

Grading and Growth: Answer to an Editorial

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"Why is Professor Longstreet so perplexed by grades? . . . I find that letter grades—or an equivalent rating system—serve a natural, logical, and perfectly defensible function in evaluation and reporting."

WILMA LONGSTREET claims in "The Grading Syndrome" that letter grades impede the intellectual development of students in school, and she pleads in strongly personal terms for alternatives to letter grades in schools. Imagine my surprise to find that Professor Longstreet's own academic experiences actually make a strong case for quite the opposite argument: Letter grades are effective in *promoting* intellectual development! Let me explain.

Often in her essay, Professor Longstreet acknowledges the power of grades as constructive motivators in her own life. For example, her desire for good grades at mid-term in a course finally forced her to engage in the kind of studying that she should have done from the beginning of the course, "the kind of studying that would have enriched

the course and made it more worthwhile. . . ." She is chagrined today to find that she was so highly motivated by grades yesterday, yet while she resents grades, she takes pains to recount what would have been lost to her had she not been motivated by grades.

Why is Professor Longstreet so perplexed by grades? When all is said and done, I really do not know. Although I too grow weary of the American student's obsession with letter grades, I find that letter grades—or an equivalent rating system—serve a natural, logical, and perfectly defensible function in evaluation and reporting. For example, I have found that parent and student conferences, cited by Professor Longstreet as an "alternative" to letter grades, only postpone the parent's inevitable question to me the teacher, "Well now, all this talk is fine, but how is my Johnny doing?" The implied tag is "Give it to me straight without all your educational jargon," and so my answer must inevitably be (a)

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“Great,” (b) “Good,” (c) “OK,” or (d) “Frankly, not so hot.” Like any good teacher, I try to translate my rating into the most appropriate language possible, but no matter how many words I use, anyone could interpret my report as A, B, C, and so forth.

Even student self-evaluation, another “alternative” to letter grades, turns out to be a form of letter grading, disguised ever so slightly by language. To discern and report their progress to themselves and to me, students use some form of (A) Great, (B) Good, and so it goes. How does *anyone* evaluate anyone else? (A) Great, (B) Good, and so forth.

What Are Letter Grade Standards?

Letter grades are nothing more than a shorthand device to communicate to a student the teacher’s biases, goals, performance expectations, standards, call them what you will. Some people decry letter grade standards as “subjective.” Precisely the case: *All* performance standards are subjective. The cry should not be whether a teacher’s standards are subjective but whether they are *appropriate*, for even in working under the burden of standards dictated by the State, a teacher may choose to apply those standards or not to any student at a particular moment.

The proper question is not whether letter grade standards are subjective but whether there *are* such standards. Students need standards—for judging themselves if for no other reason. Without such standards, I find my students wandering aimlessly through even the most attractive and stimulating curriculum, wondering first if what they are doing is meaningful in the real world and wondering next if what they are doing is “good” in *somebody’s* view, particularly mine.

My students look to me for judgments on their performance, and when I fail to provide such feedback to them, they feel cheated. They may not like my judgments, but they demand them nevertheless, and *the more that students care about what they are doing, the more they seem to care about how*

other people judge them. In the absence of other means, my convenient shorthand of letter grades seems adequate to satisfy my students’ curiosity about how I perceive their performance. When other means are available and appropriate, I use them too; perhaps I use a pat on the back for discovery, or “how about that” for creativity, or “hey, that’s neat” for imagination. But the major and most critical question in American education today is not whether an A is given for discovery, as opposed to a pat on the back, but whether *any* meaningful reward is given for discovery.

The era of universal pass-fail grades has probably faded with the 1960’s. One reason is that students have received little feedback, little reward from the P-F system; another reason is that teachers have been left with little means in P-F to tell students what needs to be told. Certainly employers and college admissions officers are unimpressed with the P-F system, for it tells them next to nothing about the academic prowess of their student applicants. P-F grading does remain in places where absolute standards are not re-



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quired or helpful, yet the lack of enthusiasm for P-F tells us that traditional grades are more *fundamentally* important to teachers and students than the critics have led us to believe.

Now what of letter grades in reports to the outside world, that is, to employers and graduate schools? The claim that "grades do not tell the whole story about a person" is trite: No sensible person would seriously assert such power in grades. Most sensible people do know, however, that the best predictor of how well a person will perform on a job tomorrow is the quality of the job he or she is doing today, particularly if the two jobs are comparable. So grade reports, intelligently used, can serve a useful purpose. I am not condoning the use of school letter grades to set car insurance rates or to screen for military service, but if we did not have a reporting system with letter grades, we probably would not hesitate long to invent one with numbers.

Needed: A Panoply of Alternatives

What we want in American education today is not an alternative to replace letter grades, as Professor Longstreet implies, but rather a *panoply of alternatives to supplement letter grades*. We need to understand a full range of rewards that extend from the teacher's nod through various types of public acclaim—including letter grades—to a student's quiet and private self-satisfaction, each reward carrying its own degree of appropriateness for each student personality and place. Professor Longstreet knows what this panoply means; the most poignant, albeit confusing, moment of her essay occurs when she observes that the grading system seems a dirty trick to play on a youngster: "All the youngster wants is a dose of approval. . . ."

To make the panoply a practical matter, teachers and students should be *trained* to recognize their own and others' different reward needs. The children who expect to receive money every time they do a favor need to learn balance and appropriateness. The teacher who feels he or she must always

push grades or gold stars on children needs to learn what *really* makes kids tick.

Can students really learn to change their styles of motivation? Most certainly. For example, I suspect that many of the students who worry Professor Longstreet have the attitude "I need an A to tell other people that I am a worthy person" or "I need

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an A to tell *myself* that I am a worthy person." Students can progress to less ego-centric attitudes such as "I need an A to know that the teacher felt my performance was really good." And students can progress even further to assume the almost dispassionate attitude, "I need an A purely for the record."

Despite Professor Longstreet's inference that the letter grade system wreaks havoc on the intellectual development of American youth, my own experience with high school and college students suggests that many if not most students eventually achieve a most dispassionate and mature attitude toward letter grades. Not infrequently students today will say to me that their arguments over grades arise less from ego concerns than from concerns about the effect of recorded letter grades on future opportunities.

And Professor Longstreet herself has at last achieved a balanced and dispassionate view of the grades she received in school! The most encouraging aspect of her essay is her living example that even highly grade-oriented academics can grow to a point where they see grades in perspective *without any conscious assistance from the school system*. Just think of the personal learning that might accrue to students with a little help from their teachers. □

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