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In an important sense, grading is a moral issue.

A question of testing and grading

by Robert Paul Craig



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Howard Kirschenbaum and his colleagues in their book **Wad-ja-get: The Grading Game in American Education**, point out both the absurd and almost immoral extent to which the question of grading can go. In regard to justifying grades, they write:

But then I realized that this kid usually gets a B+ or A-, so when he read my comments, he would say to himself, "Why not a B+ or an A-?" So I had to go back over the paper and find places to make some more comments in order to justify clearly the B-. (p. 105)

In an important sense, grading is a moral issue, for grades are part of the student's permanent record file; and they can be looked up and used for hiring and other purposes. Grades, like an albatross around the neck, follow one throughout his or her life. Thus, important questions need to be asked, such as: In what sense are grades an objective indicator of a student's academic progress? Again, from Kirschenbaum:

'I'm in full agreement with you Henry,' Ingles said. 'I figure I've recorded probably 12,000 grades during my teaching career, and I'm really proud about the objectivity of my grading. Numbers don't lie; and when I tote them up in that rollbook, any student can check my math and see that he's gotten just what he worked for.' (p. 131)

Is this teacher's mathematical assessment correct? Is grading a matter of mathematics? Or, is there a sense in which grades are indicative of a self-fulfilling prophecy? R. Rosenthal and L. Jacobsen in their book **Pygmalion in the Classroom: Self-fulfilling Prophecies and Teacher Expectations** point out that teacher expectations play a large part in subsequent grading. For example, if a teacher was informed that a student was a slow learner, there is a high statistical correlation between the student's academic profile and subsequent grades. This is the case even if the student is a high achiever, but is classified as a slow learner. More important questions: Are grades often the result of teacher expectation? Is it moral to classify students in this way?

It seems to be the case that grading is a moral activity in that teachers are assigning values to the academic (and sometimes affective) progress of human beings. And, since grading is a valuational activity, it becomes inherently a philosophical concern. Different perspectives on the nature of teaching and learning become part and parcel of the notion of evaluation. If teaching (or learning) is a strictly measurable affair, one's concept of grading would differ from the notion that there are aspects of the teaching (or learning) process which are not strictly measurable.

Kenneth Conklin maintains that before a teacher can evaluate a student she or he must ask important philosophical questions. For instance, they must have a commitment to some particular epistemology.¹ How do students learn is logically prior to the question of evaluation. Thus, teachers need to investigate the theory of knowledge.

Likewise teachers need to reflect about the philosophy of mind. I am not suggesting that every teacher should be a philosopher of sorts; rather I am saying that there are essential philosophical questions each teacher should ask. Some training in philosophy or philosophy of education would be desirable. The general philosophical issue presented here is: How does one gain knowledge of other minds? I can know with some certainty that I know such and such—unless, as the philosopher Descartes imagines, there is an omnipotent evil God who is deceiving me. But, how can I be certain that someone else knows? This is an especially problematic question if the knowledge a student claims to possess is beyond or different than the teacher's knowledge. Can a teacher infer the knowledge of other minds from the paradigm of her or his own? This deeply philosophical issue is certainly not settled.

But there are varying educational epistemologies depending on the philosophical commitments of the teacher, among other qualities. The perspective of an empiricist has different implications for the issue of grading than the perspective of an idealist. The empiricist demands empirical evidence to demonstrate that a student knows X. The teacher listens to the student recite, or she or he gives an examination. For the empiricist, physical evidence alone is the only basis for giving grades.

Other philosophers, idealists, disagree, for they insist that the student's intended meaning is more important than the use of objective evidence in giving grades. Some idealists suggest that even objective evidence needs to be interpreted in light of the student's intended meaning. The idealist has a good point, for students can guess at answers on tests and not know the correct answer at all. Empirical data, such as written tests, are not always a reasonable basis for giving grades.

Yet, the empiricist has a retort. By defining learning as a "change in behavior," the empiricist feels that this learning can be successfully measured. This issue also has philosophical implications, for this is a concern of the branch of philosophy called ontology. The empiricist claim demands an excursion into the nature of reality. Is interaction with the environment merely a matter of observing physical behavior, as the empiricist maintains? Is learning merely a measurable change in behavior? The idealist would answer negatively to both questions, for she or he feels that reality is not mainly physical at all—it also has transcendent, spiritual properties. According to the idealist, learning is not synonymous with a change in behavior; it is also concerned with self-actualization.

