

Reverse Grading

MAX S. MARSHALL

STUDENTS once appraised professors and courses at a normal griping level; today, however, such appraisals have become formal systems. This development will, in the writer's opinion, quite likely bring neither progress nor peace. Actually, teachers began the trouble themselves, by arranging students in relative orders of alleged merit. Since no two teachers have the same opinions about students' abilities and accomplishments, the differences among the resultant rankings are great.¹

By rating their teachers, students double the barrier which grading practices started. Each group now forces the other to try to beat the system. Students once deliberately tried to please the professor; now professors aim to please the students. Stress on understanding the subject at hand is often left to inclination and spare time. Tolerance of excuses, ease on examinations, and other evident concessions made by teachers already seem to show a marked increase.

The eternal grinding out of appraisals in both directions is bound to topple. Whether riots, ruin, or reason will prevail remains to be seen. The evils in an atmosphere of constant grading are apparent to students; yet,

¹ M. S. Marshall. *Teaching Without Grades*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1968. 156 pp. (Paperback, 1970.)

when the front is reversed, they demand the right to "grade" the professors. There are several reasons for this.

By reciprocal justice, for example, if one side grades, so can the other. The two wrongs, however, instead of neutralizing each other, are compounded. The principles and errors are parallel, and consequences are as serious. The student may seek entrance to a graduate school; the professor may seek popularity in the right places and promotion.

A second reason for the students' urge to criticize lies in their natural self-assurance. Today, if they consider the first few weeks of a course a bore, the teacher and subject never get a chance.

Youth's resentment of authority is another factor. Intrinsic in this resentment is a significant desire for retaliation. Teachers always please some students and irritate others.

A fourth reason for students' rating their mentors is that they are now urged to do so. To ask an inexperienced student for his opinion is a flattering and appealing diversion, and administrative approval is always welcome.

Fifth, students may rationalize that appraisal is a moral duty. Occasionally a new idea is effective, of course, but taking criticisms literally, though commonly done, is

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exceedingly hazardous. However, the relief students feel when they have a chance to speak out may be mildly beneficial.

The Urge To Criticize

The urge to criticize is strong. A senior medical student once suggested to his classmates that a survey of their courses and teachers would be a good legacy to leave behind them. As seniors and as interns, the class produced a massive volume of data and distributed it to those involved. From students together in classes for four years, with seven years of college and one year beyond, one might expect optimum results. The results, however, were notably dubious. Though it was easy to see how the students got their impressions, they had had no teaching experience and they ignored the instructional problems a teacher often has to face.

In this instance, the criticisms gave the victims no chance to present reasons. Professors whose "interest in students" actually was negligible were rated well above those

with a genuine interest, and so on throughout. Just as some professors post their class grades, the students distributed this report openly, enabling each professor to think twice about each of his colleagues. Yet if the original comments each student made about one teacher had been given to that teacher, a little benefit might have accrued. Instead, the faculty got a mildly annoying jolt, and administrators no doubt kept a copy for support if and when they happened to agree with the data.

Asked why averages were used, one student-intern replied: "The data have to be *compiled*. A student who writes 'Bunk!' for your course says nothing." Yet such a student is just the one the teacher needs to know, for the teacher is stifling his education.

One professor who taught seniors presented them at his last class with a questionnaire covering all courses and professors, the answers to come to him. This professor, of course, had the basis for blackmail, with no good accomplished.

A dean once kept a private file of the

students' critiques in his desk to use as he pleased. Staff members could get the dean's interpretations, but only he saw the evidence. Whether he gave undue emphasis or pulled his punches, no one could tell. Administrators, chairmen, and reviewing committees on promotions naturally enjoy having "information" to use as they please. Often, however, students' impressions do not constitute factual information. They allow varied interpretations which carry the biases of both writers and users.

Today students publish and sell critiques of courses and professors. Denying privacy, the procedure simulates libel, blackmail, fraud, tapped telephones, or fingerprinting, against each of which legal protection exists. The temptation to appraise is strong, whether incompetently, needlessly, unfairly, or relentlessly. Rules today are sometimes designed not by reason but to appease students who, like their mentors, reach for all the power they can garner. Faculties promise to make students' appraisals part of each professor's permanent record, meanwhile trying to erase blots from students' permanent records.

Teachers defend their own practices with flimsy excuses: colleges demand grades; some students are "better" than others; students may want to transfer; how else can they get into graduate school? Of reverse grading, teachers say: students are perceptive about teachers; students are sincere; we can always detect bias; and so on. These phrases are routine evasions used to justify expedient acts. We might instead admit that they are pernicious. The diehards insist that some good comes out of reverse grading. Even fortune-tellers are right some of the time. "Correct" appraisals are only those with which one agrees.

Every professor has unfortunate personal characteristics, gaps in his knowledge and experience, and faults in his courses. Certain of these are apparent to students and are thus repetitiously advertised by each class. Exposing faults may seem plausible, but let us look at that again. Except for occasional arrogant members, professors know most of their own faults and those in their courses.

To overcome reachable faults, adjusting to the rest, is a constant task. When known faults are thrust repetitiously upon a teacher, the effect is that felt by a student who finds C, the general label of "mediocre," on his work every day. The criticisms the professor gets are personal and are labeled: he talks too rapidly, uses too much jargon, commits this sin and that fault. Even praise will disturb a balanced outlook. Professors worth their salt find praise pleasant, but they wonder how so many faults could be missed. Onlookers wonder still more.

If, while breathing the atmosphere of carping criticism which now goes both ways between teachers and students, we are obligated to find some benefit, it is in the occasional discovery of a specific remediable fault which the person concerned had not recognized. Repeated allusion to known faults is nagging. It can help to let a teacher, and *no one else*, know about an unrecognized remediable fault, personal or in his courses. To know which faults so qualify takes discretion. If, to make such a discovery, a teacher must face a collection of alleged faults publicly with every poll, he deserves a chance to vindicate himself.

To the teacher who tries to work on faults of person and courses, deliberate and regular criticism changes the campus from a sanctuary of learning to a place of nagging and defense. Teachers and students need neither to fight nor to fawn over each other. When both groups concentrate on the subject matter, and the task of education, the critical atmosphere disappears. To try to improve one's self and one's work is better than trying to improve the other fellow's.

Did it never occur to the students, who defy all history with their claims to know a "good" teacher when they see one, how easy it is to blame the teacher when one does not understand? It is every bit as easy as it is for professors to blame students for not understanding what was, of course, "perfectly clear"!

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