From Degrading to De-grading

by Alfie Kohn

YOU CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT a teacher's values and personality just by asking how he or she feels about giving grades. Some defend the practice, claiming that grades are necessary to "motivate" students. Many of these teachers actually seem to enjoy keeping intricate records of students' marks. Such teachers periodically warn students that they're going to have to know this for the test "as a way of compelling them to pay attention or do the assigned readings —and they may even use surprise quizzes for that purpose, keeping their gradebooks at the ready.

Frankly, we ought to be worried for these teachers' students. In my experience, the most impressive teachers are those who despise the whole process of giving grades. Their aversion, as it turns out, is supported by solid evidence that raises questions about the very idea of traditional grading.

Three Main Effects of Grading

Researchers have found three consistent effects of using —and especially, emphasizing the importance of —letter or number grades:

1. Grades tend to reduce students' interest in the learning itself.

One of the best-researched findings in the field of motivational psychology is that the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward (Kohn, 1993). Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that when students are told they'll need to know something for a test —or, more generally, that something they're about to do will count for a grade —they are likely to come to view that task (or book or idea) as a chore.

While it's not impossible for a student to be concerned about getting high marks and also to like what he or she is doing, the practical reality is that these two ways of thinking generally pull in opposite directions. Some research has explicitly demonstrated that a "grade orientation" and a "learning orientation" are inversely

related (Beck, Rorrer-Woody, and Pierce, 1991; Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986). More strikingly, study after study has found that students –from elementary school to graduate school, and across cultures –demonstrate less interest in learning as a result of being graded (Benware and Deci, 1984; Butler, 1987; Butler and Nisan, 1986; Grolnick and Ryan, 1987; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Hughes, Sullivan, and Mosley, 1985; Kage, 1991; Salili et al., 1976). Thus, anyone who wants to see students get hooked on words and numbers and ideas already has reason to took for other ways of assessing and describing their achievement.

2. Grades tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks.

Students of all ages who have been led to concentrate on getting a good grade are likely to pick the easiest possible assignment if given a choice (Harter, 1978; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Kage, 1991; Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986). The more pressure to get an A, the less inclination to truly challenge oneself. Thus, students who cut corners may not be lazy so much as rational; they are adapting to an environment where good grades, not intellectual exploration, are what count. They might well say to us, "Hey, you told me the point here is to bring up my GPA, to get on the honor roll. Well, I'm not stupid: the easier the assignment, the more likely that I can give you what you want. So don't blame me when I try to find the easiest thing to do and end up not learning anything."

3. Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.

Given that students may lose interest in what they're learning as a result of grades, it makes sense that they're also apt to think less deeply. One series of studies, for example, found that students given numerical grades were significantly less creative than those who received qualitative feedback but no grades. The more the task required creative thinking, in fact, the worse the performance of students who knew they were going to be graded. Providing students with comments in addition to a grade didn't help: The highest achievement occurred only when comments were given *instead of* numerical scores (Butler, 1987; Butler, 1988; Butler and Nisan, 1986).

In another experiment, students told they would be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group remembered fewer facts a week later (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987). A brand new study discovered that students who tended to think about current events in terms of what they'd need to know for a grade were less knowledgeable than their peers, even after taking other variables into account (Anderman and Johnston, 1998).

More Reasons to Just Say No to Grades

The preceding three results should be enough to cause any conscientious educator to rethink the practice of giving students grades. But there's more.

1. Grades aren't valid, reliable, or objective.

A "B" in English says nothing about what a student can do, what she understands, where she needs help. Moreover, the basis for that grade is as subjective as the result is uninformative. *A* teacher can meticulously record scores for one test or assignment after another, eventually calculating averages down to a hundredth of a percentage point, but that doesn't change the arbitrariness of each of these individual marks. Even the score on a math test is largely a reflection of how the test was written: what skills the teacher decided to assess, what kinds of questions happened to be left out, and how many points each section was "worth."

Moreover, research has long been available to confirm what all of us know: any given assignment may well be given two different grades by two equally qualified teachers. It may even be given two different grades by a single teacher who reads it at two different times (for example, see some of the early research reviewed in Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971). In short, what grades offer is spurious precision—a subjective rating masquerading as an objective evaluation.

2. Grades distort the curriculum.

A school's use of letter or number grades may encourage what I like to call a "bunch of facts" approach to instruction because that sort of learning is easier to score. The tail of assessment thus comes to wag the educational dog.

3. Grades waste a lot of time that could be spent on learning.

Add up all the hours that teachers spend fussing with their gradebooks. Then factor in the (mostly unpleasant) conversations they have with students and their parents about grades. It's tempting to just roll our eyes when confronted with whining or wheedling, but the real problem rests with the practice of grading itself.