For the empiricist, grading means the measuring of behavioral change; for the idealist it involves an intuition of the student's intended meaning. It is the student who interprets various subjects, history, for instance; and it is through this personal interpretation that the student discovers knowledge. The empiricist position on grading is problematic because it makes it almost impossible to grade students on knowledge the teacher does not possess. It is conceivable that a student may be more informed on a particular topic than the instructor is. Using

the empiricist's own criterion, there is no measurable standard by which to measure this degree of knowledge. But idealism even runs into difficulty in regard to grading, for there may be too much reliance on subjective factors in determining a grade. Yet idealism seems to be the better of the two theories, because its exponents admit the importance of empathy and intuition in grading. This means, in part, that the idealist bridges the gap between cognitive and affective factors in learning; while the empiricist seems to rely too heavily on cognitive factors.

Historically grading has always been problematic to educators. Alan Small points out that early in the history of American education teachers had at least two quite distinct functions, namely, teaching and examining.² His survey of the history of grading in American education shows that from the Colonial period to the mid-nineteenth century these two functions were kept distinct. Teachers taught subject matter, and a board of examiners did the testing. Many educational problems were alleviated by this system, for scholastic achievement was not measured by teachers. The problem of the variability of teacher's grades did not exist.

The pass-fail method of grading likewise is not new. It was initiated during the Colonial period. Even during this period some students attempted to learn only enough to "pass the test."³ One problem with this pass-fail system is that there is virtually no way to deal with individual differences or with levels of excellence, for the same standard applied to all students. Small insists that if the classroom teacher continues to have the sole responsibility for grading, students and teachers will continue to be put into an adversary or competitive relationship. Small opts for an independent examining-marking process; certain departmental members would be responsible for examining and grading.

At one level grades can be a thorn in the side of positive student-teacher relationships. It can also be a means of controlling human beings. At least this is Clarence Karier's contention. In his opinion, which is developed through the use of much historical evidence, testing and grading can, and indeed have been used as a method of fitting people into the ideology of the corporate liberal state.⁴ For example, he contends that there was an explicit philosophy inherent in much of grading and testing: a racist philosophy.

He suggests that the liberal tradition, from Jefferson on, assumed that there is a positive relationship between talent (often measured in grades) and virtue. Karier writes: "It is not surprising to find people assuming that a person low in talent will also lack virtue, a relationship assumed in most sterilization laws."⁵ In fact, Karier points out that the illiterate were often viewed as a threat to society—and the illiterate included many immigrants and members of racial minorities. Karier proposes that the general purpose of American schooling was to bring about a salvation of sorts—appropriate standards of conduct—and the virtue of patriotism must be developed in wayward persons.

We witness, then, the rise of meritocracy, for I.Q. tests, among others, were used to measure educational merit. And merit seemed to be synonymous with virtue. In other words, since many immigrants and minority individuals scored rather low on these tests, it was assumed, by Terman and others, that they were morally as well as intellectually inferior. Karier goes so far as to insist that the structure of American society was based on the idea of meritocracy—"a meritocracy of white, middle-class, management oriented professionals."⁶

This was evident in the tracking plan in which immigrants and minority students were put into vocational programs, while many middle-class white students were put into liberal arts and pre-college programs; these were a necessary condition for their rise into the meritocracy. Thus, Karier's main point is that testing and grading were used as ways to guarantee order in the corporate liberal state.

Some educational theorists even go further than Karier in their indictment of grading and testing. Sidney Simon, for instance, claims that grades perform a negative function for they separate teachers and students into two warring camps—a criticism made also by Small. Simon further suggests that grades punish the students who cannot compete adequately.⁷ Grades can be destructive in the learning process, for they can reinforce a negative self-concept. Thus, Simon insists that grading and testing must be abolished.

A final point needs to be made, namely, the relationship between grades and subsequent occupational or even academic success. D.E. Lavin found, for instance, that grades are poor predictors of future occupational or academic endeavors, for there are other important criteria of success—one's personality and drive, for example.⁸

Likewise, it is the contention of Patricia Wright that grades may predict a certain amount of success in academic endeavors, although even this is highly questionable. But they do not predict such important occupational variables as tolerance to stress, endurance, or the ability to apply what has been learned in school.⁹ Certainly these studies bring grading (and testing) into a new light. The purposes of both grading and testing need to be re-examined and re-evaluated.

In this brief essay I have not attempted to answer these complex questions about grading and testing; rather I have tried to put the issue(s) into perspective. Several important questions need to be assessed: Is either the empiricist or the idealist perspective correct? In what sense is grading a moral issue? How do grades become part of social-political control? What is the relationship, if any, between grades and one's subsequent academic or occupational possibilities? Each teacher must take a position on these important issues.

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