2 Grading

> To a man with a pencil, everything looks like a list. To a man with a computer, everything looks like data. And to a man with a grade sheet, everything looks like a number.
> —Neil Postman[1]

In schools, and in certain disciplines, and in certain kinds of research, many lovely human qualities get squeezed into fixed molds and patterns and turned into numbers. Like knowledge. Or attitudes. Or motivation. Or creativity and originality. Or ability to communicate. Internal, felt, and invisible, these qualities all exist outside the realm of the empirical. They can be standardized, made concrete, only secondhand—through tests, and through essays, reports, presentations, and portfolios, the latter four of which then need to be assigned numbers and letters. In the world of education, the activity of assigning numbers seems to be overwhelming the lives of

teachers and students, all of whom would probably rather be doing something else, like educating and getting educated. Because we had trouble finding many uplifting stories on this topic, we offer more reflection than respite in this essay. Be forewarned.

How strange that the practices in our educational institutions (our societies?) convey a belief that properly educated people should all know the same things and should display only certain kinds of knowledge in only certain ways. How strange that our practices encourage students to believe that a number or letter grade on a test is the primary evidence by which they and others (teachers, parents, classmates, politicians) know or don't know something. How equally strange it is that a great many people believe that teachers who do not pass certain tests with certain scores cannot possibly be qualified to teach. And finally, how strange it is that schools operate as though teaching and learning cannot happen without our keeping detailed numerical (or convertible-to-numbers) accounts of every time a student sneezes, or fails to sneeze, on command.

Every teacher is familiar with the course syllabus that lays out, with percentages of the total, how grades will be computed in a particular class:

Attendance	10%
Participation	4%
Not talking in class	5%
Speaking up in class	6%
Homework submitted on time	3%
Quizzes and tests	11%

Essays	12%
Number of correct answers in spontaneous conversation	2%
Journal writing	9%
Pronunciation and diction	1%
Book reports	2%
Individual projects	3%
Group projects	2.5%
Willingness to revise and correct work	1.5%
Attitude	3%
Improvement	4%
Effort	7%
Interest	0.5%
Creativity	0.2%
Relations with peers	6%
Use of handkerchief or tissue during cold season	1%
Presence of bilingual dictionary	0.6%
Absence of bilingual dictionary	0.6%
Voice volume	2%
Cleanliness	3%
Hair roots same color as hair (Japan)	1%
Posture	0.3%
Helpfulness	8%
Responsiveness to direct orders	12%
Responsiveness to indirect orders	11%
Staying awake in class for at least half the class period	2%
Use of formal language in addressing teachers	5%
Length of skirt (girls)	0.4%
Political leanings	1.2%
Height-to-weight ratio	0.8%
Unsavory thoughts [a minus number]	–41.6%
TOTAL	100%

Using numbers and scales and percents for grading, scoring, testing, and overall record-keeping pleases everyone at some level because it makes it seem as though everyone is doing the jobs of teaching and learning properly and objectively. The formal presentation of the numerical evidence looks right, impresses parents, teachers, administrators, students, and politicians, but misses the heart of what teachers hope students will be able to do. The display deceives.

A good friend of ours, someone who once taught in Japan, told us that he "did not take attendance" or give a percentage (grade) for attendance. In the interest of getting his class started and running it in a more substantive way, this teacher resisted both the attendance requirement and the practice of computing grades by a series of numerical calculations. We sympathize. Like that teacher, Miguel often forgets to, or intentionally does not, call out names and mark his class list with *maru* and *batsu* (presence and absence symbols), a decision he explains to his students at the beginning of the term with the following true story told to him by someone who once met the late Yehudi Menuhin:

One day, someone came to Menuhin asking the old master to take him as one of his pupils. This young man had all the right credentials: He had studied at Julliard, taken master classes in Gstaad, summer sessions at Tanglewood, and studied with so and so. The list was very impressive indeed, and Menuhin seemed to be very interested in taking this person as his student. He even had the right

violin: a Stradivarius that was once owned by Antonin Dvorák. At the end of the "presentation," old man Menuhin asked this young, well-groomed violinist a question he never forgot. Menuhin looked at him and asked, "Can you play a decent scale?"

