

The Grading Syndrome

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FRANKLY, I have never outgrown the grading syndrome of my childhood days—the cold clamminess of my hands, the muscles of my jaw tensed so tightly they would hurt, my leg tapping to the beat of an ominous drum while I waited for the return of my paper or the distribution of report cards. I was a good student and grades mattered. When I did well it seemed as though everyone loved me; and when I sometimes did poorly, it burned deep inside more than I can tell now.

I really did not know how severely the syndrome still afflicted me until I returned to graduate studies several years ago. My mannerisms had, of course, become more sophisticated but the feelings had remained essentially unchanged. My logic and everything I believed in told me that I was studying for my own sake—for what I could take away with me—but a “C” I received upset and hurt me to an extent I would not have predicted. I had picked up the syndrome long before the onset of my abstract reasoning powers. It was buried in me at gut level

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and no amount of reasoning could do away with its effects.

What shocked me most when I returned to studenthood was my dependency on the threat of grades to get me going in my studies even when I was enjoying the course. Invariably, it was the midterm that got me to do the kind of studying I should have done from the beginning—the kind of studying that would have enriched the course and made it more worthwhile for me. I knew it and so did most of my companions who crammed with me until our minds would boggle.

Upon reflection, I really do not know why I was so shocked for I had not under-

taken a serious investigative study of a topic since my undergraduate days when grades had served the purpose of getting me "on the road." I had, of course, read newspapers and a few books here and there, but nothing that required a sustained effort. While I was not uninformed, I was informed in a haphazard and inconclusive fashion.

"I Needed the Threat of Grades"

In a vague way, I was aware of my functional dependency on grades. It was, however, only when I had a course conducted by a professor who guaranteed everyone an "A" that I fully understood the gravity of the grading syndrome. It was an excellent course but I had signed up for two other classes, both of which were conducted by professors who brandished "C's" as swords were brandished in old Errol Flynn movies. I read and studied like crazy for those two very ordinary courses while I was flagrantly slipshod in the course that guaranteed me an "A." I loathe to admit it, but I researched and dealt with much more data for the two very ordinary courses that held the fear of grades over me than in the course that encouraged me to follow the dictates of my intellectual interests. The latter was an exciting course that filled my mind with ideas, but somehow I never seemed to get around to doing the research that might have expanded the ideas into a conceptual and creative control of the topic. I needed the threat of grades.

I know there must be many who have never succumbed to the grading syndrome, but I did not meet any of them while I was enrolled in school. Instead, I have known all too many so-called "successful" students holding master's degrees and doctorates who were no better off than I. We are well adapted to the scholastic world, but we are intellectual cripples needing a dose of grades to get us started on any serious study we undertake.

I cannot help but ask why this was done to me. Why was I taken at a most tender age, long before I was able to judge the value of grades or their true relationship to life,

and made to feel that they were the reason for my studying, the reward for all my efforts, the purpose for any intellectual endeavor? I know this was not the intention, but it is the outcome. Rather than a self-motivated society of intellectually active men and women, we have a grade-motivated society of scholastically oriented men and women who only infrequently initiate any in-depth investigation into the facts of their lives.

I have heard and, to some extent, accept that the school needs to evaluate my progress. But I cannot accept that that evaluation needs to be translated into grades that are permanently recorded, supposedly for the benefit of the community, universities, and business. I cannot accept that my performance needs to be continually compared and classified so that I will know where I stand according to a massive collection of national norms, so that colleges and businesses will know how acceptable I am to them. I cannot accept that grades have come to signify the reward of studies to the successful, punishment and the elimination from intellectual endeavors to the rest.

Somehow, the whole grading game seems a dirty trick to play on youngsters, telling them, as well as everyone in their world, how well they are doing when they do not even know themselves what they are doing or why they should be doing it. All young people want is a dose of approval and if doing the Irish Jig will get them a gold star that is what they will do. The goal of developing their creative and intellectual capacities so that these will be an intimate part of their ongoing adult lives could not be further from their minds. It is a goal that must develop through the years and cannot be estimated with the gross icons of our present "ABC" grading system. Nor can its achievement be encouraged by telling a youngster that he or she is not doing as well as the rest of the class. "Creativity," "Inquiry," "Discovery,"—how can these occur if the student is ashamed, or hurt, or just afraid of what will happen when he or she brings home a poor grade? And what exactly would an "A" mean in "Discovery" anyway?

