gillmore 1997b; Jacobs 2000; but see Marsh and Roche 2000).

We also included teacher status (0=graduate student instructor, 1=faculty), since faculty tend to receive higher evaluations than graduate students (Jacobs 2000). We did not include instructors' gender and race because of anonymity concerns and because research has found the effects of gender and/or race are inconsistent on the whole (Baker and Copp 1997; Cashin 1995; Harlow 2003; Jacobs 2000; Moore 1997). Another teacher characteristic we controlled for is fairness. This variable is based on a question that asks students to what extent the instructor "is fair and impartial in dealing with students," where high values indicate a teacher who is more fair and impartial. While this question shares some conceptual overlap with the balance measures, we believe it more explicitly taps into fairness regarding grades, which is not our focus. Finally, based on findings of prior research (e.g., Cashin 1995; Jacobs 2000; Marsh and Roche 1997; Murray 1983), we included a set of teacher characteristics (i.e. enthusiastic, interesting, and knowledgeable), which somewhat captures teacher personality. We coded these variables so that higher scores indicate more favorable ratings. We expect all of these teacher characteristics to be positively related to evaluations.

Analytic Strategy, Methods, and Limitations

We began by examining descriptive analyses to gauge whether sociology students perceived their instructors as balanced. Next, we used correlative analyses to explore relationships among students' perceptions of "balance" and instructor and course evaluations. Finally, we used ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses to determine the influence of "balance" on evaluations once other factors were controlled.

There are four potential limitations with using these methods. First, prior research suggests that some of these measures might

be highly correlated. Thus we were necessarily concerned with multicollinearity and we looked for indications of problems (e.g., high variance inflation factors and few significant coefficients).³ Second, by aggregating these categorical measures to make them effectively continuous, we potentially lost information about the effects of these measures; yet, current limitations in techniques and our sample size precluded using other approaches. Third, our regression models might violate the assumption of homoskedasticity. Because diagnostics revealed that errors were heteroskedastic and the data were clustered, we used Huber/White/sandwich variance estimators.⁴ A final, and related, potential limitation is that due to confidentiality concerns, we cannot fully account for the clustering among instructors. As noted above, however, we included a variable representing course level, which helps to parcel out the effects of an instructor teaching the same course in one semester or both semesters; inclusion of a variable for semester in supplementary analyses led to the same substantive results.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all of the above variables. To answer our first research question concerning whether students perceive sociology instructors as balanced, we begin by examining the means of the two balance measures in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the means of both “balance” measures (“Discusses other points of view” and “Invites criticism of ideas”) round to 4, suggesting that sociology classes perceived their instructors to “often” discuss points of view other than their own and to “often” invite criticism of

their ideas. Classes were more likely to perceive instructors to discuss points of view other than their own (mean=4.24) than to perceive instructors to invite criticism of their ideas (mean=4.06). This difference is significant ($t=6.26$, $p<.001$). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the distributions of these two balance measures.

Looking at Figure 1, we see that 4.5 is the modal rating on the “Discusses other points of view” measure. Because this rating falls in between the “often” and “almost always” categories, this suggests that a plurality of classes perceived their instructors to be balanced. Figure 2 shows a similar pattern; the modal response of 4.3 with respect to inviting criticism of their ideas again suggests that a plurality of classes perceived their instructors to be balanced.

To answer our second research question about the relationship between balance and evaluations, we examined the bivariate relationships between both “balance” measures and instructor and course evaluations. We found that instructors who were perceived to discuss points of view other than their own also had better instructor evaluations ($r=.844$, $p<.001$). We also found a high correlation between “Invites criticism of ideas” and instructor evaluations ($r=.833$, $p<.001$). Additionally, instructors who were perceived to discuss points of view other than their own had higher course evaluations ($r=.847$, $p<.001$). Finally, we found a high correlation between course evaluations and “Invites criticism of ideas” ($r=.837$, $p<.001$). These results indicate that instructors who were perceived as more balanced tended to earn better evaluations.

