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Grading or Assessing Learning? Seasonal thoughts for reflection!

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The examination period is upon us. Students are anxious and faculty contemplate the “burden” of marking! The Registrar prepares to receive the grades and all students graduating or otherwise are calculating their respective GPAs and seeking to improve them. All this activity takes place at the end of each semester on each and every university campus the world over. What is its purpose and why do we give it pride of place in academia? In what sense if any does it relate to the primary objective of academic institutions, namely learning? Does the GPA or the letter grade awarded to a student reflect learning or for that matter any form of objective assessment and/or evaluation of what a student gained in terms of the other key objectives of higher education: critical thinking, self-learning skills, ability to work in groups, understanding key issues in a particular discipline, etc.? Current pedagogic research argues forcefully that the answer is a clear “NO”. So why do we go on doing it and devoting so much time and energy on the part of both students, faculty and administrators? The answer is simple:

Although faculty may find grading too subjective and difficult to justify, our students “worship” the grade! Furthermore, and possibly of even greater importance, employers seek graduates with high GPAs! Graduate schools rely heavily on GPAs and SATs. Parents, who pay fees or otherwise, await anxiously the end of semester grades of their respective off springs, the list can go on..... Grading has constituted a corner stone of academic assessment for decades.

Nevertheless, no single system has gained universal acceptance and both faculty and universities are continuously experimenting with alternatives. Educational research continues to explore and ponder of ways in which faculty can improve the way they **telescope** a variety of assessments during an entire semester into a letter grade or number. Similar research questions whether such an enterprise is at all possible or fruitful. *In fact a number of reputable liberal-arts colleges in the U.S. either do not issue grades at all or de-emphasize them. In all cases, the rationale is that grades often do not provide a clear picture of academic aptitude or of potential for success, and that learning, not achieving the highest score, should be the goal of a liberal education.* (Wikipedia)

Furthermore, and irrespective of what took place during the semester in the classroom, faculty and students Part Company at the end of the semester and become “antagonists”. Faculty see examinations as part of a process of learning. For students examinations themselves are the process. Faculty see the need to award a letter grade as a necessary chore required by the institution. Students, on the other hand, perceive grades as the sole

and key indicator reflecting all of their accomplishments during a semester of learning. Faculty see grading as an “objective” assessment of student performance during the semester. Students see the grade clinically and ascribe all failings to the “sadistic” nature of faculty. The list of conflicting and opposing perceptions held by faculty and students with regard to the grade and the grading process can be as long as a piece of string! Thus, once again, we ask ourselves why do we engage in such an activity? The answer, again, is simple: educational institutions, faculty and administrators continue to confuse **grading** with **assessment**.

Assessment of student performance does not and should not place value or judgment upon it. Assessment is simply a reporting of a student's profile of achievements. Assessment is in fact akin to a baseball or soccer card that lists the batting average, the goals scored, runs batted in, penalties saved, without placing a value on the performance. In order to place value and/or evaluate performance we need to engage in a very different exercise. We need to consider if the player is a rookie, if the player played in a first or third division league, etc. In other words a low batting average may in fact be a highly valued average if we consider the player is a rookie. Thus, the wider context within which performance is evaluated needs to be incorporated in our final decision to attribute a letter grade (value).

As such it becomes very clear to all that grading and assessment are very different species and each have their own and very distinctive pedigrees. Examinations are forms of assessment while what we report to the Registrar is grades. Thus, we need to ask ourselves: what is it that enables us to translate academic and scholarly performance during a semester into a value judgment. What additional considerations and criteria do we take into account in order to avoid spurious value judgments that reflect our own biases rather than some degree of objective value system? The answers, of course, are very complex and numerous. Different disciplines and even different departments will have their own internal and agreed upon rubrics or “understandings” that enable them to award grades that mean something in that discipline or department. The analogy with the rookie and the batting average is critical here. How do we evaluate (value) a batting average of .280 for a rookie. It may be low as batting averages go, but may in fact be more than sufficient for a major league team to sign that person on. It is the context within which value is attributed that is critical for all of us to make sense of grades.

In conclusion, therefore, this is but one small attempt to appeal for a reform of the way in which we attribute grades at the end of each semester and thus remove both the anxiety and the antagonisms that emerge at this time of the year. Let us consider, for example, ways in which letter grades can be accompanied by discipline-based or department-based rubrics and narratives that enable students, their parents and fellow faculty members in other departments and/or schools to make sense of this mystique laden letter grade and GPA.

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to: pandeli@aucegypt.edu and/or aellozy@aucegypt.edu