What Is the Primary Goal?

Schools are institutions of learning in which the encouragement of self-initiating intellectual and creative behavior on the part of every student ought to be the primary goal. Grades, as we know them and as they are used for the certification of learning, interfere significantly with this goal. Surely, business and universities could administer their own sets of tests for purposes of hiring or admission. Surely, the schools themselves could achieve fuller, more sensitive evaluations of students' progress than is now possible via the grading system. We have yielded for so long to the bureaucrat's zeal for the quantification and easy management of evaluation (packaged proof, if you will, that the kids are learning), that we have left our questions regarding the value of such

learning as can be measured by an "A" or "D" be shuffled under the accountability carpet. Does anyone care whether Johnny knows all the parts of an amoeba or even of a missile? Does anyone care whether Johnny cares?

The mistake has been to equate grading with evaluation for the convenience of administrators as well as tradition. The present system of grading is indeed a form of evaluation, but it is a narrow one that severely limits not only the conception of evaluation but of grading itself. It is based on peer comparisons which may take a variety of forms from class averages to national norms. It is a system of evaluation which tells us how well Johnny is doing when compared to others but very little about the actual state of his knowledge in a subject (How many

In elementary school, grades set the stage for early failure in school. Students who leave elementary school a failure (which in many cases can be directly related to the grading system) will often never succeed again in school.
—William Glasser, *Schools Without Failure*.



"A" students in French speak French?), or about his intellectual development given his particular talents, interests, and background.

Assuming that we must continue grading, there are other forms of grading that would significantly modify the nature of the feedback we give youngsters. At least three have been discussed for the public schools though infrequently adopted. These are *mastery grading*, *contract grading*, and *self-assigned grading*. *Mastery grading* embodies the view that the length of time it takes a youngster to learn some given content or

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process is insignificant and ought not be considered in assigning a grade. However long it takes Johnny to learn, he ought to receive an "A" for his achievement. *Contract grading* is based on the development of an agreement between the student and teacher regarding what the student will do for a given grade. Usually, he will have to commit himself to more activities if he wants a higher grade. He sometimes participates in establishing the criteria by which he will be graded but this is most often not the case. *Self-assigned grading* allows the student to determine his own grade and is sometimes used, especially by beginning teachers, as a way of getting around the anxieties caused by comparative grading. It is usually a dismal failure. The problem is not in the concept of encouraging the student to evaluate his own performance, but rather that in all his previous school experience he has never really analyzed and developed for himself the

criteria which will signify to him his success in an undertaking. Furthermore, the student is as fuzzy as most teachers when trying to relate letter grades to the effort he puts forth or to the experiences he has gained that cannot fit into a fill-in.

Freedom from Peer Comparison

Mastery grading, contract grading, and self-assigned grading are all efforts to free the youngster's school experiences from imposed and unproductive peer comparison. But why must we cling to grading—to scholastic icons that have lost any real meaning but remain as rewards and punishments for the young both in their present and in their future? Criteria truly significant to the development of an intellectually independent and creative individual cannot be reduced to simple grades. The moment a grade is forced upon such criteria, they are reduced to lesser, though more manageable objectives. The revision of grading may improve the quality of the evaluative feedback achieved, but it cannot alleviate the exaggerated dependency upon grades foisted on pupils when they are too young to defend themselves. Nor can it overcome the trivialization of complex, humanistic goals inherent in letter grading regardless of its format.

Why are we clinging to grades? Wouldn't conferences with our students and their parents be better vehicles of evaluation than grades? Wouldn't encouraging our students to develop their own criteria of study and their own modes of evaluation be more beneficial to their future than an "A" in French or physics or whatever? Wouldn't it be more beneficial to everyone to finally admit that the really important goals of education cannot be summed up in a few letters or percentages, however convenient these may be bureaucratically? Isn't it time we stopped afflicting the intellectual development of our young with the grading syndrome? This is a plea for alternatives to grading.

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