To answer our third research question concerning the *relative* influence of balance, we next ran regression analyses. Tables 2 and 3 present results from the regression of instructor effectiveness and course evaluations, respectively, on each balance measure and controls. Because of high correlations between the balance measures, we introduced the effects of discussing other points of view and inviting criticism separately on each dependent variable in Models 1 and 2.

³To deal with this, we also attempted to scale some of these variables—including the “balance” measures—and obtained the same substantive results.

⁴We also ran our models using MacKinnon and White’s “jackknifed” heteroskedasticity-consistent covariance matrix estimators, and we obtained the same results.

Table 1. Selected Descriptive Statistics: Sociology Undergraduate Course Evaluations, Indiana University (2002-2003 Academic Year), N=99 Classes

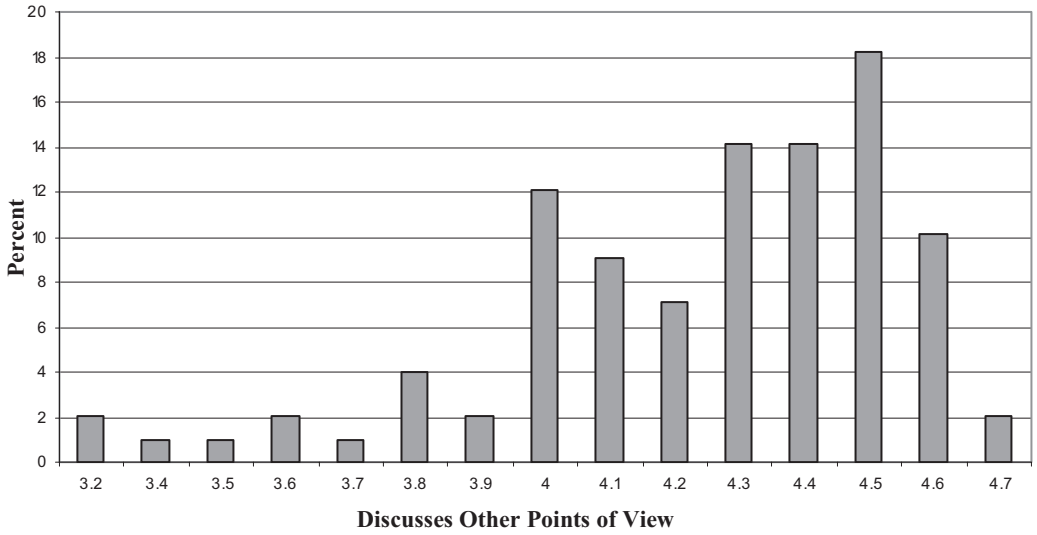
Variables	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Sample Range	Description and Coding
Instructor effectiveness	4.07 (.54)	1.8-4.9	Class's perceptions of instructor's teaching effectiveness, in general: excellent (=5), good (=4), satisfactory (=3), below average (=2), poor (=1).
Course evaluation	3.98 (.50)	2.1-4.7	Class's overall evaluation of the course: excellent (=5), good (=4), satisfactory (=3), below average (=2), poor (=1).
Discusses other point of view	4.24 (.32)	3.2-4.7	Class's perceptions of whether instructor discusses points of view other than his/her own: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).
Invites criticism of ideas	4.06 (.43)	2.7-4.7	Class's perceptions of whether instructor invites criticism of his/her ideas: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).
Workload	3.70 (.35)	3.0-4.7	Class's perceptions of how much work required for the class: great deal (=5), quite a bit (=4), moderate amount (=3), little (=2), almost nothing (=1).
Course level	1.12 (1.03)	0-3	Indicates whether course is a 100-level (=0), 200-level (=1), 300-level (=2), or 400-level (=3).
Class size	49.70 (29.06)	9-224	Number of students in class who filled out evaluation forms.
Percentage of sociology majors	22.19 (28.16)	0-95	Percentage of sociology/potential sociology majors in course, expressed as whole numbers.
Expected grade	3.28 (.20)	2.67-3.88	Class average expected grade, calculated based on students' expected grades: A (=4), B (=3), C (=2), D (=1), F (=0).
Faculty	.54 (.50)	0-1	Whether teacher is an associate instructor/graduate student (=0) or faculty (=1).
Fairness	4.40 (.35)	3.2-4.9	Class's perceptions of whether instructor is fair and impartial in dealing with students: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).
Enthusiasm	4.50 (.38)	2.3-5.0	Class's perceptions of whether instructor is enthusiastic about teaching the course: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).
Interesting	4.03 (.54)	2.0-4.8	Class's perceptions of whether instructor makes the subject interesting: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).
Knowledgeable	4.64 (.29)	3.1-5.0	Class's perceptions of whether instructor is knowledgeable about course topics: almost always (=5), often (=4), sometimes (=3), rarely (=2), almost never (=1).

