

Teaching Notes

A Defense of Conventional Grading

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In the Spring 1970 *PS*, Eugene Lichtenstein criticizes a classroom experiment of R. J. Rummel's. Rummel concluded that giving his student's all A's has worsened academic performance. Lichtenstein pointed out that Rummel had ignored the context of his experiment, in particular the other classes which still used conventional grading systems and the effect which Rummel himself may have had on the class. However, Lichtenstein himself ignores the wider social context in which grades are given. He also adheres to a number of dubious propositions about learning which have become commonly accepted among those demanding radical reform of current grading systems.

Conventional grading systems, that is, those ranging from honors-pass-fail to A-B-C-D with pluses and minuses perform several functions. These include giving the student information on his performance, impetus for studying, and an approximate measure of his relative academic achievement. While advocates of radical change in grading systems, that is, the elimination of all grades or the institution of a pass-fail or pass-credit systems, have taken issue with the notions that grades do provide information or spur greater learning, they have not indicated how they would find an alternative means of ranking students. Class rankings are one means by which scarce resources are allocated. In particular, they are the basis for deciding which students will go to graduate or professional schools. I assume that they are also important in business recruiting. The demand for admittance to the better graduate and professional schools is far higher than the number of places available. If these places are not allocated partly on the basis of grades, they will be allocated purely on the basis of personalism, on the recommendations or string-pulling engaged in by professors to place those students whom they perceive to be competent. Rather than reducing tensions and encouraging learning, such a situation will do just the opposite. Many of the less desirable aspects of graduate training will percolate into undergraduate academic activity. Psychophantism is far more inimical to learning than anxiety. Since the number of letters of recommendation which any graduate or professional school will demand will be relatively small, the student may concentrate most of his efforts on cultivating a few teachers who appear favorably disposed. The only alternative to such a situation would be a growing emphasis on various national entrance examinations which are hardly an adequate substitute for several

years of course grades, and are likely to cause greater anxiety than conventional grading systems which distribute risk over a large number of examinations.

Lichtenstein also asserts that "often grades are directly related to coercion, and only secondarily, or peripherally, do they affect learning." I find this contention alien to my own experience. Furthermore, I would suspect that it is foreign to the experience of most professional academicians. Lichtenstein seems to assume that boredom rather than laziness is the primary cause of students not learning. Take away grades, the instrument of coercion, he argues, and we are confronted with the boring failure of our pedagogical efforts as indicated by the lack of enthusiasm of our students. A counter explanation, and one which I find more plausible, is that with the removal of grades the temptations of leisure will become irresistible for many students. Clearly there are some academic endeavors such as the elementary steps in learning a language which are pleasant for very few people. Learning is not always immediately emotionally gratifying. Conventional grading can provide a system of rewards which do make students work harder and in the end develop more fully their own potential.

Finally, Lichtenstein argues that students "are asking in some instances, if it is possible for them to be judged as persons, or perhaps not be [sic] be judged at all." Grades not only have a pernicious effect on learning, Lichtenstein contends, they are counter-productive in an even more profound sense: they erode the students self-esteem and inhibit the development of rewarding human relationships. Students want to be evaluated as people and not as points on a normal shaped curve.

Clearly there are many students who are neither personally happy nor fulfilling their intellectual potential. However, the elimination of grades is likely to place the students' sense of self-esteem in even more jeopardy and make it more difficult to develop rewarding human relations between teachers and themselves which extend beyond formal academic work.

The great strength of conventional grading systems is that they are, for both the student and the teacher, an evaluation of performance in a specific course. They make no general observation about the student's character or about his inherent intellectual ability. A student who gets

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a high grade may consider it a fluke, a reflection of his true ability, or the result of exceptionally hard work. A poor grade may be regarded as perversity on the part of the professor, laziness, or bad luck. The student has no cause for feeling that the professor is making an assessment of his ultimate human worth or his value of the student as a "person." In fact I would suggest that most teachers are in no position to make evaluations of their students as persons. Teachers can claim expertise in particular disciplines. By neither training nor experience are they more competent than other men to evaluate the basic worth of other people.

The use of specific grades for specific courses may facilitate rather than inhibit decent relationships. Passing judgment is uncomfortable; more so I would suggest for those that judge than for those who are judged. If a new grading system is introduced which purports to judge students as "persons," teachers, particularly those with the integrity to feel that their evaluations should be honest, may shun contact with their students lest they be forced to pass unfavorably on the character of a student they have become acquainted with outside of class. The present grading system does separate the evaluation of class performance from any other personal or intellectual contact which a teacher may have with his students. This separation makes non-formal contacts easier rather than more difficult. Radical changes in the grading system which blur the distinction between work in a specific course and more general evaluations of the students' character or ability would create suspicion and distrust. Given the chaotic situation in the United States and the ethnic and social diversity of both the student body and their teachers, feelings of alienation and unhappiness are not going to be eliminated, certainly not by a radical reform in the grading system which makes the relationship between the students and teacher more amorphous.