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Position Paper on Grading

Thomas M. Driscoll

The purpose of this paper is to justify why, after fifteen years of grading, I now decide to rid myself of this plague that threatens to label me not as a living person, but as a letter or as a number.

The grading game has kept me from my real goal of education, which is the development of myself as a person. This person I wish to develop is not a mere cog in a wheel, but instead, a vibrant, interested, and curious learner. This is not possible for me in a system that relies on rewarding me by the standards it has set. At this time the grade point is working to my advantage because I am scoring well within the confines of it. Until very recently, I was concerned not with how much in a certain content area I was going to learn, but with how many facts and which facts I needed to know to get a high grade. In all my years of schooling, the first questions put to an instructor at the beginning of the semester were how many tests or what kind of tests or what do we have to do? The question of what will we learn or how will we learn or why will we learn were of little importance and seldom asked. So the result was that I, along with many students, often desired or demanded the best possible grade for the least amount of work. I became a hustler. I became a prostitute. My needs and my interests became secondary to the demands of the teacher. What the teacher asked for, the teacher got. Then I would be rewarded with a letter grade for doing exactly what the teacher wished. If a teacher liked short, concise sentences, that is what I gave him or her, even though that was not my style.

The main reason for my dislike of grading is that it creates and promotes unwarranted competition, a competition so lethal that it divides students into two

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warring camps--the dummies and the smarties. There are two types of competition. The first is when people choose to compete according to standards they, themselves, set and regard as important. Theoretically, in this type of competition everyone can be a winner. And there is a real sense of accomplishment and jubilation in being a winner. On the other hand, being a loser is not degrading because there always is a real opportunity to be a winner and one can learn from failing. The second type of competition is when people are forced to compete against one another according to standards imposed upon them. In this competition, for every winner there is a loser. I think one of the few good things left in our society is a feeling that within each of us there is a strong compassion for one another. With this in mind, there is a little joy in being a winner in this type of competition. And for the loser, there is an unwarranted sense of humiliation. Why, indeed, even think about competing for knowledge? There is enough to go around; it's not a limited quantity.

Many would say it is necessary for an individual to become acquainted with and come to accept losing and failing; that is what our society is all about--winners and losers. Though I agree this dreadful aspect of our society does exist, I strongly feel there are more meaningful and better ways to experience failure. In the grading game all players are losers, because the inner drive for new knowledge outside of the curriculum is seldom rewarded by grades, so there is little point in pursuing it. Knowledge, rather than being the goal of an exciting and extensive search, has become something to be disseminated; discrete packets of information to be greedily acquired, seldom shared, returned verbatim on an exam and then forgotten.

Piaget believes that the two goals of education should be, "To create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply what other generations have already done; men who are creative, inventive, and are discoverers. The second goal is to form minds which can be critical and not accept everything they are offered."

The present grading system, which seems to reward only what is in a relatively defined curriculum, leaves little room for the kinds of goals Piaget suggests.

Another point of conflict for me is that grades become inextricably tied to a person's sense of his or her own worth--the "what letter I am, I am" syndrome. This surely is destructive and creates for individuals feelings of inferiority, superiority or vagueness. At this time I should like to relate two brief stories about how grading has affected my life for many years. Only now can I begin to understand how I was almost doomed by grades. When I was in third grade we would spend Friday afternoons doing art projects. As I never had any healthy encouragement for creativity at home or school I was not, I suppose, a very good artist by others' standards. Throughout that year, I received failing marks for my art work. My only logical assumption was that perhaps I should not do any art because then I would not fail. Failing for a third grade child creates a very internalized sense of inadequacy. For over fifteen years I have stayed away from any form of artistic effort because I knew I was a failure. For years I have had to rely on others to provide me with their art and their creativity. One of the reasons I feel television has become so important in our society is because many people, like myself, must rely on others' abilities of creativity to provide not only entertainment, but also, beauty in our lives, because we have been labeled failures. I would like to say this is a very dangerous and unhealthy setting for modern society.

