Anastasia Velikovskaya

March 3 2022 AV RS

**ROUGH DRAFT**

**My gig as an executive coach for my College Prof**

**PAR #1: How students search for opinions on classes and professors**

 *“Who is the best professor for The Social World?” “Thoughts on professor Y?” “How difficult is Professor X?”* These posts flood class Facebook group pages days before class registration opens. As a recent Barnard alum (‘21), these posts seem all too familiar to me. CULPA, known as the Columbia Underground Listing of Professor Ability, also serves the Barnard/Columbia community every semester by offering honest, anonymous reviews from former students. It is considered the biggest gamble to sign up for a class without checking CULPA first. Although the reviews are subjective and may be biased, they remain fairly consistent for professors year after year. Some professors consistently receive raving reviews, as evidenced by their “gold nugget” status, while others have CULPA pages filled with ominous warnings to avoid the class at all costs. It always seemed to me that it is our responsibility as students to adapt to the flaws of each class because professors will not change their teaching styles. It wasn’t until Professor Rae Silver and I tried something called *executive coaching* for her Neuroscience Frontiers class that I realized that professors can and should be open to changing the way they run their classes.

Before I was an executive coach, I was a “preceptor” for Professor Silver during the spring semester of virtual learning. As a preceptor, I monitored the Zoom chat, took attendance, made sure questions were answered, graded and chose the best homework responses from the students. After the semester finished and college was back to being in-person for the fall of 2021, I asked Professor Silver if there was any way I could help her with her next in-person seminar, Neuroscience Frontiers, as a recent ‘21 grad. We landed on executive coaching.

**PAR: Students can constructively help faculty improve their courses.**

Professor Silver first heard about *executive coaching* from Professor Harry Brighouse. She noticed his article in Daedalus– an academic Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In his article, *Becoming a Better College Teacher (If You’re Lucky),* Professor Brighouse explains how most professors in research universities teach even though they have received little to no training as teachers. In fact, he explains how they are hired for their potential as researchers, not teachers. Pay raises, promotions, and job security are not dependent on student evaluations. It’s not a surprise that as a result, many students have poor learning experiences. When Professor Brighouse started teaching a seminar for the first time, he admitted that the first few weeks were awful. He assigned too much, the readings were too difficult, and the students stared blankly at him while he was lecturing. He knew there was a problem. To become a better college teacher, Professor Brighouse asked a former student, Emma, to be his *Executive Coach.* Emma’s job was to observe once a week, take notes on what was happening in the classroom, and debrief after class. By receiving a student-centered perspective, Professor Brighouse greatly improved his class. Since then, a coach observed every single class he taught for a year.

By signing up to be an executive coach, I had nothing to lose. I wasn’t a current student in the class and I didn’t have to worry about my grade or the impression I made. Instead, I was focused on providing candid reviews– something I would fear if I was a current student. As I sat in on the classes, it was the first time I didn’t solely focus on the professor. Instead, I was focused on *how* the students were reacting to the professor. My job was to pay attention to not only the researchers who came and presented to the class, but also the students. As I observed what was happening, I took notes and debriefed with Professor Silver and Professor Miozzo afterwards.

**Par## My advice week by week**

Notes from week 1;

The **first day of class**, I wrote:

* “I’m noticing how two students are falling asleep while watching the 40-minute video, and I’m close to falling asleep too…Perhaps pause it frequently for discussion questions next time, or choose a more entertaining video?”
* “I think it’s taking too long to go over the entire syllabus– people are dozing off. It’s not necessary to read every bullet point, especially because students have read through dozens of syllabuses in other classes. Next time, it would be best if only the important points were mentioned and students were told to read the syllabus ahead of class.”
	+ Hopefully by the next first-day, changes will be made.
* “There doesn’t seem to be a focus on Zoom students at all [during the hybrid teaching model]. Perhaps when discussing with the class, ask the Zoom students directly if they have anything to add and encourage them to unmute themselves rather than solely use the chat function.”
	+ In the next class, Professor Silver and Professor Miozo did exactly that– they spoke to the Zoom students directly and encouraged them to participate in the class by unmuting themselves.

**The next few classes**, I noticed that students were always asking questions about how the researcher knew that research was “for them”. Every time the scientist answered this question and told their story, the students seemed more attentive. The researchers became more human-like and personable and the students connected with them more. As a result, I suggested that every subsequent researcher should start their presentation off with a five-minute personal career trajectory. That way, they could connect with the students instantly and students could ask their career oriented questions at the beginning rather than in the middle of the science talk. Another suggestion I offered involved networking with the students. Initially, the researchers would be asked to leave the class five minutes early so the students could vote on how engaging the presentation was. I suggested that students leave the class along with the researchers because the benefit of networking far outweighed the extra five minutes spent on rating the talk. Lastly, I observed that students were zoning out when talks would proceed for a long time without any breaks. I suggested for Professor Silver to interrupt the researcher when this was happening and ask if students had any questions. This opened up discussions and encouraged the students to speak out and not feel uncomfortable interrupting the presenter.

