

On Grades and Grading

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It has been many years now that I have been pointing students to the account of Harvey Mansfield and his creation of “ironic grades” in response to grade inflation at Harvard. And I have assigned ironic course grades (of my own design and implementation) for many years. What I perceive as a relatively recent “change” in the attitudes and actions of students and administrators has prompted (inspired?) further contemplation of matters related to the topic. I record a kind of summary of those ideas here.

University professors have been complaining about diminishing student interest, as well as lack of focus, lack of “hard work,” and display of “bad attitude,” for decades if not centuries. Claiming one observes “trends” with regard to students’ attitude toward learning, in this way, is probably a silly thing to do. Nevertheless, prevalent attitudes among individuals in identifiable populations do seem to be somewhat observable and to play some influential role at times. For example, one hears daily of the “division” among “Americans” and the increase in hatred towards those holding another (political) viewpoint. An example I like much better is that of attitudes toward washing hands and personal hygiene. I imagine that at some point in the past it was quite uncommon (actually impossible) to find an individual who thought tiny living creatures might be on his hands and in his food and that the presence of those tiny invisible creatures could cause him to get sick—so he should wash his hands and take all manner of precaution against these tiny imagined and invisible creatures. Now almost everyone thinks this way.

I have had individual interactions in the past two or three years that are unlike any I have had before. There seems to have developed (what I would describe as)

an “all out” aggressive posture of entitlement on the part of (at least some individual) students. These students, in particular, are conspicuous for showing no interest whatsoever in engaging with the intellectual content of a course but are preoccupied with the technicalities of grades and grading. My first inkling that such an attitude was afoot came with the announcement of various documents styled as a “student bill of rights.” These had an influence on me through specific “requirements” on the structure of the courses I teach and the attempted enforcement of those requirements by administrators. I was required to give exams and have other “course requirements” for the students. Associated with exams were specific protocols. I was required to have certain course requirements for students “count” at least a certain amount in the calculation of the course grade, but no more than another certain amount. Sometimes these numbers were contradictory: Attendance must count for at least 20% of the course grade in one semester and no more than 15% in another. Obviously the mandates were arbitrary and absurd. I ignored (or tried to ignore) what was happening. I shrugged. I had been routinely assigning my “ironic grades” for years, so I felt that these absurdities would not effect me.

Then recently (individual) students have started aggressively demanding various structural elements in my courses. Students must all be seated and working on their exams within 5 minutes of the scheduled course meeting time. Students must all be able to understand and work all problems on every assignment. All material on every assignment must have been explicitly addressed in the lecture, i.e., no independent learning is allowed. The students seem to have figured out that if they can find some administrator who agrees with whatever absurd demand they have made, then they can have that demand enforced upon an instructor. Maybe they are correct. What is certainly clear is that I have attempted to avoid conflict—pretty much to any extent possible—and there is a movement among students and administrators to make sure that conflict comes to me. In retrospect, this is not surprising.

About one year ago, in some sort of effort to clarify the situation to students in a course I was teaching, I prepared a presentation covering various topics related to grades and grading. The slides from the presentation are not very self-explanatory, but they do contain some relevant links, and the main point was to introduce the Milgram learning experiment and the Zimbardo prison experiment and to point out that all of us have been involuntarily enrolled in some “real life” version of these experiments resulting in trauma, the likely submission to (if not embracing of) extremely destructive ideas, and (predictable) conflict. The presentation is still available at <https://people.math.gatech.edu/~mccuan/courses/2550/meaningfulla.odp>

I conclude with some disjointed observations:

Discussions with administrators on anything related to these topics inevitably include “horror stories” about instructors who abuse students in various ways. The implication is, presumably, that all instructors have this inclination and must be “regulated” or “cracked down on” by authority. I’m sure a good deal of abuse goes on. Nevertheless, “one-size-fits-all” and “lowest common denominator” thinking about such problems are still counterproductive. I have never heard a “horror story” that describes my interaction with students as an instructor. These stories seem to me to always carry a strong element of projection. I would go further to say that the instructors who participate in the most abuse are, at heart, the strongest believers in the system.

I think Harvey Mansfield has some reasonable points to make, and the creation of ironic grades is a priceless contribution. Mansfield is, however, clearly a strong believer in the system, and there are a couple points (with respect to grades and grading) on which we think rather differently. He mentions specifically that a grade is an indication of “hard work.” This probably results, at least in part, from his subject of instruction, humanities, where any evaluation is, of necessity, subjective.

At some point I obtained a grasp of what might be termed “professional standards” in mathematics, and there was a certain coherence in, for example, what it means to master a subject like calculus, linear algebra, or ordinary differential equations. The content of these “standards” were largely the result of German mathematicians and to a certain degree, more generally, European mathematicians who had, at least, some coherent historical and cultural view of society—and what they might call “Western Civilization.” This had an appeal and gave grading at least a patina of objectivity. Certainly, allowing grading to rest on the concept of “mastery” rather than “hard work,” was a step in the direction of objectivity. Still, the view of Mansfield presents itself in contrast: If a student has already mastered a subject like calculus (objectively) and takes a course in the subject, should he still receive an “A” even though he has done little, or perhaps no, work? If not, why not? If so, what about the student who works very hard and only obtains a grade of “B” for mastery. I’m not making an evaluation here, I’m simply saying that one instructor, like Mansfield, may consider these questions and come to a conclusion quite the opposite of another instructor, like myself.

In the end, I realized that “Western Civilization” was not a civilization at all but was still based, at its foundation, on the barbaric idea of enslavement. Humans have yet to see civilization on any large scale. In particular, the European idea that a coherent direction of “society” or the state has “interests” superceding those of individuals, while providing a convenient framework for German mathematicians and

others, is barbaric. Consequently, the entire structure of “professional standards” is, at the very least, resting on a questionable foundation. I realized that any marginally coherent system of grading rests pivotally on belief in some kind of brutal system of imposition—of slavery. Almost no one believes in such a system as applied to himself as an individual. Clearly almost no students actually believe in it—as judged by their responses and actions. In fact, very few people understand the real nature of the system enough to be true believers of any sort. And yet, there is absolutely widespread belief in application of this brutal system to *others*, and a rock solid intuition that the system leads to wonderful “progress” in the face of suppressed skepticism (as well as all evidence to the contrary).

Thus, perhaps the most disturbing observation presents itself. I have no reason to believe that “understanding” things and “studying things” per se are objectionable. But if it is true, as Richard Feynman seems to have temporarily concluded in 1945 after helping to build a nuclear bomb and seeing it employed to kill 146,000 people, that the nominally neutral attainment of knowledge, and especially mathematical and scientific knowledge, is predominantly (if not exclusively) used for objectionable purposes, then participating in the structures of support for the system is objectionable far beyond the psychological damage to those directly and immediately subject to it.

Almost 25 years ago now, I had a chance discussion with a Berkeley psychology professor on the campus shuttle bus. I was surprised to hear him say that all of his students received “A” grades in his course. At the time, this declaration seemed very removed from my attachment to “mastery” based on objective professional standards as the basis of grading. He did not elaborate much on his philosophy or the particulars of his instruction, but at length his comments did bring to mind the famous anecdote concerning Richard Courant, arguably a German with as much claim to the European academic ideal as any other, who declared his grading “rubric” as follows: If I know the name of a student at the end of the semester, I assign that student an “A.” If I do not recognize the name, I assign the student a “B.” If the student complains about receiving a “B,” I change the grade to an “A.”