The point of Miguel's story to his students is that no matter how many components we incorporate into a grade in a language class, in the end, everything boils down to the same question: *Can you use language in ways that allow you to convey whatever your thoughts are?* In other words, can you communicate in English, or French, or Spanish, or whatever foreign or second language you are learning? Can you express something about yourself, your ideas, your curiosities, and questions? As Peter Elbow has told us in the field of writing, grading can get in the way of these goals.

Peter Elbow, the quintessential writing teacher who above all has been concerned about reaching students and helping them discover something about themselves, has asked us to stop grading students now and then and to consider whether we like anything about their writing, and indeed about our own.[2] Although he is talking about writing, his ideas apply to all kinds of teaching and learning activities in language classes, art classes, and any classes where students produce some kind of work. Elbow worried that too much ranking, rating, scoring, grading, and evaluating would distract students and teachers from the real goal of the writing class—to help students learn to explore and express important things about how they understand themselves and the worlds they live in. By identifying what we like in students' writing, and in our own, we are able to

foster what works. Teachers too often believe that their main job is to discover what is wrong with students' work, and students and parents generally buy into this belief. How many times in our careers have students come to us to ask, *What do you like in this piece of writing or this project? How can I learn to do more of what you like?* Not often, in our experience. They all want corrections of what is wrong, and then to know what their grade will be. Similarly, how many times in our careers have we asked students what they like about their own work? Or what they are interested in? There is no time for such diversions because we have to cover the material, get students to display their knowledge in conventional ways, and count up the correct answers so that we can turn grades in at the end of the term. And there doesn't seem to be a way to escape the end-of-term grades.

In fact, sometimes there is also no way to escape rather tedious record-keeping as part of the grading process, particularly in public schools. A photography teacher we know teaches at a community college in California, where she is required to keep accurate records for purposes of grading. Although she loathes the bookkeeping, she does not fight this system because it protects her later from administrative hassles and from students who might complain about their grades. But she does her grading backward. On the first day of class she announces to her surprised and motley group of students (from gangly youths to focused and sincere middle-aged women) that they all have A's—100 points. She then tells them what they need to do to keep all those points, and what happens if there are various infractions, such as skipping a class or arriving late, neglecting to turn in assignments or turning them in late, turning in work that shows no effort, or failing to clean up after themselves in the darkroom. They lose points. Students who have been sick or have a

legitimate emergency can make up a few of the lost points by doing some extra credit projects, but in general it is difficult in this teacher's system for students to wheedle and whine their way back up the scale. To her credit, this teacher does not penalize students for not being able to remember Ansel Adams's zone system, speaking out without being called on, sitting silently, not remembering how to mix chemicals properly, or quietly searching for bits of nasal detritus during class. And when she likes their work, she tells them this, and helps them learn to see their own photographs and those of their classmates with an interested and critical eye. They learn to like their own and each other's work.

Now here is an end-of-term grading story we would like to share. For the amusement of our readers outside Japan (those inside may find this boringly familiar), we tell the story of how end-of-year grading is done in some Japanese colleges and universities. Interestingly, we both face a conflict in how we feel about the grading system that is described in this section because we believe strongly that students should not be made to think that they are failures. We would like everyone to pass.

So the good news is that in the English (and other) classes in some of the Japanese universities where we have worked, students cannot fail. This happens in one of two ways. The first solution is that students who have not attended class or who have failed all the tests and quizzes in the year or who have not turned in any required work might be given what is called a make-up test. This test must be easy enough for the problem students to pass at one sitting. In case

no test is involved, the teacher can assign a report, usually a two- or three-page reaction about any topic. Both of us have heard stories about teachers assigning a topic all students should be familiar with, such as "My Summer Vacation," regardless of the time of year.

One assumption with such a system is, of course, that we are supposed to teach students something about English that can be absorbed and then displayed, and that it is the display that should count rather than the ongoing use of language in class. The other assumption is that we have done nothing important at all in our classes, and that if students simply know a certain amount of English, wherever acquired, they should be allowed a passing grade. However, both of us and many of our colleagues like to teach in ways that cannot be assessed on paper and pencil tests or that can't be made up in one sitting. We like students to talk together, to write journals over a full term, to read together in class, and to listen to stories we and classmates tell.

