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CONFESSIONS OF A GRADE INFLATER

David Bernstein

I contribute willingly to grade inflation. It's not that I dump A's in great mounds into the economy. Rather, I do it by exerting subtle inflationary pressures on the value of an A. I am more like the butcher's forefinger resting on the edge of the scale. There is risk in this calling. I can feel the chill along my spine and the tiny feet of fear scurrying across my stomach walls when the grade point average for each course in the University is published. A quick skimming of the list in my department and division tells me that I am within the penumbra of respectability.

For much of my teaching career, grading has posed a gut-wrenching dilemma for me. Grades are the traditional incentive for motivating students to do their work; I teach within that tradition. On the other hand, I dislike the adversarial relationship that develops between students and me over the matter of grades.

Some would claim that grades are necessary to motivate students to do excellent work. I think that this claim is wrong. There is a destructive element in the grading system. Students begin to identify their grades as personal attributes. They become known to others and to themselves as 3.8's, 2.5's, 1.8's. Grades thus become like their complexions: a source of constant worry and shame. Shaming students has a number of untoward consequences, but I am troubled most by the way shame and other negative emotions interfere with the learning processes.

My search over the years has been for an approach to evaluation that has the virtue of motivating students to work, but that does not produce disabling shame. To show how evaluation in my method is different, I need to distinguish between two aspects of evaluation. I will use the terms "informational" and "motivational," borrowed from the learning theorist, Albert Bandura, to refer to these two aspects. Informational evaluation is a critique of a thing (say, a human product or response) against a set of criteria. The amount of detail in an informational evaluation report can vary from a simple response (e.g., "right" or "wrong") to an elaborate critical book review. Motivational evaluation is a statement of the consequence of being evaluated in a particular way. "You win the Nobel prize for Medicine" is a motivational evaluation. So is giving an "A" or an "F." Saying that a person's body of work wins the Nobel Prize tells you that Society thinks highly of the work. The person who wins the prize is honored, but she doesn't learn about the explanatory power or theoretical richness of her work. That informational evaluation occurred typically over years and years earlier in dialogue with her colleagues—in seminars, colloquia, conferences, and responses to published work.

In most cases, grading a student's work mixes the informational and motivational aspects of evaluation. I see a major problem with mixing them. The motivational aspect carries the sanction of society, in the form of either reward or punishment. Both reward and punishment are intricate processes, but I think that the overriding

experiences for students surrounding the grading process are the emotions of fear and shame. Their sense of integrity is threatened by being graded for their intellectual worth. Their response to this threat is a self-protective hiding. In the academic environment, students hide their ignorance and their ideas that diverge from the normative ones, which are established collectively by the professors and other students. Such "hiding" can take the form of pleasing the professor, a form captured by the familiar student question, "Is that what you want?" The question is a deep and poignant acknowledgment that they are treading unfamiliar territory where the professor is a seasoned and wily tracker. Nevertheless, their question has a plaintive tone. They fear that a misplaced footfall will get them into a snapping trap. They protect themselves and, in a conspiracy of shame, they protect their peers as well. Every teacher knows how difficult it is to get students to sustain a critical evaluation of their peers' ideas, whether in class discussion or in a workshop devoted to critiquing the first drafts of fellow students' papers.

Sometimes, students defend themselves by attacking our methods of assessment, our fairness, or intentions. I feel nauseous, as Woody Allen would say, when I compute the ratio of conversations with students about grades to conversations with them about ideas. And that is the major point for me. When grades become an instrument for measuring ideas, the ideas shrink back from the calipers.

Whether the students hide in shame or fight in anger, their response confutes the twin moral imperatives of critical rationality, put forth by the philosopher Karl Popper. The first imperative is to open one's thinking to critical examination by making bold conjectures about the problem under discussion. The second imperative is to subject the conjectures of others to critical examination. Popper was a tough bird; his prescription is too strong a physic for most of our students. Henry Perkinson, a philosopher of education softens Popper's medicine by adding a humanistic ingredient. He proposes that we create "educative environments," where it is safe to put one's ideas forth for examination.

I have created my own version of an educative environment by separating the grading process from the process of critical evaluation of intellectual work. In my teaching, students' work takes the form of regular (almost daily) writing assignments, formal papers, class discussion, and presentations to the class. There are no exams. I do grade student work. However, the criteria are sincerity of effort and timeliness. Students who pay careful attention to what the assignment requires, who read the assigned material thoroughly, and who write at reasonable length about relevant ideas usually receive all the points available for the assignment. Their responses do not have to contain what I consider the correct interpretation. In fact, many assigned questions and problems do not permit a clearly favored answer. They require students to explain a demonstrated phenomenon, argue a position on a controversial issue, or apply a theoretical notion to their own experience. Even when there is a clearly preferred answer, I do not award degrees of credit based on the completeness of their analysis or the brilliance of their presentation. There is a wide range of formally creditable work.

I am not saying that the evaluation of intellectual work has no important place in education. Quite the contrary. I believe that evaluation is a natural and irrepressible act. It happens each time we put a morsel of food into our mouths or move our eyes across a vista. I believe, along with Popper, that it is essential for the growth of our thinking ("knowledge," he would say). I evaluate my students' papers. I conduct writing workshops where students' papers are critiqued by their peers. Many of the shorter written assignments become the basis for class discussions. Students read their responses to the class. The class responds. The reader responds in turn. Dialogue is the natural stuff of human evaluation. It is powerful and, I think, sufficient to constitute critical rationality. And I have very few discussions with students about grading.

Along the way, students generally receive high grades. The ones who do not work receive low, even failing grades. Their failures are mainly failures to respond. They do not fail because their ideas failed to measure up to preordained criteria of intellectual quality. If my "solution" to the dilemma of grading kills the sacred cow GPA, I am a willing butcher.