4. Grades encourage cheating.

Again, we can continue to blame and punish all the students who cheat—or we can look for the structural reasons this keeps happening. Researchers have found that the more students are led to focus on getting good grades, the more likely they are to cheat, even if they themselves regard cheating as wrong (Anderman, Griesinger, and Westerfield, 1998; Milton, Pollio, and Elson, 1986).

5. Grades spoil teachers' relationships with students.

Consider this lament, which could have been offered by a teacher in your district:

> I'm getting tired of running a classroom in which everything we do revolves around grades. I'm tired of being suspicious when students give me compliments, wondering whether or not they are just trying to raise their grade. I'm tired of spending so much time and energy grading your papers, when there are probably a dozen more productive and enjoyable ways for all of us to handle the evaluation of papers. I'm tired of hearing you ask me, "Does this count?" And, heaven knows, I'm certainly tired of all those little arguments and disagreements we get into concerning marks which take so much fun out of the teaching and the learning... (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971, p. 115).

Grades spoil students' relationships with each other. The quality of students' thinking has been shown to depend partly on the extent to which they are permitted to learn cooperatively (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Kohn, 1992). Thus, the ill feelings, suspicion, and resentment generated by grades aren't just disagreeable in their own right; they interfere with learning.

The most destructive form of grading by far is that which is done "on a curve," such that the number of top grades is artificially limited: No matter how well all the students do, not all of them can get an A. Apart from the intrinsic unfairness of this arrangement, its practical effect is to teach students that others are potential obstacles to their own success. The kind of collaboration that can help all students to learn more effectively doesn't stand a chance in such an environment.

Sadly, even teachers who don't explicitly grade on a curve may assume, perhaps unconsciously, that the final grades "ought to" come out looking more or less this way: a few very good grades, a few very bad grades, and the majority somewhere in the middle. But as one group of researchers pointed out, "It is not a symbol of rigor to have grades fall into a 'normal' distribution; rather, it is a symbol of failure—failure to teach well, failure to test well, and failure to have any influence at all on the intellectual lives of students" (Milton, Pollio, and Elson, 1986, p. 225).

The competition that turns schooling into a quest for triumph and ruptures relationships among students doesn't just happen within classrooms, of course. The same effect is witnessed schoolwide when kids are not just rated but ranked, sending the message that the point isn't to learn, or even to perform well, but to defeat others. Some students might be motivated to improve their class rank, but that is completely different from being motivated to understand ideas. (Wise educators realize that it doesn't matter how motivated students are; what matters

is *how* students are motivated. It is the type of motivation that counts, not the amount.)

Grade Inflation ... and Other Distractions

Most of us are directly acquainted with at least some of these disturbing consequences of grades, yet we continue to reduce students to letters or numbers on a regular basis. Perhaps we've become inured to these effects and take them for granted. This is the way it's always been, we assume, and the way it has to be. It's rather like people who have spent all their lives in a terribly polluted city and have come to assume that this is just the way air looks—and that it's natural to be coughing all the time.

Oddly, when educators are shown that it doesn't have to be this way, some react with suspicion instead of relief. They want to know why you're making trouble, or they assert that you're exaggerating the negative effects of grades (it's really not so bad—cough, cough), or they dismiss proven alternatives to grading on the grounds that our school could never do what others schools have done.

The practical difficulties of abolishing letter grades are real. But the key question is whether those difficulties are seen as problems to be solved or as excuses for perpetuating the status quo. The logical response to the arguments and data summarized here is to say: "Good heavens! If even half of this is true, then it's imperative we do whatever we can, as soon as we can, to phase out traditional grading." Yet, many people begin and end with the problems of implementation, responding to all this evidence by saying, in effect, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, but we'll never get rid of grades because...."

It is also striking how many educators never get beyond relatively insignificant questions, such as how many tests to give, or how often to send home grade reports, or what grade should be given for a specified level of achievement (e.g., what constitutes "B" work), or what number corresponds to what letter. Some even reserve their outrage for the possibility that too many students are ending up with good grades, a reaction that suggests stinginess with As is being confused with intellectual rigor. The evidence indicates that the real problem isn't "grade inflation," it's grades. The proper occasion for outrage is not that too many students are getting A's," but that too many students have accepted that getting A's is the point of going to school.

Common Objections

Let s consider the most frequently heard responses to the above arguments — which is to say, the most common objections to getting rid of grades.

First, it is said that students expect to receive grades and even seem addicted to them. This is often true; personally, I ve taught high school students who reacted to the absence of grades with what I can only describe as existential vertigo. *(Who am I if not a B+?)* But as more elementary and even some middle schools move to replace grades with more informative (and less destructive) systems of assessment, the damage doesn t begin until students get to high school. Moreover, elementary and middle schools that *haven t* changed their practices often cite the local high school as the reason they must get students used to getting grades regardless of their damaging effects —just as high schools point the finger at colleges.