The second solution, as was the case with a teacher we know at "Tampopo" University, is to fabricate grades. It is likely that grades are fabricated for reasons other than, or in addition to, preventing students from seeing themselves as failures. They may be fabricated to maintain certain average scores for a department, which in turn ensures that a university maintains or improves its standing relative to other universities. Regardless of the underlying motivation, imagine how the teacher at Tampopo U. felt at the end of one school year when, after turning in his year-end grades based on attendance records and work turned in, he received a call from his boss informing him that the grades that he had compiled did not meet the school's desired "average." He was asked to "bump them up a bit" from 67 percent to 76.5 percent or 78.5 percent, the num-

ber that would make everybody happy. He was not in a position to argue with this request-demand.

Rather than pull an all-nighter calculating everything again (common at end-of-year grading time for part-time teachers who have hundreds of students at several different universities), he realized that he could simply fabricate the grades, basing them on what he had already calculated. As he tells the story, it took him about two hours to design the desired average, cringing the while at the unethical nature of his action. A few days later, before taking the final step of recording the new grades and turning them into the office, he looked closely at the faces of other teachers in the part-time faculty room who presumably were doing the same thing and saw no signs of remorse. At that very moment, there was one of Japan's frequent earthquakes, a strong one—a jolt of 4-point something. He took it as a message from nature: "Do it, man; just get it over with." So he sat there and, as he put it, copied numbers onto the official record sheet like a robot. The result was that the office ladies downstairs were very happy. *"Kore wa totemo ii desu"* (This is just fine), they said. The teacher had done his bit to help the school keep up a good image, no matter what went on inside his own class. He has since moved back to England where he manages a Japanese restaurant, by the way.

We don't mean to suggest that ethical issues involving grading are unique to Japan. Test score scandals in public schools occasionally make the news in North America. In the language education field, individual ethical dilemmas involving assessment and grading are described by Hafernik, Messerschmitt, and Vandrick[3] and by Johnston's[4] story of Peter, among others, and stories about grading often crop up in our conversations with teachers, including teachers who wrestle with portfolio evaluation systems. Our point from the

particular story we tell is that these end-of-year grades at Tampopo U. had no meaning that was related to students' progress in class or to their involvement with words and ideas in their second language. Indeed, it is probable that no end-of-term grade can do anything more than give stakeholders the comfortable illusion that something meaningful has been accomplished.

In the North American and English-dominant Western world, curriculum and assessment reform movements are seeping into every corner of public education. These movements are seeking ways to use "science" and technology to define and measure the "performances" of both teachers and students through more and more tests. We quote Neil Postman at length here because he has expressed eloquently his views on the "seemingly harmless practice of assigning marks or grades to the answers students [and teachers, we might add] give on examinations." By putting this practice in a historical context, he highlights how peculiar the practice is. He continues:

> This procedure seems so natural to most of us that we are hardly aware of its significance. We may even find it difficult to imagine that the number or letter is a tool or, if you will, a technology; still less that, when we use such a technology to judge someone's behavior, we have done something peculiar. In point of fact, the first instance of grading students' papers occurred at Cambridge University in 1792 at the suggestion of a tutor named William Farish. No one knows much about William Farish; not more than a handful have

> ever heard of him. And yet his idea that a quantitative value should be assigned to human thoughts was a major step toward construction of a mathematical concept of reality. If a number can be given to the quality of a thought, then a number can be given to the qualities of mercy, love, hate, beauty, creativity, intelligence, even sanity itself....Our psychologists, sociologists, and educators find it quite impossible to do their work without numbers. They believe that without numbers they cannot acquire or express authentic knowledge.
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> I shall not argue here that this is a stupid or dangerous idea, only that it is peculiar. What is even more peculiar is that so many of us do not find the idea peculiar. To say that someone should be doing better work because he has an IQ of 134, or that someone is a 7.2 on a sensitivity scale, or that this man's essay on the rise of capitalism is an A- and that man's is a C+ would have sounded like gibberish to Galileo or Shakespeare or Thomas Jefferson. If it makes sense to us, that is because our minds have been conditioned by the technology of numbers so that we see the world differently than they did.[5]

