



Assessing Students Classically

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Lesson 2: The History of Grading

Outline:

Our hope is not only that we learn to grade virtuously but that we that we do so in ways that actually nurtures the formation of the moral, intellectual, and affective virtue in our students. And we want this because we believe that their virtuous formation contributes directly to their flourishing and the flourishing of the cultures, societies, churches and schools that they will go on and help create.

Dr. Brian Williams

The Vice of Curiositas

- If we habituate students to get good grades we nurture them towards curiositas and we undermine attempts to cultivate their intellectual, affective, and moral, and spiritual formation by orienting them to the true, good, and the beautiful.
- Curiositas is a moral vice of the appetite that misuses the intellect to:
 - pursue forbidden knowledge
 - pursue knowledge for disordered means
 - pursue knowledge for disordered ends

Where did grades come from and why did academic institutions start to use them?

What problems did it solve?

- At Oxford, *leaving exams* receive marks, and they are graded in collaboration. They are placed in a general category. The exam helps the student to see what they know, what they don't know, and what they need to revise.
- The exam's results don't proclaim a verdict like a judge. In these exams it is for future- oriented tasks rather than leaving behind what has been judged.

History of Grades

- In the **13th Century**, schools had their foundation in cathedral schools, which trained boys to be priest and civil servants for the king's court. Students were taught a version of the trivium and if promising, the quadrivium.
- Gregory the IX issued the **Parens scientarium**.



- Scholars could teach without sitting for exams by local religious aristocracy.
- University of Paris could issue teaching licenses to its students.
- In **1233**, another papal bull extended the Parens scientarium.
 - Anyone formally allowed to teach in University of Toulouse could take that teaching certification and teach at any university in Europe without sitting for further examinations.
 - Universities starting tightening and formalizing their assessments.
 - Teaching licenses, diplomas, and leaving examinations became important.
- **18th Century**
 - At an Oxford graduation, you graduate en masse with your colleagues by degree. There were no diplomas, and only doctoral students names are called
 - At Harvard (1760s) and Yale (1815), we begin to see students receiving honorific roles for the first time at graduations.
 - Written exams emerge in part because of cheap paper and cheap pens, but also due to the rise of mathematics and Newtonian science, which are more easily tested by written exams than oral exams.
 - Students could be examined individually orally by any examiner, which is where William Farish enters the scene.
 - Farish began assigning marks for the first time in **1792**, numerical scores assigned to individual questions in the Tripos examination in order to avoid bias from oral examination.
 - Subsequent generations of teachers did follow in the fictitious Farish's footsteps as the "the world's laziest teacher", often times they have too many students to apprentice in any meaningful way, or because we give too much assessment.
 - 18th Century Prussian grammar schools influenced Horace Mann, and report cards emerge.
- By the **mid-19th century**, grades became normative.
- **1896** – Mount Holyoke College uses letter grades pegged to 100% scale, aligned with Prussian model of descriptive adjectives are introduced.
- Multiple Social pressures effect and entrench grading.
 - School populations boomed due to the following: Compulsory schooling, child labor laws, immigration, rise in number of girls and minorities in schools, and increasing socioeconomic advantage of education.



- There was fluctuation of grade distribution over decades that did not correlate with student achievement.

What end do the grades serve?

- There is no indication throughout this story that grades serve pedagogical function to improve student learning.
- Grades were developed for the institution to rank its students (where there is scarcity of “gold stars”)
- Grades could be seen as a simplistic lingua franca necessary for communicating between one academic institution and another (transactional end)
- We may wonder if this new language is really adequate to carry the meaning it is supposed to carry.
- We may also wonder if grades violate Aristotle’s frequent warning that we ought not expect or attempt the same kind of precision in every field of knowledge.

Students are in an interlocking system, and resources become scarce, so we wrestle with how to use grades within the system without affecting the actual ends which we think are important (intellectual, moral, spiritual).