The other story relates to a time when I was in eighth grade. Every Friday our class would have to take an assortment of tests from different content areas. When we returned to school the following Monday, the seating arrangement would be determined by the averages of these tests. The smart students, with the higher averages, sat in the front of the classroom. The dumb students, with the lower averages, sat in the rear of the classroom. The creation of all sorts of complexes grew rapidly in that environment. I was

always one of the "poorer" students in that class, and I left that school with a great sense of inadequacy which I retained for many years. The point I am trying to make is that we destroy the love of learning in students by compelling them to work for petty and destructive rewards. We do this so that the student will have the satisfaction of knowing that he or she is better or smarter than someone else. The result is that students never develop their own values, their own likes and dislikes, only those which are forced upon them every year, by every new teacher.

With regard to my opposition to the grading game, I should like to bring up two more brief points. Grading, as we proceed with it today, prolongs the dependency that is naturally within us. This is true because we seem willing to work only when we know we will be rewarded. At some point in time an individual must depart from this dependency if that individual wishes to be a whole person. I picture each of us as a bubble; that bubble never assumes its true shape until it breaks away from the clustered bubbles. An individual never needing the petty rewards of grading has in fact, assumed his or her true shape. His reward is internal, and surely more meaningful.

My final point is this: as I stated earlier, my main objection to grading is that it promotes unwarranted competition. Like it or not, the unlimited growth in the industrial society is coming to an end. We are approaching the limits. Shortages of resources are becoming an accepted fact in our lives. There are two ways to deal with these shortages. The first way is to compete for them. The strong, aggressive, bold people will walk away with what they want. The weak, timid, and modest people will go without. Last winter as I stood and watched lines of cars waiting for gasoline in Boston, I was frightened and shocked by people's behavior as they competed for gasoline. If such competition becomes necessary in food lines, the unruliness and insensitivity of people will surely cause the end of our society. The other way of dealing with shortages is through cooperation. If we hope to retain semblances of a sane society, we must begin to

share. We must begin to cooperate. Grading patterns in schools are related. Grading postpones, and, in some cases, cancels out the notion of cooperation, for indeed it does promote competition.

However, with all this in mind, I feel a strong need for some meaningful process of evaluation. For most of us many of the actions and thoughts we perform are directed toward achieving or accomplishing some goal. Because of this, we must often take time to evaluate as to whether or not our actions and thoughts are purposeful with regard to these goals. Appraising our own or another's movements is indeed a very natural function in our lives. What we must do is try to develop some evaluation process that will induce growth at each step. As I have pointed out, grades, in my opinion, do not serve this purpose. Once grades are put aside, it is possible to get down to the business of helping and teaching, in terms of understanding and reasoning. The process I suggest that will meet these needs is a structure based on "credit received" or "no credit," the result an honest description of a student's performance by both the teacher and the student.

At this point, let me take some time to explain what I believe the foregoing can foster. It is a process which I have personally found helpful. At the beginning of a semester or school year, the teacher and student together decide on the criteria for receiving credit. Any student who meets this criteria receives credit, any student who does not meet this criteria does not receive credit. It is important for all to realize that no credit does not connote failing work. Some of the advantages of this process are that the student feels more relaxed about his or her learning. The student is less anxious and less competitive. This surely promotes a better learning environment. Students are not pinned to a narrow curriculum, and time is allowed for exploring other areas of knowledge. Finally, I feel students may do more intensive study because there are no grading pressures. I believe that this proposed process will minimize apprehension, minimize competition, minimize the hoarding of knowledge,

and eliminate cheating, apple-polishing and a narrow curriculum; I feel that it is also necessary to provoke growth. The best way I see for this is a written evaluation by both teacher and student. The teacher and student should begin this process by writing a clear statement of objectives including how these objectives will be measured. Upon completion of this, both teacher and student should have a copy of this statement in which they both write a meaningful, honest communication to each other. This communication should include the consideration of the student's strengths, weaknesses, and possible directions for improvement. The student's communication, which is a self-evaluation, should also include how his or her own learning goals were met. Time should then be set aside for the teacher and student to read each other's evaluation and engage in a discussion based on this sharing of perceptions.

As I have stated previously, evaluation is a natural process which we all engage in. With this in mind, we should exercise it so that it encourages growth. I feel the process outlined briefly above does so.