To ensure that the students’ concerns were also taken into account to improve the course, I told students that they could directly email me their feedback and I would relay it to Professor Silver and Professor Miozzo anonymously, without giving away names. I also started sending out anonymous feedback forms every two weeks. Some of the student feedback we received included:

* “The presentations of a couple of guest speakers have gone over my head (particularly when they use very specific jargon or dive straight into tests that I have never heard of). While it is definitely on us to ask clarifying questions, I think that for some of the presenters it also would have been beneficial if they could be instructed to go into slightly less detail and instead focus on the bigger picture/what the takeaways should be. I thought that the presentation today, for example, was the perfect balance of detail, clear explanation, and big picture.”
* “I feel like it can be a little uncomfortable when we get called out by name to ask questions, sometimes the questions have already been asked in the talk so it makes it repetitive / puts people on the spot.”
* “I like when we are able to have a conversational style discussion with the presenter about their work.”

To address these concerns, Professor Silver stopped cold-calling students and printed out the questions they submitted for homework so that they could remember what they wanted to ask. Professor Silver also instructed the researchers to spend more time on the big picture and main takeaways of the research. If they didn’t, Professor Silver directly asked the researcher what the implications of their research are. Researchers were also asked to leave room at the end for discussion, which students responded positively to. Throughout the duration of the class, changes were implemented and student satisfaction increased, as evidenced by their positive anonymous reviews.

**Consequences of my coaching for students:**

After a while, the small changes that we implemented started to add up. Students were happy with the way things were going, and most importantly, they felt heard because their feedback was implemented. Looking back at my college career, I wish that my professors had an executive coach, or at least sent out anonymous feedback surveys every few weeks to get our opinion on how classes were going. Since students know that this practice isn’t commonplace, they resort to checking CULPA to avoid sealing their fate with a poorly run class. Even though most of the negative reviews on CULPA are easily fixable, they stay fairly consistent year after year and help students avoid notoriously difficult professors. While students check CULPA for professor reviews, professors use course evaluations as their main source of feedback. Despite the pressure put on students to submit course evaluations, the evaluations are flawed and don’t seem to work. When people do analyses of whether they are useful, the dominant factor in a good review is easy or high grades. Negative reviews typically come from students who get bad grades. A lot of course evaluations are not constructive. Many are not incentivized to write out actionable ways to improve the class, especially because the students won’t benefit from their suggestions. Course evaluations try to distill four months of class into one short form with vague questions. The course evaluations form has nothing actionable in it. Furthermore, the deadline to submit course evaluations every semester is during finals season and many students don’t have the time or desire to write out thoughtful suggestions.

**Consequences of my coaching for faculty**

From the professors point of view, receiving hateful reviews from students who received poor grades is depressing. Furthermore, half the people already don’t want to be in a required class and will write crappy things. If the goal is to make the class better and address things that are addressable, those feedback things don't seem to work. Research has also shown that course evaluations are flawed and even ineffective. For example, teaching evaluations are biased against women and faculty of color (Mitchell and Martin, 2018; Reid 2010). Racial minority faculty are evaluated more negatively than White faculty “in terms of overall quality, helpfulness, and clarity, but were rated higher on easiness” (Reid 2010). Boring found that male students discriminate in favor of male professors and students rate professors according to gender stereotypes (2017). Uttl et al found that student evaluation of teaching ratings and student learning are not related and students don’t learn more from professors with higher ratings (2017). Course evaluations need to be supplemented with a better model, one that Harry Brighouse describes.

**Summary and suggestions**: Executive coaching is a solution to addressing fixable criticism and improving the learning experience of students. Unlike course evaluations, executive coaching is a way of improving the student experience through actionable suggestions to the professor. Just like professors hired preceptors for classes during virtual learning, they should also hire executive coaches to improve their class. Executive coaches have an incentive to improve the class and they are able to comment if student feedback is genuine or not by observing every class and experiencing what the students experience. Most importantly, executive coaches will pick up on small ways the class can improve. For example, no one will remember that they fell asleep on the first day of class while watching a 40-minute video by the time course evaluations come around. However, an executive coach will make note of this observation and future classes won’t experience this problem.

Anastasia Velikovskaya