

Reference Publications

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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.