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After student complaints, Utah professor denied job ^[1]

Submitted by [Kaustuv Basu](#) ^[2] on October 31, 2011 - 3:00am

Some students didn't take well to Steven Maranville's teaching style at Utah Valley University. They complained that in the professor's "capstone" business course, he asked them questions in class even when they didn't raise their hands. They also didn't like it when he made them work in teams.

Those complaints against him led the university denying him tenure – a decision amounting to firing, according to a lawsuit Maranville filed against the university this month. Maranville, his lawyer and the university aren't talking about the case, although the suit details the dispute.

Maranville and his attorney did not return phone calls, but the allegations in the lawsuit raises questions that have been raised and debated about the value of student evaluations and opinions, how negative evaluations play into the career trajectory of affected professors and whether students today will accept teaching approaches such as the Socratic method.

Last year, a professor at Louisiana State University was removed from teaching a course ^[3] after a majority of her students received failing grades, while another professor at Norfolk State University was denied tenure ^[4] in 2008 for similar reasons.

A twist in Maranville's case is that he gave up tenure at the University of Houston to come to Utah Valley, with the expectation that he would be awarded tenure there after a year. He is now an associate professor at Westminster College, in Salt Lake City, and his suit says that he earns considerably less than he did in his previous position.

The Socratic Method and Today's Students

Maranville followed the Socratic teaching style and described his way of teaching as "engaged learning," according to court documents. Those records describe teaching approaches designed to go beyond lectures. He would ask questions to stimulate discussion. He divided his students into teams and gave them assignments outside class.

The Socratic style of teaching that Maranville used is hardly novel. But experts say that while it remains popular in law schools, there are reasons many faculty members have never used it extensively with the current generation of students.

"When done well, you simply do not impose the teacher's idea, and try to come up with a solution through dialogue," said Michael Apple, a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "In general, it is a guided dialogue."

Supporters of the method see it as "a process by which you try to make the best logical argument and you focus on process as much as content," Apple said. But he added that not that many faculty members use it these days. "The reason for its unpopularity sometimes is because we are in a test-based education system. Students can be increasingly impatient where the answer is not clear and when the professor is not giving it to them immediately."

A lot also depends, Apple said, on who the students are. "It is controversial to some people, for example, students who are deeply concerned that they have to learn a certain amount of content and then take a test at the end," he said. Students may also think that they are being treated as if they were not very smart.

Walter Parker, a professor of education at the University of Washington, said he teaches using the "Socratic seminar" method. He cautioned against stereotypes of the Socratic method, namely the depiction in the 1973 movie "The Paper Chase," ^[5] which shows a professor giving harsh evaluations to a student, leaving the students embarrassed.

"That is not the Socratic method," he said.

"It is an interpretive discussion of a piece of text during which the professor says very little," Parker said. "The professor chooses a rich piece of text and plans an interpretive question as he opens the discussion."

This kind of teaching is more common in the humanities and social sciences, he said.

The advantage of this kind of teaching is that students learn how to think on their feet, said Patricia King, a professor of education at the University of Michigan.

In Maranville's case, students did not see the value of his approach, the court records suggest. "Some students were quite vocal in their demands that he change his teaching style, which style had already been observed and approved by his peer faculty and administrative superiors," according to the lawsuit. Students did not want to work in teams and did not want Maranville to ask questions. "They wanted him to lecture." They also complained, according to the suit, that he did not know how to teach because he is blind.

The department chair – Scott Hammond, who is named in the lawsuit – apparently agreed with how Maranville taught his courses and called him a "master teacher," according to court documents. Hammond visited his class, and so did an associate dean.

But a few months later, during the spring semester, Maranville received a letter from university president saying that his classroom behavior was not suited to his being granted tenure.

When contacted, the Utah Attorney General's Office, the agency defending the university in the lawsuit, declined to talk about the allegations. "We defend state schools and agencies and that is our job. They made a decision and we will be in court defending that decision," said Scott Troxel, deputy communications director at the attorney general's office.

Maranville's lawsuit alleges breach of contract, breach of good faith, failure to provide a pre-termination notice and due process violation under the Utah constitution.

John Curtis, director of research and public policy for the American Association of University Professors, who was not specifically speaking about the Maranville case, said such situations might reflect a growing trend to give weight to student evaluations when it comes to promoting professors and even in their retention.

This trend might be more noticeable when it comes to contingent faculty, he said. "These kind of situations might become a real threat to academic freedom. We have heard from professors who are afraid to be tough with their students because of the possibility of negative evaluations leading to them being let go," Curtis said.

As a result, he said, it might be tempting for a faculty member to make classes easy just to garner positive evaluations.

Student opinions are just one perspective, he said. Also important are peer evaluations from other faculty members who could look into how a teacher is developing the discipline and incorporating new teaching techniques.

In some ways, Maranville's allegations about student complaints are reminiscent of the case of Dominique G. Homberger, a biology professor at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge ^[3] who

While some view these cases as evidence of the overuse of student evaluations, Elizabeth Hitch, associate commissioner for academic affairs in the office of the commissioner for higher education in Utah, said student input was a key factor -- appropriately -- in reviewing professors.

"I think it is very important to find out what the student experience has been. They are sitting there every day listening to the professors," Hitch said. "But student ratings are not the only thing. It is one element in a much more inclusive system."

Faculty ^[7]

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