A Short History of Grading

By Thom Hartman

Thomas Jefferson was arguably one of the well-educated Americans of his time. He was well-read, thoughtful, knowledgeable in a wide variety of topics from the arts to the sciences, and the founder of the University of Virginia. The same could probably be said of Ben Franklin, or James and Dolly Madison. On the larger world stage, we could credibly make such claims for René Descartes, William Shakespeare, Galileo, Michelangelo, and Plato.

But there is one thing unique about the education of all these people, which is different from that of you, me, and our children: none ever were given grades. All attended schools or had teachers who worked entirely on a pass/fail system.  
  
The model of education from its earliest times was one of mentorship, starting with hunter-gatherers taking their children out on the hunt 100,000 years ago, all the way up to the teaching methods employed at the university founded by Thomas Jefferson. The teacher and the students got to know one another. They interacted constantly throughout the day. The teacher knew each child, had a clear vision of each child's understanding of the coursework, and worked with each child (or encouraged them to work with each other) until the teacher was satisfied each child understood the material ... or was hopelessly incapable of being educated. Because this latter was virtually an admission of failure on the part of the teacher, it happened rarely.

When a student graduated, the most impressive thing she or he could share with a prospective employer was not a Grade Point Average (GPA) or even the name of the institution attended: it was the name of the teacher. Students of the great teachers of history often became famous themselves because of the thoroughness with which their mentors had inculcated knowledge, understanding, skill, and talent in them.

This is how things went from 98,000 BC to roughly 1800 AD. Then came William Farish.

Around the turn of the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution was going full-bore. Piece-work payments were becoming increasingly popular, and many schools were beginning to pay teachers based on the number of students they had, as opposed to a flat salary.

William Farish was a tutor at Cambridge University in England in 1792, and, other than his single contribution to the subsequent devastation of generations of schoolchildren is otherwise undistinguished and unknown by most people.  
  
Getting to know his students, one may suppose, was too much trouble for Farish. It meant work, interacting and participating daily with each child. It meant paying attention to their needs, to their understanding, to their styles of learning. It meant there was a limit on the number of students he could thus get to know, and therefore a limit on how much money he could earn.

So Farish came up with a method of teaching which would allow him to process more students in a shorter period of time. He invented grades. The grading system had originated earlier in the factories, as a way of determining if the shoes, for example, made on the assembly line were "up to grade." It was used as a benchmark to determine if the workers should be paid, and if the shoes could be sold.

Grades did not make students smarter. In fact, they had the opposite effect: they made it harder for those children to succeed whose style of learning didn't match the didactic, auditory form of lecture-teaching Farish used.

Grades didn't give students deeper insights into their topics of study. Instead, grades forced children to memorize by rote only those details necessary to pass the tests, without regard to true comprehension of the subject matter.

Grades didn't encourage critical thinking or insight skills, didn't promote questioning minds. Such behaviors are useless in the graded classroom, and within a few generations were considered so irrelevant that today they're no longer listed among the goals of public education.

Grades didn't stimulate the students, or share with them a contagious love for the subject being studied. The opposite happened, in fact, as the normative effect of grades acted as a muffling blanket to any eruptions of enthusiasm, any attempts to dig deeper into a topic, any discursions into larger significance or practical application of content.

What grades did do, however, was increase the salary of William Farish, while, at the same time, lowering his workload and reducing the hours he needed to spend in the classroom. He no longer needed to burrow into his students' minds to know if they understood a topic: his grading system would do it for him. And it would do it just as efficiently for twenty children as it would for two hundred.

Farish brought grades to the classroom, and the transformation was both sudden and startling: a revolution as rapid and overwhelming as the Industrial Revolution from which it had sprung. Within a generation, the lecture-hall/classroom shifted from a place where one heard the occasional speech by a famous thinker to the place of ordinary daily instruction.

While grades didn't help students a bit - and, in fact, had the now well-known effect of "dumbing down" entire nations - they vastly simplified the work of teachers and schools. So they spread across Europe and to America with startling speed, arriving here in the early 1800s.

Without grades, the assembly-line-classroom would not be possible. With grades, whole categories of children were discovered who didn't fit onto the conveyer belt, providing an entire new realm of employment for' adults who would diagnose, treat, and remediate these newly-discovered "learning disabled" children.

Responsibility for the success of learning shifted from teachers to students: when kids failed, it was their own fault, because they obviously had a defect or disorder of some sort.

A process of sorting and discarding the misfits began (just like in the shoe factory) which, to this day, rewards the "standard" and wounds the "different."

William Farish gained, but something precious was lost to generations of students thereafter: the mentored learning experience.

In his best-selling book Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman lays out in great detail how the factors that contribute to a happy, well-adjusted adulthood are not necessarily good grades or even high IQ. In fact, study after study has shown that there's virtually no correlation between grades in school and success in adult life.

Unfortunately for Farish, his students, and generations of students since his 1792 invention, grades do not predict success and, in fact, are not even a particularly good measurement of true learning or understanding of a topic. Studies of valedictorians have found that they're about as likely as anybody else to succeed or fail in life. Oddly enough, it's the "average students" who seem the most well-adjusted to life as adults - assuming, of course, that they were not constantly harassed, humiliated, or prodded by their parents or teachers to improve their grade point averages (GPA). Those adults who lived under the most pressure as students - and often who got the best grades - are also often the ones who crumble under the pressures of life as adults.

Along with grades came another horror for students, although it's only been in the past few decades that it's become an obsession in the public schools: standardized curriculum. If grading students frees teachers from having to get to know them, having to work one-on-one with them, and having to develop any deep sense of their skill levels, then standardized curriculum causes them to not even have to think about what level of development or knowledge a student may be at. All students must be the same! It's ordained by the all-knowing bureaucrats in their offices downtown, in the state capitol, or in Washington D.C.

And, since the standardized curriculum has implicit in it a concept of normalcy, if students are not performing well it's obviously because they - not their teachers or their schools, but they - are not normal.

Unfortunately for our children, standardized curriculum has proven to be as much of a failure as have grades in helping kids learn. The ability to perform to some mythical norm is irrelevant as a measurement of a child's abilities, just as grades are only marginally relevant as a measurement of anything other than a person's ability to take a test and to memorize. (Neither of those skills have much application to the real world, and yet they comprise the vast majority of what students are called upon to do throughout their school careers.)

There is, however, one measurable index which does do a pretty good job of predicting a child's probability of leading a happy and successful life as an adult: his or her self-esteem.

Self-esteem, however, is not generally measured in schools. Indeed, at times it seems as if modern schools were set up specifically to minimize self-esteem, producing instead compliant, unthinking little robots for parents and teachers of the machine of industrial society.

Much teaching behavior, in the holy name of Good Grades, could have been designed in a psych laboratory to disorient and shatter the self-confidence of young people, particularly those with ADD.

Parents and teachers can work together to change this situation and modify our learning environments so emphasis is put on building an enthusiasm for learning, rather than the ability to do short-term rote memory to pass a test. Grades based on the ability to memorize and recite minutiae should be replaced by a simple pass/fail system in which the teacher determines if the student has mastered the topic, understands the material, and can carry that understanding forward into other areas of study and life. In other words, we need to go back to the system that worked so well for thousands of years before Farish decided to become history's most famous lazy teacher.

Bibliography:

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