The reduced ("a") models include balance measures and controls for student and course characteristics, while the full ("b") models add perceptions of teacher charac-

teristics.

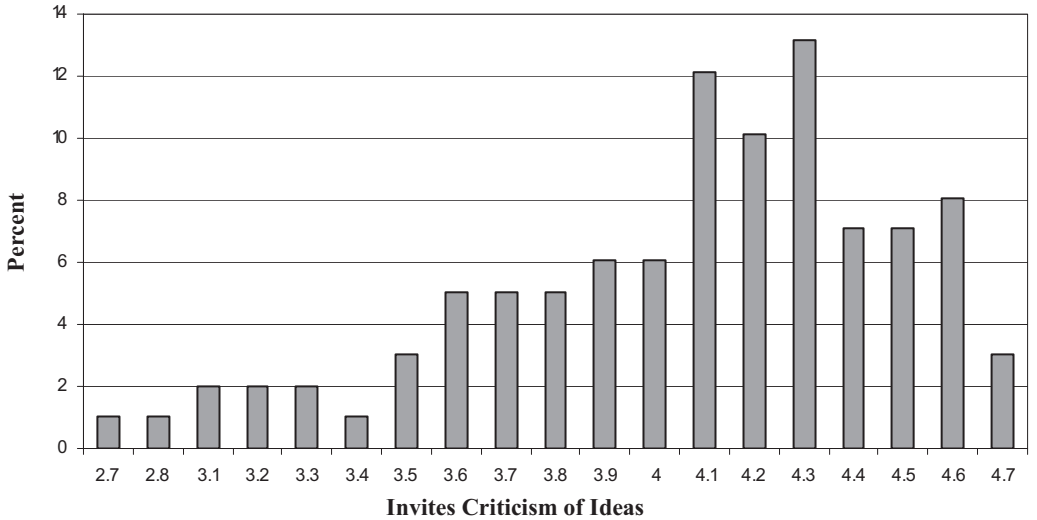
Tables 2 and 3 reveal that balance—measured either by "Discusses other points of view" or "Invites criticism of ideas"—is

Figure 1. Distribution of “Discusses Other Points of View”



Note: 3=“Sometimes,” 4=“Often,” and 5=“Almost Always”

Figure 2. Distribution of “Invites Criticism of Ideas”



Note: 2=“Rarely,” 3=“Sometimes,” 4=“Often,” and 5=“Almost Always”

positively and consistently related to instructor effectiveness and course evaluations in the reduced (“a”) models. In fact, the effects of the individual measures of balance are the largest: Taking the coefficient for “Discusses other points of view” in Table 2, Model 1a ($b=1.365$, $p<.01$), for example, reveals that a standard deviation

increase on “Discusses other points of view” yields a .794 standard deviation increase on instructor evaluations, on average. The coefficient for “Invites criticism of ideas” in Table 3, Model 2a ($b=.885$, $p<.01$), reveals that a standard deviation increase on “Invites criticism of ideas” yields a .763 standard deviation increase on

