You May Have Been YouTubed

If you don’t like what RateMyProfessors.com has done for the image of professors, get ready for the YouTube effect. YouTube is the immensely popular Web site where people post videos of themselves and their friends hanging out, doing mock television shows, watching television, or just about anything you can imagine in front of a video camera of some sort.

Because YouTube is very popular with college students, it should probably come as no surprise that they are posting videos of course scenes on the Web site — and judging from interviews with the “stars” of these postings, the professors aren’t being asked or giving permission for the filming. Nonetheless, some of the videos feature professors’ names, disciplines and institutions.

Judith Thorpe, who just retired from teaching at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, had no idea that someone had filmed her class and [posted it, with her name](http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/09/06/youtube). Matt Kearly had no idea that what claims to be a biology lecture he gave this month at Auburn University had been posted. In other cases, professors aren’t named, but they are clearly visible and held up to ridicule — as in the video of a professor who is not a native speaker of English mispronouncing a word repeatedly, and made fun of by the student who posted the video. The word is “glucocorticoids” — not a word many non-experts would necessarily use with ease.

To be sure, many of the videos of campus scenes are from public events — protests, strikes, inaugurations. And many more are just silly and don’t invade anyone’s privacy. But many others involve filming courses, or staging events in courses. The boredom of lectures is a frequent theme, with audio of a professor talking while students look bored — or in the case of one student at Southern Methodist University, fight a losing battle to stay awake.

Hijinks are also common, in many cases interrupting classes. There’s the student who talks about honoring his great grandfather’s birthday by mooning a large lecture class. (Warning/spoiler: He goes through with it, so [the link](http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/09/06/youtube) may be more detail than you want.) Indiana University students revel at Halloween by interrupting classes as the Village People or portraying scenes from Ghostbusters.

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- [Can’t We All Just Get Along?](http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/09/06/youtube), July 20
To colleges and faculty members, the filming raises a variety of issues — with regard to their intellectual property and their dignity. Many colleges have been warning students about the images they post of themselves and their friends on YouTube, telling them that scenes of drinking and partying that seem amusing in a dormitory room may not go over well with potential employers. But colleges’ focus has been on telling students about the harm they may be doing to themselves, not their professors.

YouTube, whose officials did not respond to phone calls or e-mail messages about this story, posts a variety of warnings on its site about how people should post only those videos for which they have ownership rights, and that it will not post “hateful” videos, among other categories barred by its terms of service. There is also a form someone can fill out to object to a video posting of them, if they own the copyright.

Of course, people who were never asked if they could be filmed in class wouldn’t know that they had reason to check what is on the site.

Ann Springer, staff counsel for the American Association of University Professors, said that no professor should be filmed in class without granting permission. “The professor’s presentation in class is the professor’s intellectual property, and to submit it to a Web site is a violation of those rights — and a concern to the university and the professor,” she said. If a competing college started posting video of a professor’s courses, that would be a violation of rights, and the same legal principles apply, regardless of whether there is profit involved, Springer said.

She stressed that this wasn’t a free speech issue. “Students will always mock professors and there’s nothing you can do about that,” she said. But filming them without permission is the issue, whatever the use of the video.

In cases where taping of professors has become public — generally when the taping was politically motivated, not just for the purpose of mocking — universities have responded, she noted. In January, for example, a conservative group at the University of California at Los Angeles offered to pay students to tape professors, with the idea of exposing alleged ideological bias. The group backed down when the university and faculty groups raised intellectual property issues.

A spokesman for Indiana University said that the institution has received no complaints from professors about having their lectures filmed, but that university officials would consider it a violation of rules barring “disorderly conduct” or behavior that interferes with teaching. University policy gives professors the right to permit or reject any photography or taping in their classes.

Aside from the legal issues, there are also questions to some academics about how this YouTube trend affects professors generally, and whether anything can be done about it. Neil Gross, a sociologist at Harvard University, has surveyed public attitudes about faculty members, and found “soft support” for their work, and skepticism of some of their views. He said that in the mocking of professors on YouTube, he saw some strains of political disagreement with professors, along with “classic anti-intellectual themes, as well as the typical youthful distaste for authority.”

Several academic blogs, such as Yellow Dog and Digital Digs, have been discussing the implications as they relate to both professors and high school teachers (videos abound on YouTube of teachers losing their temper in class, for instance). Among the issues being raised are whether this form of expression — however upsetting to faculty members — is an example of students acting on their feelings and expressing
themselves, something composition instructors in particular tend to encourage.

The blog Metaspencer predicted that YouTube would have an impact that builds on the way RateMyProfessors.com has intimidated many faculty members — who hate the site and check to see how they are doing on it.

“When that site first went online, many seemed outraged that college level instructors would be publicly assessed in this way, outside of our already established course-evaluation-systems, and in many cases, professors have been graphically slandered and bodily objectified on that site. RateMyProfessors.com made our lives as college level instructors suddenly unstable and encouraged some of us to be just a bit more careful, if that’s the right word, when it comes to what we do in the classroom,” the blog said. “Videos of teachers on YouTube, however, magnify whatever paranoia RateMyProfessors.com may have generated. Were you videotaped in front of your class yesterday? Today? Yesterday? Will what you do with your students be edited and presented in a way that you feel misrepresents how you teach?”

— Scott Jaschik

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