

Competitive Grading Sabotages Good Teaching

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PROFESSOR JONES took great pride in the bell-shaped curve generated from students' scores on his final exam. He was able to assign grades of A, B, C, D, and F with precision, simply by marking off segments of that normal curve. He told a colleague, "One semester I experimented with a new method of teaching in which I used more examples and explained the material more clearly. It was a disaster! My normal curve was hopelessly skewed. Too many students received high scores. So now I am deliberately more ambiguous in my lectures, I use fewer examples, and I am gratified to find that my exams produce normally distributed scores once again."

In other words, Professor Jones intentionally taught in a way that inhibited student learning. He chose this approach because of the need to assign grades. Clearly, competitive grading can redefine and distort the underlying purpose of education, which is to help every student learn. To date, arguments against the current grading system have focused on ways in which competitive grading victimizes students, but teachers are negatively affected as well. Assigning competitive grades affects teachers' behavior in five basic ways:

- 1) it turns teachers into students' opponents,
- 2) it justifies inadequate teaching methods and styles,
- 3) it trivializes course content,
- 4) it encourages methods of evaluation that misdirect and inhibit student learning, and
- 5) it rewards teachers for punishing students.

Teachers Become Opponents

Many educators justify a differential grading system as a means of sorting students according to their performance. Unfortunately, sorting and ranking students inevitably creates a contentious relationship between students and their teachers. Imagine the following scenario.

Ms. Smith, an 11th-grade English teacher, has a pile of student papers to grade. The topics vary tremendously, and she must assign a letter grade to each paper. Since everyone cannot receive the same grade, Ms. Smith must find reasons to give some papers lower grades than others. As she reads the papers, she looks for flaws — awkward sentences, factual errors, incorrect interpretations — and marks each one in red ink. She concentrates on the negative, carefully counting errors. If a student complains about his or her grade, those errors will be her defense. But what about the student? Is he or she encouraged to write more or look for ways to improve the paper? More likely, the student will feel discouraged, defeated, and humiliated. Now imagine the same scenario with one difference: no grades are expected or allowed. Ms. Smith's sole purpose is to motivate all the students to learn and to improve their work. Does she read and respond to the papers differently? Most certainly. Now she points out the strengths of the writing—the apt phrase, the persuasive argument, the clever use of alliteration. She considers and appreciates students' ideas and their individual learning styles. She is constantly looking for improvement.

To assign grades, teachers must become critics whose focus is negative, always seeking errors and finding fault with students' work. Moreover, students must be compared with one another, because there is no accepted standard for a given letter grade. A performance that earns an A in one classroom could earn a C in another classroom because of differences in the teachers' standards or in the composition of the two classes.

When judging the relative merit of students' performances takes precedence over improving their skills, few students can feel good about their accomplishments. Only one student can be the best; the rest are clearly identified as less able. Comparative grading ensures that, unlike children in Lake Wobegon, half of the students will be below average.

It could be argued that, despite the drawbacks, grading is necessary in order to sort people. Colleges demand high school grades, for example, to help them decide which applicants to admit. But high schools should never compromise their central mission in order to satisfy the demands of colleges for student rankings.

What would colleges do if high schools refused to employ a competitive grading system? Colleges would find some other method of deciding whom they wished to admit. High schools have no responsibility to serve colleges by performing the sorting function for them. Since mandatory sorting undermines student learning, colleges have no right to demand competitive grades from high schools. High schools cannot serve two masters.

Grading Justifies Inadequate Methods of Teaching

When students fail to achieve course objectives, whose responsibility is it— the teachers' or the students'? Current grading practices put the onus squarely on the students. Teachers can use the most slipshod of teaching methods, discover that many students do not understand the material, and then assign grades accordingly. Current grading practices do not encourage teachers to help students improve, because only the students are blamed when they fail to learn. If every student achieved all the objectives of a given course, every student would earn an A— an unacceptable state of affairs in the current view. Thus teachers are reinforced for using methods that ensure that some students will not succeed. For example, instruction is often provided in a unidirectional manner, as in a lecture, and interaction between the lecturer and the students is discouraged. Moreover, teachers often create conditions that inhibit students from challenging them or asking questions. Most people find it difficult to sit and listen to someone else talk for long periods of time. Those students who can tolerate that situation best will tend to receive higher grades. In developing examinations, many teachers tend to focus on objective information that cannot be disputed. By emphasizing the memorization of facts, however, such teachers discourage debate, inhibit the expression of opinion, minimize teamwork and cooperation, and force students to listen passively— the very worst way to learn. An emphasis on memorization deprives students of opportunities to ponder their ideas critically or to discuss their ideas publicly. Students have to remember the facts only long enough to pass the next exam.