Table 2. Unstandardized and Fully Standardized Coefficients for the OLS Regression of Instructor Effectiveness on Balance and Control Measures

Independent Variables	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b	
	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B
Discusses other points of view	1.365** (.128)	.794	.263* (.117)	.153	---	---	---	---
Invites criticism of ideas	---	---	---	---	1.000** (.090)	.794	.104 (.083)	.082
Workload	.109 (.072)	.071	-.030 (.045)	-.020	.199* (.085)	.130	-.016 (.048)	-.010
Course level	-.053 (.040)	-.100	-.048 (.019)	-.090	-.037 (.041)	-.070	-.041 (.020)	-.079
Class size	-.001 ^a (.001)	-.025	.001 (.001 ^a)	.031	.003** (.001)	.151	.001** (.001 ^a)	.061
Percentage of sociology majors	.003* (.002)	.144	.002* (.001)	.087	.001 (.002)	.073	.001* (.001)	.075
Expected grade	.358* (.166)	.130	-.035 (.081)	-.013	.235 (.171)	.085	-.060 (.079)	-.022
Faculty	.059 (.069)	.055	.002 (.037)	.001	.066 (.068)	.061	-.012 (.034)	-.011
Fairness	---	---	.064 (.093)	.041	---	---	.134 (.114)	.086
Enthusiasm	---	---	-.074 (.069)	-.051	---	---	-.085 (.088)	-.059
Interesting	---	---	.645** (.066)	.644	---	---	.648** (.072)	.648
Knowledgeable	---	---	.460** (.084)	.245	---	---	.513** (.098)	.273
<i>Constant</i>	-3.305** (.772)	---	-1.509** (.373)	---	-1.660* (.803)	---	-1.330** (.362)	---

Note: *b*=Unstandardized regression coefficients; **B**=fully standardized regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. N=99 classes.

^aActual values are smaller than .001, but are rounded up to the nearest thousandth.

p* < .05 *p* < .01 (one-tailed tests)

course evaluations, on average. This set of results indicates that classes that perceived their instructors to be “balanced” rewarded them with better evaluations.⁵ Even in the presence of controls for factors cited by

⁵Although graphical analyses suggest that the relationship between expected grade and evaluations may be curvilinear, regressions using expected grade and its square do not.

previous research, balance not only has a significant effect, but also the largest effect.

When other variables (e.g., fairness and interesting) are included in the models, however, the effects of “balance” are substantially reduced—in the case of “Discusses other points of view” (compare models 1a with 1b in Tables 2 and 3)—or disappear—in the case of “Invites criticism

Table 3. Unstandardized and Fully Standardized Coefficients for the OLS Regression of Course Evaluations on Balance and Control Measures

Independent Variables	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 2a		Model 2b	
	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B	<i>b</i>	B
Discusses other points of view	1.219** (.108)	.769	.252** (.092)	.159	---	---	---	---
Invites criticism of ideas	---	---	---	---	.885** (.082)	.763	.065 (.076)	.056
Workload	.188** (.072)	.133	.082 (.052)	.058	.269** (.075)	.190	.093* (.052)	.066
Course level	-.015 (.032)	-.032	-.013 (.017)	-.026	-.001 (.034)	-.002	-.007 (.018)	-.014
Class size	-.001 ^a (.001)	-.024	.001 ^a (.001 ^a)	.023	.003** (.001)	.147	.001* (.001 ^a)	.052
Percentage of sociology majors	.002 (.001)	.102	.001 ^a (.001)	.024	.001 (.001)	.035	.001 ^a (.001)	.013
Expected grade	.465** (.131)	.184	.137* (.077)	.054	.360** (.140)	.142	.108 (.079)	.043
Faculty	.015 (.055)	.015	-.007 (.037)	-.007	.020 (.059)	.020	-.022 (.038)	-.022
Fairness	---	---	.242** (.096)	.168	---	---	.335** (.100)	.232
Enthusiasm	---	---	-.184 (.070)	-.138	---	---	-.190 (.085)	-.144
Interesting	---	---	.572** (.073)	.621	---	---	.584** (.077)	.634
Knowledgeable	---	---	.286** (.095)	.165	---	---	.334** (.106)	.193
Constant	-3.424** (.588)	---	-1.726** (.425)	---	-1.940** (.605)	---	-1.539** (.424)	---

