

Place Oakland Undiapered Logo Here

“OAKLAND UNDIAPERED”-DIAPERED

Max Brill

Student Evaluations of Teachers [SETs]:

I do not know whether or not the practice of students filling out forms, in order to evaluate the performance of their professors, is universal in American universities. If it is not universal, it certainly is common. It has been a general practice, at Oakland, since the beginning, for a few Departments to gather and to use SET's for one purpose or another. But at the start, most Departments were not involved.

Currently, among some Oakland faculty, there is again interest in the matter of SETs in general. At issue is whether or not the gathering of the SET data should be done at all, irrespective of whether or not it is being done well.

Here I will say a little about a few simple early publications, student sponsored, each titled *Oakland Undiapered*, with the appropriate number and year appended. I might be of a little help, as I had a part in that particular story.

Some may be a curious as to why the early SET's at Oakland were published under the name *Undiapered*. It had nothing to do with revealing things better hidden, as some have guessed. For those who might not know, the Oakland University logo has a large sail, on what purports to be the little ship of Ulysses, who was out seeking wisdom. The sail looks to many of us something like a diaper. Hence *Oakland Undiapered*. Reasonable naming.

Richard Kamman was in the Psychology Department in the 1960's. He and his wife Alice, and their little girl Karen, lived for a while in an apartment in Van Wagoner Dorm, where he was Dorm Manager. He was a brilliant and personable guy, and most imaginative. In the

Winter of 1967, Richard was invited to do research at the Bell Telephone Research Labs, in Holmdale, New Jersey. It was to be a one-year appointment. A plum. He went before the start of the Fall Semester. About twenty years later he died there while playing with his dog in a park.

Richard was popular in his classes, and with his dorm students. In some bull sessions, with a few of these students, a question came up: How might they be able to help some of their fellows to know just what they might expect from certain professors, if they registered for their classes? The group developed the idea of putting together a small handbook to do this.

The project was undertaken partly, it was said, because it was something to do that seemed worthwhile, to pass the time. There was little besides schoolwork for students to do out here, in a new, almost unknown University, dropped in the wilds north of Detroit. The students went to work, with Kammann's guidance.

Oakland Undiapered #1 came out in the Fall of 1967, some 37 years ago. The guys in the dorm, along with some of their campus friends, made the evaluations that went into that first issue. They just talked about it, sometimes over beer or whatever, and came up with descriptive paragraphs. This was probably not the very best way to gather opinion data on an important matter, even though the group was sincere, honestly motivated, and attempting to be reasonably impartial. At least that's the way I believe it was.

Oakland Undiapered #1 consisted of the composed paragraphs, one per faculty member. It was printed and copies were sold in the Oakland Bookstore, for 50 cents or maybe a dollar. I do not know any of the details, but I believe that the Bookstore made no profit from the sale. At that time the University itself operated the Bookstore.

Changes, Changes, Changes:

I do not know who was the faculty adviser for *Oakland Undiapereds* #2, #3 and #4, though I believe it was Professor Roger Marz of the Political Science Department. *Undiapered* #2 was similar to #1, but in some ways significantly different. *Undiapered* #3 changed again, a great deal, as did #4.

The popularity of the publication was attested to by the fact that almost 2000 copies of #3, 1970, were sold, and this to a student body of approximately 6000. Professors, who were naturally curious, bought some of those copies.

By *Oakland Undiapered* #5, 1972, the changes were even more radical, though at least the purpose of the SETs had remained the same. After #5, the changes became bigger and more basic, with the students being no longer involved as editors. *Oakland Undiapered* passed into history. Over the next 32 years or so, the entire thing has become something quite different from what it was intended to be at the start.

How has it changed? At least four ways: (1) The questions asked have changed. (2) The sources of the gathered data have changed. (3) The presentation of the data has changed. (4) And, most importantly, the uses to which the SET's have been put have changed.

Ultimately, most departments have done it differently one from the other, and so have the different colleges. Let us look at some of the more salient changes over time, from 1968 till 2003. It may help us to decide what changes might be desirable in 2004, or 2005.

(1) **Questions:** The matter of the Questions to ask came up right from the beginning. It is the most obvious place to start, and the most fun to play with. Everyone is an authority on what to ask.

In 1972, for #5, we decided to survey what was going on in the field. We gathered old questionnaires from wherever and whenever they were available. This sounded like a great approach, but the questionnaire we came up with did not seem to be much of an improvement over what others before us had merely dreamed up, and we had wasted a lot of time.

Today the matter of the questions to be asked still engenders discussions. There are always some faculty, I'll wager, who believe that they understand the subtleties of Questions-to-Ask better than anybody else and can cleverly phrase the old standbys. Let them have fun. The questions themselves are probably not the major issue involved with SETs.

(2) **Sources of Data:** Here indeed is the major place for study and for change. For #2, it was not a few dorm students who came up with descriptive paragraphs about the professors in the department. The descriptions were written by Department Committees, made up of a total of about 140 student majors, all of whom were said to be doing well academically.

For the next two issues of *Oakland Undiapered*, #3 and #4, students were polled directly, in the classrooms. I'm not sure just how they managed it logistically, but they did. Summarizing paragraphs were derived from the raw data.

Then there was *Oakland Undiapered* #5, 1972. In 1971, with the Fall Semester already underway, some students came to me with the request to guide them in its production. I was, as we all were, a good deal younger at the time, 33 years younger, and more enthusiastic about things in general, and more callow. I agreed to do it, of course. I offered it as a course, *Individual Reading and Research*, with full Psychology Department credit.

