Evaluations

Of course there are those pesky teacher and student evaluations. I receive quite favorable evaluations, and yet I still feel relief only after those forms are filled out. Suddenly I feel like I have free rein (within the bounds of common sense and law) to do whatever I want: I can be rude; I can tell the students what I really think; I can yell at them; I can give them failing grades! Of course I do none of this. I continue to teach as I always do. And every year their evaluations stress me less and less. Certainly tenure has something to do with this, but so does experience, confidence, and ability. Students are not out to "get" you any more than you're out to get them. Your evaluation will probably be fine. And if a few students don’t like you, by the time a pencil fills the bubble, there’s nothing you can do it. But if your evaluations are uniformly negative — or even very mixed — there is, as they say, room for improvement. If most of your students think you’re not a good teacher, there are classroom issues that need to be resolved. Talk to other professors. Sit in some other classrooms. Observe different styles and learn from them. Ask other people you know to sit in your class.

As part of my job, I’ve observed dozens of other professors. Almost all have been very good to excellent. One or two, however, were bad. The first indication of a problem was being bored. These professors were not comfortable in their own professorial skin. As a result, they came off as overly formal and seemed to hide behind their suit and tie. Talking to these professors outside of class, they were relaxed and far more engaging. As cliché as it sounds: be yourself. Maybe not the same self you are at the bar with your buddies, but yourself as you normally talk to people one-on-one. And if being comfortable and confident in your own skin doesn’t come naturally to you in the classroom, then you need to put on a show and act.

I've heard rumors, certainly all false, that some professors tell students they're going to be easy simply for the purpose of getting high marks on the student evaluations. This tactic works far less than you’d think. (Besides, have some dignity!) While certainly some professors may be disliked for being "too" tough, professors are also disliked for being too easy.

Any potential "softy bonus" in evaluations is miniscule compared to the basic differences between a good and a bad teacher. Students respect a tough but fair professor. And good students resent being catered to. It’s one thing to be a soft grader on papers. It’s another to make a class so easy that no learning takes place. Most students want to be challenged and pushed — even forced — to learn. Treat you class as the most important they're taking and they may believe it is!

And if you do get a negative review or two, have thick skin and don’t take it personally. While you can't please all your students all of the time, you can certainly please most students them most of the time.