Note: *b* = Unstandardized regression coefficients; **B** = fully standardized regression coefficients. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. N = 99 classes.

^aActual values are smaller than .001, but are rounded up to the nearest thousandth.

p* < .05 *p* < .01 (one-tailed tests)

of ideas” (compare models 2a to 2b in both tables). Instead of balance being the most important factor influencing evaluations, classes’ perceptions of whether instructors make the course interesting was most important.⁶ Hence, Tables 2 and 3 support the

⁶Multicollinearity is of particular concern in these models, given that many of these additional variables are highly correlated. None of

conclusion that while balance—especially as measured by whether classes perceive instructors to discuss other points of view (but see footnote 6)—is important for instructor

these models reach tolerance and none of the individual variance inflation factors (VIFs) exceeds 10—the “rule of thumb” for assessing the potential of collinearity (Gujarati 1995). Using more stringent criteria (Allison 1999), we find

and course evaluations, it is not the most important factor.⁷

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Claims of instructor bias abound in popular culture, media, and even in the policy realm, while academics continue to debate the merits and possibilities of being value-free in the classroom. Seemingly absent from this debate are empirical analyses of students' perceptions of balance in the classroom and the consequences of these perceptions for instruction and course evaluations. Such analyses are especially important in sociology, where value-laden topics are frequently discussed and the field has been characterized as overtly activist and liberal.

In our study, we operationalized balance as classes' perceptions of whether sociology instructors discuss points of view other than their own and invite criticism of their ideas. We found that sociology classes at Indiana University during 2002-2003 perceived their instructors to be relatively "balanced" in their approach to teaching: Classes perceived their instructors to "often" discuss points of view other than their own and "often" invite criticism of their ideas. Additionally, we found that classes that perceived their instructors to discuss points of view other than their own and invite criticism of their ideas tended to reward their instructors with better instructor and course evaluations. Measures of balance bore relationships to instructor and course evalua-

that the non-significance of "Invites criticism of one's ideas" in Model 2b of each table may be due to multicollinearity. Dividing the standard errors of this measure by the square root of its VIF and calculating the corresponding t-score reveals this measure would be significant in both models ($t=2.97$ and 2.03 in Model 2b of Tables 2 and 3, respectively). However, this does not change the substantive conclusion: Balance is important, but not as important as other factors.

⁷In additional supplementary analyses in which we included nearly all of the items on the evaluation form, we obtained substantively similar results.

tions in OLS regressions once some other factors were controlled but not always when all other factors were controlled. We found that balance was not as important as other factors in influencing instructor and course evaluations.

These findings contradict some research showing that students who perceive psychology professors as "tolerant of other points of view" were no more or less likely to rate them favorably (Murray 1983). This might suggest that balance is more important in sociology than psychology, but differences in samples, methodologies, and perhaps, political climate preclude such a conclusion. Future research should expand the scope of this research using data from more departments, universities, and time periods, possibly also developing more discriminating items—including measures of balance—to be used on evaluation forms.

