

ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

OPINION

THE DIGITALISED PUBLIC COURT

Behind private Facebook faculty review groups

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Before selecting a course, Sisyphus finds himself anxiously looking up the faculty initials to read the shared experiences of his fellow Sisyphuses to discover whether he might also have to carry the burden of the grades on a rocky hill or a smooth slate with rollerblades. The culture of Facebook groups for faculty reviews serves as a hideout for the students from the keen eyes of surveillance. Serving as a communal space, Facebook groups for faculty reviews informally assess faculty members, their desired courses, and assessment strategies.

In search of an easygoing section and faculty, the hunt for wishful thinking continues, as it is in human nature for us to find easier and shorter routes to decode the unknown for uncertainties.

10 years ago, I, too, stumbled upon a Facebook faculty review group, anxiously trying to decode my science electives as a humanities major. Being on the other side of the discourse, I find myself sympathetic to both parts of the academic ecosystem. Informal, student-friendly online spaces serve as an effective medium for first-year students to connect with students and the campus in a manner that seems more accessible to their "survival" throughout the semesters. While in the West, "Rate My Professor" is globally accessible, the practice of review groups in Bangladesh is more gatekept. Because universities carry an institutional hierarchy, students seek solace through these internet spaces in navigating this newfound individual agency.

The transitional evaluation cycle of each semester is almost loop-like. A teacher assesses students, and students later assess the faculty member in two ways: one in an official system organised by the university and another in social media groups. While it is a standard practice of confidentiality on university official portals, students tend to share their frustrations with the faculty members on online forums through anonymous posts. Most reviews entail a detailed list that can often come across "accusatory" without evidence and at times reads more personal than providing constructive criticism on pedagogical approaches.

With the lack of monitoring towards anonymous posts, this space creates an unsettling form of confirmation bias amongst the students. Reputation aside, such posts affect the grading and course design, along with the emotional anxieties that prevail for the faculty member. Between burnout followed by research deadlines and endless academic chores, an anonymous evaluation pining against a faculty member on social media inevitably impacts their teaching philosophy.

We must put into perspective how, amidst LLM-based writing and lack of enthusiasm towards literary discourses, the space for curiosity and open-ended conversations has been met with mostly symbolic cricket noises with occasional responses from the same set of one or two students, creating almost an unintentional echo chamber. Being viewed only in numbers and in the binary of "would and would not recommend", one can't help but feel a strange empathy towards fast food joints on review groups oscillating between three and five stars.

Of course, actionable feedback increases academic rigour, but the lack of accountability on anonymous reviews only causes further anxieties for both parties. That being said, it is almost urgent for universities to hold mandatory departmental town hall meetings between the students and the department. A recurring debate amongst students is that university-based teacher and course evaluations are ineffective. At a time when there is a rise in the number of student intakes in private universities, it is, without a doubt, important to have a space for open dialogue between departments and their students. As most evaluations are conducted at the end of the semester, it is also necessary for faculty members to offer anonymous surveys mid-semester to improve and effectively incorporate honest feedback from their classrooms.

Under the constant need to improvise a certain CGPA, it has almost become an archaic culture to pursue the end goal without preparing oneself for challenges. The rising discourse on the effectiveness of higher education providing any value other than climbing the corporate ladder is yet another journey Sisyphus must dread. The tension between the facilitator and the student is not merely dependent on the teacher-student relationship but a larger cultural shift in philosophy surrounding education. Whether one needs to attribute it to lifelong learning is hardly a conversation when the number of graduates is known to be highly dissatisfied with their degrees and their job availability. As a result, the need for a commendable grade requires fast-paced gratification, and without one, the rise of apprehension becomes more targeted towards a person rather than the overall systemic change. Academic camaraderie affects the way we often find difficulties in sustaining a community of trust and effective communication.

The challenge is neither the Facebook groups nor the students, but rather the question of what and how we channel our voices via digitalism. While faculty should seriously reflect on the evaluation comments, it is equally important for the students to create a space to communicate through critical thinking with the determination to not only focus on the teaching skills but also to improvise in curating a better academic culture for the student community.

Regardless of what material the boulder is, Sisyphus must move forward.

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