Mastery Learning and Grade Inflation

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"Grade Inflation" may result not from flabby standards but from more effective instructional strategies such as mastery learning.

Recent reviews of research on mastery learning approaches (Robin, 1977; Block and Tierney, 1974; Bloom, 1976) provide convincing evidence that mastery learning positively influences student achievement in a variety of instructional settings from elementary school through graduate school. Ironically, it is possible that the success of mastery learning strategies and related instructional approaches have contributed to the "educational problem" of grade inflation. This concern over inflated grades appears to be most pronounced in higher education, but references to secondary grading practices linked with SAT score declines are common.

Evidence that collegians are earning or being awarded higher grades abounds. For example, in a report summarizing some 50 colleges and universities, Suslow (1977) stated that from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s the percentage of A grades for undergraduates more than doubled from 16 percent to 34 percent, while the percentage of C grades was reduced by nearly one half. Further, Suslow reported that the average grade at these institutions changed from a C+ to a B during this period. These statistics are given further credibility by Hendrickson (1976), who reported in a similar investigation an increase of A grades and decrease of C grades by undergraduates. Additional evidence of grade inflation has also been reported from a study of grades awarded at 33

Texas colleges during a 15-year period from 1960 to 1975. An important finding of this investigation was that the percentage of students graduating with honors increased from 10.8 percent in 1959-60 to 18.8 percent in 1974-75. (Bromley, Crow, Gibson, 1978). It is interesting to note that reasons offered in the literature for the grade inflation phenomenon do not include more effective instructional approaches. Rather, faculty permissiveness, grading innovations, and student characteristics are cited as probable factors responsible for higher grades.

Of course these explanations are mere speculations, but faculty permissiveness has been linked to many factors, for example, a declining occupational mobility, which is thought to increase faculty dependence on the institution with which he/she is affiliated; economic considerations because institutions need students to stay in business; student evaluation of faculty teaching performance, which increases vulnerability of faculty to student expectations for high grades; lower faculty expectations of student performance, which results in higher marks for lower-quality work; and reduced importance and meaning of grades to faculty members, which encourages students to negotiate for higher grades, (Bromley, and others, 1978). Only the final entry on this list—reduced importance of grades—relates to the assumptions of learning theory and instructional design. The other factors are linked to organizational and administrative presses on faculty members.

Grading innovations are also thought to influence grade inflation. Alterations of grading practices that have evolved range from policies that permit students to withdraw from a course for any reason at any time, expunging grades for coursework that is repeated, and dichotomous grading plans. It is worth noting that dichotomous grading systems are consistent with behavioral approaches to instruction that specify objectives and criterion levels, and the practice of *discounting grades for initial attempts* serves to give the student more time to accomplish course requirements without a grade penalty. Unfortunately these departures from traditional grading practices are often viewed as devices through which students raise their grade point averages artificially, rather than true reflections of increased learning.

Another influence on grade inflation is the student. Students entering college today are viewed by some as being better prepared than former students. Moreover, many of today's students expect to attend graduate schools, and work diligently to achieve grades and admission to graduate studies. Conversely, critics cite open-admission policies and the publicized SAT score decline as evidence to the contrary regarding the quality of current college students. Both phenomena probably occur resulting in a much more diverse population of college students today than two decades ago. In order to accommodate the diversity of students, grading policies may have been relaxed to prevent high failure and dropout rates. However, it is also possible that instructional systems have been improved enabling more students to be successful. In fact, a substantial body of literature on mastery learning strategies has been amassed in the past decade acclaiming the virtues of mastery learning in college and university classes of psychology, education, engineering, chemistry, and political science (Seymour, 1977).

Advocates of mastery learning and related behavioral aproaches *are* concerned with whether students achieve the performance objectives. Conversely, they *are not* concerned with ranking students in terms of their performance. Therefore a simple achieved/not achieved designation for evaluating student progress is preferable to assigning letter grades. Whenever grades must be assigned, they should be based on predetermined performance criteria. This is commonly called the *criterion-referenced* form of grading (Terwilliger, 1977; Armstrong, Denton, Savage, 1978). In this approach, the assignment of grades reflects more on effectiveness of the instructional program than on the performance of the students. This orientation toward grading can be traced to an oft-cited position of Bloom (1968, 1976) regarding the capabilities of youth in today's schools. Bloom contends that 90 to 95 percent of all school youth can successfully reach mastery of a subject provided the instructional system accounts for the entry levels and backgrounds of the students. Thus, the optimal instructional system should enable students of varied backgrounds and entry levels to succeed in attaining similar knowledge and skills by the conclusion of an instructional unit.

Thus we contend that improved instructional designs have positively influenced the "grade inflation problem." Rather than being pessimistic about higher grades, we posit that given operating mastery learning strategies and criterion-referenced grading systems, more students have attained desired knowledge and intellectual skills. Under these conditions, higher grade point ratios appropriately reflect greater cognitive attainment and concurrently suggest more effective instructional systems in operation rather than an intellectually bankrupt system of meaningless symbols. It is ironic that the furor over inflated grades has cast a dim light on the integrity of colleges and universities and their faculties, when the identical data viewed from a different perspective provide support for the idea that instruction is improving in higher education.

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