One might believe from reading survey comments that the majority of students in the Fall 2003 Mathematical Reasoning class think I am a bad teacher. I know that the majority know differently, and I hope that some comments from me concerning their written opinions will help to explain why. Please refer to the numbered student comments on the appended sheet as I list my corresponding individual reactions below.

1. This first student has only good things to say about the course and its instruction. The phrase “suckiest suck that ever sucked a suck” is not meant to be derogatory, it is a statement of understanding the events and underlying philosophies that led to the events of May, 2003, as chronicled in my report “How I Cracked the System”. It’s actually used here as a statement of solidarity. The person referred to as Christina is a former student of mine in MATH 3305 that I recruited as a peer mentor for the course. What she learned about the material that she effectively passed on to those students that used her as a resource, she learned in my previous course.

2. This student again has only encouraging comments, and displays the self-confidence that I seek to instill in students and the understanding of the “bridge” nature of the MATH 3305 course that I take the opportunity to point out to those students whenever the opportunity arises.

3. I’m not sure myself whether the intent of this student is to honestly give the opinion that I, as a teacher, am the “suckiest suck that ever sucked a suck”, or not. It is absolutely true that I was aware of the level of student understanding of the material being discussed at any one time during the class meetings, and that some people were, as I would often say at those moments, “Sitting in a French church and listening to a Norwegian preacher.” As I carefully explained several times in the beginning of the term, this is one course were I set a highly demanding schedule of study, and that schedule is religiously followed in order to meet the stated goals of equipping students with the tools for the transition from the study of calculation toward the study of mathematics and exposing students to the broad range of basic concepts involved in the constructions of mathematics.

4. There is little doubt that this student thinks I am a bad teacher. But many of what seem to be negative comments really aren’t, and several other statements are simply false. The charges that I “did not give clear examples”, that I “did not teach in a manner that was easy to understand”, and that the “lectures were worthless” are all false characterizations of the course. They instead give self-testimony to this particular student’s dis-preparedness (meaning, here, false expectations due to previous course experiences), if I can coin a phrase, for the demands of a junior level university course and a lack of sufficient mathematical maturity. That “the student was left to study from the book” is absolutely true, which is not to say that I didn’t continually encourage students to visit me to
discuss the material. As I repeatedly stated to the class, I had structured the course in such a way as to give the best opportunity for students to achieve the main goal that I had set for the class, as stated in the syllabus—“The main goal of this course is to improve your ability to learn and study mathematics by reading mathematics.” Thus, this student is confirming that the structure I had set in place was effective. That the student felt “I had nowhere to go if I didn’t understand it” is falsified by the earlier comment that “The tutor was good” and is not a comment about my availability, rather one about this individual student’s unwillingness to take me up on my offers of help through office hours and any other times when I wasn’t otherwise busy. This unwillingness was likely reinforced by my policy of giving outside-of-class help only if the student demonstrated that he or she had first made an attempt to read the relevant sections of the book.

5. This student obviously wants to praise the course and make it even better. The comment about including more visual aides is constructive. I did have several, but I suppose even more would be better. It takes time to collect a large repertoire, and I’m satisfied that I’ve done what I could.

6. This student has jumped to a false conclusion based on a limited perspective. I cannot overstate the value I place on all that I have gotten from my involvement in MATH 3305, and I categorically deny that I want “OUT OF THE CLASSROOM!!” I have a happy disposition that is generally infectious within the classroom, but perhaps this student failed to appreciate this fact because of his/her personal performance issues. I conjecture that this student has taken comments by me and run amuck with them: I had said to the class, when asked about the courses I would be teaching, that I would not be teaching MATH 3305 the next term, and that this was a good thing since I felt I could use a break from my routine, having taught 3305 for several semesters in succession. Further, the student has formed an opinion of my teaching based on one course, the one course that I set such goals as I’ve already described. As for “He did not teach but 30 min on a section after we took the quiz on the section”, this student is showing no awareness that the bulk (possibly all, but 30 minutes, per 75 minute meeting) of my teaching was incorporated into the discussions of the solutions to the quizzes. It’s a sneaky technique, but I can’t imagine that anyone present wasn’t conscious of it.

7. This is obviously a good review of the course and instruction, showing an understanding of the main goals of the course and rendering the opinion that those goals were affected. The comment about the final exam not being a take-home is an opinion intended to improve the course. My decision to give an in-class, unaided, mandatory final exam is based on my perceived need in this course for a grade inflation correction tool and to induce students to synthesize the course materials.

8. This student thinks I have a singular style of teaching, the one I employ in 3305. This misunderstanding, along with a resentment of the demands of learning initiated by reading, leads this student to the slanders we see here.
9. This is another straightforward praise of the course and instruction, showing an understanding of the goals and an appreciation of the structures and approaches I utilized to achieve those goals.

10. I believe this is a comment about my policy in 3305 to hold the students responsible for all the material in the chapters studied, regardless of whether or not a particular nuance is discussed during class meetings. A university student should expect no less from an upper-division mathematics course at a university. From my point of view, I’m giving these students respect as grown-up people by imposing such policies. I know that some have appreciated that fact.

11. This student is talking about one particular (and familiar to anyone who has taught for some time) incident where a student asked, upon my prompting for questions at the end of the class meeting, for me to give the solution to an exercise. I did what I could in the remaining time, made a quip about the problem being too hard for me, which received the laughter that I sought and told me that they had caught the absurdity of my words, and offered to continue during my office hours which were scheduled for immediately after class. Hence the comment, “I felt that on some of the harder stuff that the professor didn’t know how to finish …”, etc. It should be noted also that the exercise was not explicitly assigned, is on the fringes of the main concepts of the course, and I did address it during a later class meeting. I think I’ve spoken to the other comments of this person. One wonders who this student thinks gave the “S.I.” the training to be the effective peer tutor she was for the course? And it must have been fairies that constructed, published and maintained on a class website all the resources that I know students used every day, including fully stocked archive of my previous 3305 classes, continually updated scores, statistics and grades and 12 quizzes, 5 midterm exams, and a final exam, all replete with solutions.

12. Most of the many slanders by this person are addressed above. I can conjecture why this and other students “had a really hard time following his lectures in class”, but I can guarantee it wasn’t “because they really did not cover the material or answer questions we had.” It is likely that they, the lectures, just didn’t cover the material in a less demanding fashion and that, without having studied the book, my answers, which were afforded to each and every student question that was posed to me, made little sense to this person. That “taking this class with him has made me doubt myself and why I am going into math as a major” is one of two polarizing effects that I intend and that are the inevitable attributes of such a bridge course as this, the other being amply demonstrate by another, perhaps just as large, portion of former students of mine in 3305, including Christina, the peer of this person, mentioned as doing tutoring sessions.