In a conservative political and corporate climate in which many people believe that "scientific principles" can be applied to education and that technology can solve all our problems in schools, the focus on standards and test scores is understandable if misguided. But it is a false hope to presume that learning can be precisely and objectively measured across student and teacher populations and that fair comparisons can be made from one region of the country to another and between one school and another. If the numbers

are not right, teachers can lose their jobs and students can fail to be promoted or to graduate. In such a climate, "education" is not discussed except in terms of test scores. We find Postman's skepticism fully justified.

But inspiration lurks just around the corner. We quote Jerome Bruner here, as well as Mark Clarke, both of whom are concerned about the contributions that education can make to improve the kinds of people we are. Bruner comments:

> I have no objection in principle to creating better measuring instruments in order to find out how well our students are doing in science, in mathematics, in literature, in reading. For that matter, I don't even object in principle to assessments of how well our teachers are doing their jobs. Of course we need standards and resources to make our schools work well in solving the myriad tasks they face. But resources and standards alone will not work. We need a surer sense of what to teach to whom and how to go about teaching it in such a way that it will make those taught more effective, less alienated, and better human beings.[6]

Mark Clarke too, wants us to distinguish the trivial from the important in our work as educators, particularly in light of the 1999 Columbine High School incident in Colorado in which 14 children died, including the murderers, and of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. These incidents reoriented his thinking about what was important in his life as a language teacher and teacher educator. He tells us: "Suddenly, math facts and topic sentences, state standards and performance criteria—the minutiae that assail teachers day in and day out—were exposed for what they are:

monumental trivialities, the ultimate in deck chairs on the Titanic, hobgoblins of little minds that distract us from what really matters."[7] More testing and grading will not help us achieve the noble goal of eliminating trivialities from the lives of teachers and students and of attending to things that really matter in education.

We worry about the messages we send to students with all of our testing and grading, and about what messages we absorb about ourselves as teachers. Such messages have to do with control, conformity, and competition, not with what it might mean to become a better human being or to lead an ethical life. Like the metaphorical gardener and bonsai tree in the poem that follows, teachers and students whose lives are tightly controlled by testing and grading may fit a tidy and admired model, but be unable to grow. What is education but growth, stimulated by curiosity, characterized by questioning and experimenting, toward the goal of becoming a better human being?

A Work of Artifice

Marge Piercy

The bonsai tree
in the attractive pot
could have grown eighty feet tall
on the side of a mountain
till split by lightning.
But a gardener
carefully pruned it.
It is nine inches high.
Every day as he
whittles back the branches
the gardener croons,
It is your nature
to be small and cozy,
domestic and weak;
how lucky, little tree,
to have a pot to grow in.
With living creatures
one must begin very early
to dwarf their growth:
the bound feet,
the crippled brain,
the hair in curlers,
the hands you
love to touch.

We thank Patrick Rosenkjar for passing this poem on to us.

"A full moon rose over a distant sand dune that hugged the bay. Once the last pale colors of dusk had faded, a silver path appeared over the water and the breaking surf morphed into undulating rows of fluorescent white."

Grade: 82.3% (B-). Sky a bit hazy. Not enough stars visible and moon somewhat fuzzy around the edges. Surf not dramatic enough for full effect. Please revise for improved grade.

Notes

1. Postman, N. (1992). *Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 14.

2. Elbow, P. (1993). Ranking, evaluating, and liking: Sorting out three forms of judgment. *College English, 55,* 187–206.

3. Hafernik, J., Messerschmitt, D. S., & Vandrick, S. (2002). *Ethical issues for ESL faculty: Social justice issues in practice.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 32–40.

4. Johnston, B. (2003). *Values in English language teaching.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 2–6.

5. Postman, *Technopoly,* pp.12–13.

6. Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 116–118.

7. Clarke, M. A. (2003). *A place to stand: Essays for educators in troubled times.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p. 188.