Even when students arrive in high school already accustomed to grades, already primed to ask teachers, Do we have to know this? or What do I have to do to get an A? , this is a sign that something is very wrong. It s more an indictment of what has happened to them in the past than an argument to keep doing it in the future.

Perhaps because of this training, grades can succeed in getting students to show up on time, hand in their work, and otherwise do what they re told. Many teachers are loath to give up what is essentially an instrument of control. But even to the extent this instrument works (which is not always), we are obliged to reflect on whether mindless compliance is really our goal. The teacher who exclaims, These kids would blow off my course in a minute if they weren t getting a grade for it! may be issuing a powerful indictment of his or her course. Who would be more reluctant to give up grades than a teacher who spends the period slapping transparencies on the overhead projector and lecturing endlessly at students about Romantic poets or genetic codes? Without bribes (A s) and threats (F s), students would have no reason to do such assignments. To maintain that this proves something is wrong with the kids -- or that grades are simply necessary — suggests a willful refusal to examine one s classroom practices and assumptions about teaching and learning.

If I can t give a child a better reason for studying than a grade on a report card, I ought to lock my desk and go home and stay there. So wrote Dorothy De Zouche, a Missouri teacher, in an article published in February...of 1945. But teachers who *can* give a child a better reason for studying don t need grades. Research substantiates this: When the curriculum is engaging —for example, when it involves hands-on, interactive learning activities —students who aren t graded at all perform just as well as those who are graded (Moeller and Reschke, 1993).

Another objection: it is sometimes argued that students must be given grades because colleges demand them. One might reply that "high schools have no responsibility to serve colleges by performing the sorting function for them"—particularly if that process undermines learning (Krumboltz and Yeh, 1996, p. 325). But in any case the premise of this argument is erroneous: Traditional grades are not mandatory for admission to colleges and universities. (See sidebar at the end of this article.)

Making Change

A friend of mine likes to say that people don't resist change—they resist being changed. Even terrific ideas (like moving a school from a grade orientation to a learning orientation) are guaranteed to self-destruct if they are simply forced down people's throats. The first step for an administrator, therefore, is to open up a conversation—to spend perhaps a full year just encouraging people to think and talk about the effects of (and alternatives to) traditional grades. This can happen in individual classes, as teachers facilitate discussions about how students regard grades, as well as in evening meetings with parents, or on a website—all with the help of relevant books, articles, speakers, videos, and visits to neighboring schools that are farther along in this journey.

The actual process of "de-grading" can be done in stages. For example, a high school might start by freeing ninth grade classes from grades before doing the same for upperclassmen. (Even a school that never gets beyond the first stage will have done a considerable service, giving students one full year where they can think about what they're learning instead of their GPAs.)

Another route to gradual change is to begin by eliminating only the most pernicious practices, such as grading on a curve or ranking students. Although grades, per se, may continue for a while, at least the message will be sent from the beginning that all students can do well, and that the point is to succeed rather than to beat others.

Anyone who has heard the term "authentic assessment" knows that abolishing grades doesn't mean eliminating the process of gathering information about student performance—and communicating that information to students and parents. Rather, abolishing grades opens up possibilities that are far more meaningful and constructive. These include narratives (written comments), portfolios (carefully chosen collections of students' writings and projects that demonstrate their interests, achievement, and improvement over time), student-led parent-teacher conferences, exhibitions, and other opportunities for students to show what they can do.

Of course, it's harder for a teacher to do these kinds of assessments if he or she has 150 or more students and sees each of them for 45-55 minutes a day. But that's not an argument for continuing to use traditional grades; it's an argument for challenging these archaic remnants of a factory-oriented approach to instruction, structural aspects of high schools that are bad news for reasons that go well beyond the issue of assessment. It's an argument for looking into block scheduling, team teaching, interdisciplinary courses—and learning more about schools that have arranged things so each teacher can spend more time with fewer students (e.g., Meier, 1995).

Administrators should be prepared to respond to parental concerns, some of them completely reasonable, about the prospect of edging away from grades. "Don't you value excellence?" You bet—and here's the evidence that traditional grading *undermines* excellence. "Are you just trying to spare the self-esteem of students who do poorly?" We are concerned that grades may be making things worse for such students, yes, but the problem isn't just that some kids won't get A's and will have their feelings hurt. The real problem is that almost all kids (including yours) will come to focus on grades and, as a result, their learning will be hurt.

If parents worry that grades are the only window they have into the school, we need to assure them that alternative assessments provide a far better view. But if parents don't seem to care about getting the most useful information or helping their children become more excited learners—if they demand grades for the purpose of documenting how much better their kids are than everyone else's--then we need to engage them in a discussion about whether this is a legitimate goal, and whether schools exist for the purpose of competitive credentialing or for the purpose of helping everyone to learn (Kohn, 1998; Labaree, 1997).

