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From the Editor:

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This edition was again contributed by Professor Eugene Eoyang. Thanks once again for his support and generosity in sharing his thoughts and insights with us on issues related to teaching and learning. Contributions from colleagues outside the Teaching and Learning Centre are always appreciated.



Value for Money? How About Value for Grades?

It was the semester break in my first year of teaching at a midwestern university in the U. S. where the students tend to be more earnest than ironic. The campus was deserted. I passed a solitary student and realised I recognised him: I had just given him a D-. Then, suddenly, I heard his footsteps reversing direction coming after me: I could feel him gaining.

"Professor Eoyang," he hailed.

I braced myself.

"I want to thank you for passing me. . ."

I looked for a trace of irony in his tone. There was none.

"I know I deserved to flunk," he continued.

"No," I remonstrated, flabbergasted, "No one who attends every class, who does all the assignments, who worked as hard as you did, and learned as much as you have, deserves to flunk. I'm only sorry you didn't do better on the final so I could have given you a higher grade."

I found myself trying to justify a D- to a student, not because he was complaining that it was too low, but because he thought it overgenerous!

Another student, majoring in Police Administration enrolled in a course I gave on Oriental Fiction, came up to me after the semester to tell me how impressed he was to have earned a C in my course. I was, initially, skeptical, until I heard his explanation. "Some students," he told me, "came into this course with a background in East Asian studies. Others had some background in literature. So, say they started off at 60 at the beginning of the course, and ended up with an A (say, a 95): that means they improved 35 points, tops. Me, I had no background in East Asia and no background in literature, so I came from minus 50. So, to get a C (75) means that I went from minus 50 to plus 75, or a difference of 125 points. I figured that, even though they got higher grades, I learned more."

A third student some years later complained to me about a final course grade. I asked him if I had miscalculated on his final examination. No, he said. Did I not explain how I was going to grade in the course? Yes, he said. Did he have any problems with the way I graded on his previous assignments? No, he said. Then, I said, I can't imagine what your problem is. "Professor Eoyang," he protested, without a trace of irony, "I'm so disappointed because I got so much out of the course, that I wanted that to be reflected in the final grade!"

Each of these anecdotes reflects a different aspect of the relationship between actual learning and course grades. It is commonly -- but erroneously -- assumed, that a grade is a measure of how much has been learned. Not necessarily. It is not always true that the easier the course, the more one learned. Students are doubtless familiar with the motto "Value for Money"; what they should be more familiar with is the motto "Value for Grades". The three students described above each, in his own

way, appreciated "Value for Grades": Student A had no illusion about how much he had achieved, but he was grateful for how much he had learned. Student B realised how much progress he had made, even if he still had a lot to learn. And Student C was also proud of what he learned, even if he failed to understand that a course grade is a measurement determined by comparing his work with the work of his peers, not an index of individual student satisfaction. The instructor can judge what has been achieved, but it is the student who determines how much he has really learned. There is a difference between certifiable achievement and uncertifiable personal growth. The three students were astute in appreciating the experience of learning: that there could be such a thing as a valuable D and a worthless A, and that the "Value for Grades" principle leads one to value the intrinsic experience more than the extrinsic manifestation of that experience.

More students should be proud of what they have learned, whatever the grade, and all students should be ashamed when they have learned nothing, whatever the grade. Of course, the ideal is when maximal learning coincides with maximal achievement. But, alas, that doesn't always happen. "Value for Grades" prompts us to be smart educational shoppers. To use a commercial analogy, it's the difference between treasuring the hood ornament on a Rolls Royce that runs poorly and valuing a Ford Focus that wins the Dakar Rally through the rugged terrain in Northern Africa. If you go to a "Rolls Royce" institution, make sure you come away with more than the hood ornament. In the past, one could fool people with prestigious certifications, but nowadays it's performance -- in the workplace or on the road -- that counts. And the road is more often than not going to resemble the grueling course of the Dakar Rally. If one doesn't have grit, stamina, fortitude, and character, one will not survive the race, let alone win it.

To appreciate the disparity between learning and grades, just ask a student what she wants to get out of a course. Invariably, she will say, an A. It is never: "I hope to learn a lot." If one were to ask what "getting a good grade" means, chances are that students would think of high marks on assignments and tests, never on how much learning took place or on the lessons learned. Joseph Cheng is right, "there is too much emphasis on the acquisition of formal qualifications" (SCMP, Oct. 5, 2000). If a transcript -- even one with all As -- is all you can show for the years at a University, then you have received very poor value for your investment of time and effort. It is the intangible, unmeasurable, not to say immeasurable lessons in life that will sustain us and motivate us and inspire us. These represent added values, even if they are not reflected on the transcript.

Of course, a GPA is important if one wants to be admitted to an "elite" post-graduate or professional program. Law Schools and Medical Schools, in particular, stress high GPA's. And certainly many students with good grades are expert and efficient learners. But what they have learned may not always be of lasting value: the tricks in taking tests, how to ride the respective instructor's hobby horses, the probability of guessing at the right answer, the psychology of test giving and test taking -- although it should be said that the ability to pass tests -- whether in school or in life -- is not a negligible skill. However, there are students who would rather get an A than learn something difficult, and there are -- alas! -- too many courses where one can get an A without learning anything. Getting good grades may help a student admitted, but effective and committed learning is what will prove invaluable over the long haul.

Most students want merely cosmetic grades -- designer label knockoffs -- the most pizzazz for the least effort: what they get is all sizzle and no fire. The smart student will have a fire in her belly to learn, and what she will get out of education is what Walter Pater called, in another context, "a hard gem-like flame" -- something that will not be extinguished at graduation.

That may be the most valuable lesson of all.

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