Meanwhile, teachers find it easy to dispense, and then test for, factual information. Unidirectional teaching gives them a safety net. If students are unable to demonstrate comprehension of the material covered in lectures, they are presumed to have been inattentive and thus are blamed for their poor performance. Teachers who rush to cover all the material in a course syllabus are really trying to cover their backs. If a student fails to understand the material, such a teacher can say, "I did my job. I covered it in class."

Grades Trivialize Course Content

Which of the following questions is more challenging to a student?
When was the Declaration of Independence signed?
Would you have signed the Declaration of Independence if you had lived in 1776? Why or why not?

The answer seems clear. The first question requires students to memorize a date. The second question requires them to think — to imagine themselves in another time and place and then to justify an action that would profoundly affect their own lives and the lives of others. However, many teachers might hesitate to include such thought provoking questions on a test. Grading students' responses would be time-consuming and laborious, requiring subjective judgments that would be hard to justify to students and their parents. If assigning grades were not required, teachers might opt for the second question. Thus course content is determined, at least partly, by the need to grade students. Teachers would be liberated to teach toward more consequential goals if they were not obligated to assign grades. Grading Inhibits Constructive Evaluation

Evaluation of student performance is essential, but it should serve to promote student learning. Ideally, the evaluation process would help students discover how to improve their achievement of important goals. Grading defeats this purpose by discouraging the vast majority of students, who receive below-average grades, and by not challenging students who could improve on what they have already learned. Constructive evaluation encourages students to exert maximum effort by emphasizing their strengths, identifying concrete ways for them to improve, and providing them with positive reinforcement for progress.

Mandatory grading encourages teachers to evaluate their students in ways that do not promote critical thinking and long-term retention. For example, teachers of large classes may assign grades based on students' ability to memorize facts. Tests based on factual information are simple and quick to score, but they do not foster critical thinking.

Pressure to perform well often causes students to attend only to "material that will be on the final." Their behavior in preparing for a test depends on the nature of the test. If they believe that the test will require knowledge of isolated facts, most students will try to memorize isolated facts (which will quickly be forgotten). Students develop learning styles that they expect to yield good grades. They quickly learn that the operational definition of a course objective is "what appears on the final exam."

Teachers Can Take Pride in Failure

Some teachers feel proud when a high percentage of their students fail. They want others to believe that a high failure rate signifies a difficult course and an intelligent teacher. To a large extent, they succeed. There is a common assumption that taking a "tough" course is more prestigious than taking a "Mickey Mouse" course. Some teachers believe that giving students low grades adds luster to their own reputations. Such teachers may choose to include excessively difficult material in their courses simply to enhance their own self-importance. One way of guaranteeing a high failure rate is to present material that is too difficult for most of the class to comprehend. But the inclusion of material for this purpose stands education on its head. Teachers deserve shame, not praise, if their students fail to achieve.

Teachers who take pride in giving low grades blame the students, not themselves, when course material is not mastered as quickly as it is presented. They expect every student to learn the same material in the same amount of time. The few students who master the material are "proof" that this expectation is realistic. Although the system is rigged so that some students fail, the teacher can always point to the few high achievers and say, "They understood. Why didn't you?" The students who fail are blamed undeservedly, and the teachers who fail them are esteemed undeservedly— but the real culprit is the grading system.

Competitive grades turn educational priorities on their head. Classes in which most of the students master the material are perceived as unchallenging. High grades are often dismissed as "grade inflation," not as a sign that the teacher and the students have successfully achieved their mutual objectives. Meanwhile, prestige is accorded to teachers who are unable to help most of their students learn the material. The situation is ridiculous. Teachers and students are all victims of a competitive grading system. Competitive grading creates a conflict of interest for teachers: improving students' learning versus judging the relative merit of their academic performance. As long as teachers are forced to make comparative judgments, they cannot focus single-mindedly on the improvement of students' learning. Indeed, under the competitive grading system, teachers are not required to help every student learn, but they are required to judge every student. Judgment is mandatory; improvement is optional.

Teachers may not realize how much of their job frustration stems from this inherent conflict. By definition, half of all students must receive below-average grades. Student reactions to negative evaluations range from passive resistance to active rebellion. The resultant hostile interactions between students and teachers leave many teachers feeling apprehensive much of the time. Competitive grading reemphasizes learning in favor of judging. Learning becomes a secondary goal of education. Clearly, then, the need to grade students undermines the motive— to help students learn — that brought most of us into the profession. Students are not the only victims of the competitive grading system, Mr. Krumholtz and Ms. Yeh point out. It hurts teachers as well by skewing their values and ultimately robbing them of the satisfactions inherent in promoting student learning.