Above all, we need to make sure that objections and concerns about the details don't obscure the main message, which is the demonstrated harm of traditional grading on the quality of students' learning and their interest in exploring ideas.

High school administrators can do a world of good in their districts by actively supporting efforts to eliminate conventional grading in elementary and middle schools. Working with their colleagues in these schools can help pave the way for making such changes at the secondary school level.

In the Meantime

Finally, there is the question of what classroom teachers can do while grades continue to be required. The short answer is that they should do everything within their power to make grades as invisible as possible for as long as possible. Helping students forget about grades is the single best piece of advice for creating a

learning-oriented classroom.

When I was teaching high school, I did a lot of things I now regret. But one policy that still seems sensible to me was saying to students on the first day of class that, while I was compelled to give them a grade at the end of the term, I could not in good conscience ever put a letter or number on anything they did during the term—and I would not do so. I would, however, write a comment—or, better, sit down and talk with them—as often as possible to give them feedback.

At this particular school I frequently faced students who had been prepared for admission to Harvard since their early childhood—a process I have come to call "Preparation H." I knew that my refusal to rate their learning might only cause some students to worry about their marks all the more, or to create suspense about what would appear on their final grade reports, which of course would defeat the whole purpose. So I said that anyone who absolutely had to know what grade a given paper would get could come see me and we would figure it out together. An amazing thing happened: as the days went by, fewer and fewer students felt the need to ask me about grades. They began to be more involved with what we were learning because I had taken responsibility as a teacher to stop pushing grades into their faces, so to speak, whenever they completed an assignment.

What I didn't do very well, however, was to get students involved in devising the criteria for excellence (what makes a math solution elegant, an experiment well-designed, an essay persuasive, a story compelling) as well as deciding how well their projects met those criteria. I'm afraid I unilaterally set the criteria and evaluated the students' efforts. But I have seen teachers who were more willing to give up control, more committed to helping students participate in assessment and turn that into part of the learning. Teachers who work with their students to design powerful alternatives to letter grades have a replacement ready to go when the school finally abandons traditional grading—and are able to minimize the harm of such grading in the meantime.

Most Concerns about College Derail High School Learning?

Here is the good news: College admissions is not as rigid and reactionary as many people think. Here is the better news: Even when that process doesn't seem to have its priorities straight, high schools don't have to be dragged down to that level.

Sometimes it is assumed that admissions officers at the best universities are 80-year-old fuddy-duddies peering over their spectacles and muttering about "highly irregular" applications. In truth, the people charged with making these decisions are often just a few years out of college themselves and, after making their way

through a pile of interchangeable applications from 3.8-GPA, student-council-vice-president, musically-accomplished hopefuls from high-powered traditional suburban high schools, they are desperate for something unconventional. Given that the most selective colleges have been known to accept home-schooled children who have never set foot in a classroom, secondary schools have more latitude than they sometimes assume. It is not widely known, for example, that at least 280 colleges and universities don t require applicants to take either the SAT or the ACT (ACT/SAT Optional, 1997).

Admittedly, large state universities are more resistant to unconventional applications than are small private colleges simply because of economics: it takes more time, and therefore more money, for admissions officers to read meaningful application materials than it does for them to glance at a GPA or an SAT score and plug it into a formula. But I have heard of high schools approaching the admissions directors of nearby universities and saying, in effect, We d like to improve our school by getting rid of grades. Here s why. Will you work with us to make sure our seniors aren t penalized? This strategy may well be successful for the simple reason that not many high schools are requesting this at present and the added inconvenience for admissions offices is likely to be negligible. Of course, if more and more high schools abandon traditional grades, then the universities will have no choice but to adapt. This is a change that high schools will have to initiate rather than waiting for colleges to signal their readiness.

At the moment, plenty of admissions officers enjoy the convenience of class ranking, apparently because they have confused being better than one s peers with being good at something; they re looking for winners rather than learners. But relatively few colleges actually insist on this practice. When a 1993 NASSP survey asked 1,100 admissions officers what would happen if a high school stopped computing class rank, only 0.5 percent said the school s applicants would not be considered for admission, 4.5 percent said it would be a great handicap, and 14.4 percent said it would be a handicap (Levy and Riordan, 1994). In other words, it appears that the absence of class ranks would not interfere at all with students prospects for admission to four out of five colleges.

Even more impressive, some high schools not only refuse to rank their students but refuse to give any sort of letter or number grades**.** Courses are all taken pass/fail, sometimes with narrative assessments of the students performance that become part of a college application. I have spoken to representatives of each of the five schools listed below, and all assure me that, year after year, their graduates are accepted into large state universities and small, highly selective colleges. *Even the complete absence of high school grades is not a barrier to college admission*, so we don t have that excuse for continuing to subject students to the harm done by traditional grading.

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