The students and I made many changes, some by choice and some by necessity. We had no funding at all. Some of the changes were fairly radical, but not particularly so when viewed against the picture in the years that have followed.

For the *Undiapered #5*, our students also went to classrooms and passed out questionnaires to fellow students. But we had just a few students working with us, and no official authority. Also, we were doing it towards the end of the Semester, and we took that as one excuse for bungling it badly. For example, a few professors and a number of big and important classes were missed entirely. Some professors were given their own questionnaires to handle, and some students took theirs home with them, where they vanished. A few questionnaires showed up several weeks later. Sampling every class on campus, or almost every one, is a horrendous job. It takes more workers than we had, and better management than I gave.

The real problem and the worthy focus for our attention in the matter of SETs, as in much research, is in finding individuals and groups to study that are representative of the larger mass that you are interested in, but really cannot get hold of. It isn't easy.

I'll digress with the personal tale of my own partial enlightenment on the matter. I once went into a class of a colleague to gather the semester's student evaluations for that course. That's the way Psychology has done it for many years, since the demise of the *Undiapereds*. In this case there were 19 students present, and they gave pretty good evaluations of their professor. We were not supposed to look, but I peeked. As it was an Introductory course, I was surprised at the small number of students present. I checked the enrollment. The registration for the course was 117. Almost 100 Students had not made it that day! One does not have to be particularly sharp to realize that something was a little out of whack. Were the missing 100 perhaps evaluating their professor with their collective feet? Might have been, huh?

I went back to look at some of the enrolled/attending figures in the *Oakland Undiapered #5, 1972*. In the majority of cases that we had put into our book, between 30 per cent and 55 per cent of those enrolled had not attended that day, or had not returned the questionnaires. The quite likely bias problem when student responses are very low hit me right on the dome. Good sample selection is an essential matter in any student evaluation of teaching, as it is in any research, probably the most important matter.

The questionnaire-in-classrooms method surely began before the days of the *Oakland Undiapereds*, both at Oakland and elsewhere, and it surely has continued until this day. It is probably the most obvious way to obtain SET data, though it cannot be the best way, unless the attendance problem is handled. Requiring attendance might be an answer.

Today, rather than the students doing it on their own, many departments have faculty members going to the classrooms of their colleagues, excusing the professor from the room for a few minutes, and taking SETs on questionnaires that they distribute. It is still a sampling problem.

Also, now, we have PETs (Professor Evaluations of Teaching); some departments have two or three faculty members form a department committee to visit the professor's classroom. They typically attend on several occasions, pre-announced to the professor involved, and they observe for themselves. Some of the classroom-visiting faculty talk with some of the students enrolled in the course, in order to complete their picture of the teaching behaviors. I doubt that many talk to students who were not present when the observations were made. Then the small committee writes it up. Another problem arises. Bias pro- or anti-colleagues is not unheard-of in academia, is it?

3) **Data Presentation:** The first few *Oakland Undiapereds* had paragraphs summarizing whatever data they had gathered. When data began to be collected in classrooms, then tabulated data appeared, with means, standard deviations, and other statistical refinements. I can't help quoting B. F. Skinner who, in another realm of discourse said: "They did impeccable statistics, on peccable data."

As we have said, in the beginning small handbooks were printed and sold through the Bookstore. In #5 we had no funds for printing. We had begged enough to have the SETs keypunched. Sheets in hand, we came up with what we thought was a great idea. Our twist was to have the faculty member involved comment directly onto his or her evaluations, which we mailed to them. It was an attempt at fairness. Many professors got their copies way too late to send them back on time, and many did not get their copies at all. But the faculty comments we did get back were often the best part of the thing we were producing.

Copies of the resulting handbook were distributed to key locations on campus; the Library, the various Department offices, the Oakland Center, the Bookstore, etc., to be available to students.

(4) **The Purposes and Uses:** In the beginning, and through the five editions of *Oakland Undiapered*, the purpose and the uses were quite consistent. They were clearly stated, over and over again.

First of all, the *Undiapereds* were intended to help students to select the kind of professors they should take classes from, when they had a choice, professors suited to their own idiosyncratic needs. "It is the purpose of this evaluation to assist a student in choosing professors who are oriented to the needs of that particular student. Some students desire professors who

emphasize class participation, while others desire only easy graders, and still others look for professors whose interests match their own. Our evaluation should supplement, but of course never replace the 'native grapevine.'

Second, the *Undiapereds* were intended to help some professors who rated highly, and some who might take the evaluations to heart, and, where they were less than perfect, modify their own teaching behaviors for the better. "It is our hope and indeed anticipation, that in the long run, one of the durable products of our evaluation will be an increase in prestige and mobility for the talented professor who is interested enough in students to give them a quality education on a personal basis."

As student sponsored SETs ceased coming out, many departments began gathering their own. The purposes changed as completely as when a caterpillar becomes a moth. The SETs were no longer for the direct benefit of the students. That was gone, zip. Students are usually not even allowed to see them. Students would have to depend on the grapevine in the matter of professor selection.

The SETs are still available to the professor involved who might change his or her teaching behaviors according to the gathered data, or who might not. The SETs, along with the Faculty-derived evaluations, have picked up, in some cases, an entirely new and important function. The evaluations of teaching are now much used in important department decisions about promotions and tenure! That is a real change, if ever there was one.