To the extent that these results speak to the accumulating anecdotal evidence in the media and popular culture concerning instructor bias, they refute some claims and support others. On the one hand, it does not appear that students perceive sociology instructors to be as imbalanced as some would have us believe they are. Furthermore, our results suggest that balance is only one correlate of effective teaching and is not as important as other factors in influencing evaluations. On the other hand, these results indicate that perceptions of imbalance have a negative effect as some suggest, but in this instance, perceptions of imbalance had a negative effect on *instructors* in terms of worse evaluations. Moreover, these effects are large enough to justify continuing debate about what balance means, how it should be measured, and whether and how it affects student learning.

Our discussion of balance in the classroom would be incomplete without tying it to long-standing debates in epistemology and pedagogy, particularly those over what is worth knowing and by whom. Weber ([1919] 1946) and more contemporary writers argue that faculty members should not use the classroom as a forum for advocating

partisan or other positions. For some, this means that faculty should attempt to be “objective” (Himmelfarb 1996). For others, “teaching that emphasizes multiple perspectives, arguments, and evidence is an excellent middle path between the impossibility of objectivity and the nihilism of subjectivity” (Gardner 1998:803). A balanced approach, according to Gardner, for example, entails devoting lectures and readings to liberal, conservative, and moderate perspectives in his poverty class.

Many feminists, postmodernists and post-structuralists disagree with what they see as an artificial distinction that Weber and others make between facts and values. Stressing that an objectively balanced perspective is neither desirable nor possible, scholars in this tradition may argue that a balanced view should focus more (or exclusively) on revisionist scholarship because it incorporates the experiences of marginalized groups (Maher and Thompson Tetreault 1994). Furthermore, some schools of pedagogy, such as Freire’s “liberatory teaching” and feminist pedagogy, point to the importance or necessity of consciousness-raising for learning (e.g., Freire 1992; hooks 2003). These perspectives are not necessarily in conflict with the notion of balance as we have discussed it, since they support instructors presenting multiple, and situated, points of view and encouraging students to question these views.

Although more quantitative and qualitative research on balance in the classroom is necessary before concrete policy recommendations should be made, the results of this investigation invite possible policy implications. On the one hand, our results indicate that evaluations may keep instructors accountable to concerns about balance. To the extent that student evaluations affect tenure and promotional decisions, faculty may attempt to be perceived as more balanced; thus, policies mandating balance would be redundant. On the other hand, student evaluations are generally more important at liberal arts colleges than at research universities. Thus, some may believe that such

policies are needed at the latter type of institutions. Still, though, it is unclear what such policies would be, how federal and state policies would determine what constitutes a “balanced” perspective, and how these policies would be enforced.

Of course, the theoretical, policy and practical implications of this research must be tempered by its limitations, some of which have already been discussed. Although our measures of balance capture the agreed-upon dimensions of balance within policy and theoretical debates, they cannot provide closure on some of the more contentious aspects of the debate over balance. For example, while we do know whether students in our study believed their sociology instructors discussed points of view other than their own, we cannot know whether instructors discussed the “spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints” on the subject, devoted equal time to all perspectives, discussed the strengths and weakness of each perspective in parallel ways, or identified their own personal perspectives. Our student evaluation data do not capture these (less agreed upon) dimensions of balance in the classroom. Moreover, some sociology courses, such as statistics, are probably not conducive to presenting multiple perspectives. Finally, evaluations are only one way to consider the implications of balance on students’ views of the classroom.

Future research can expand upon our research in a number of ways, some of which we have already mentioned. The content of websites similar to <http://www.noindoctrination.org> could shed light on what students think about balance. In-depth individual and/or focus group interviews with students at a range of postsecondary institutions could also explore what “balance” means, how important this issue is to students, and how much it influences their learning. Finally, to more explicitly speak to the political nature of this debate, future research could survey students to gauge their perceptions of how “balanced” their instructors are, their perceptions of how effective their

teachers are, and their own political ideologies to assess the interrelationships among these factors. We offer our research as a first step towards better understanding an issue that faces all of us in the classroom and that has recently become part of a larger debate in the United States.

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