

# Grading Systems produce A, F junkies

by Jerry Farber

There's no question that the grading system is effective in training people to do what they're told. The question is: what does it do for learning?

Grades focus our attention. But on what? On the test. Academic success, as everyone knows, is something that we measure not in knowledge but in grade points. What we get on the final is all-important; what we retain after the final is irrelevant. Grades don't make us want to enrich our minds; they make us want to please our teachers (or at least put them on). Grades are a game. When the term is over, you shuffle the deck and begin a new round. Who reads his textbooks after the grades are in? What's the point? It doesn't go on your score.

Oddly enough, many of us understand all of this and yet remain convinced that we need to be graded in order to learn. When we get to college, twelve years of slave work have very likely convinced us that learning is dull, plodding and unpalatable. We may think we need to be graded; we assume that without the grades we'd never go through all that misery voluntarily. But, in fact, we've been had. We've been prodded with phony motivations so long that we've become insensitive to the true ones. We're like those sleeping pill addicts who have reached the point where they need strong artificial inducement to do what comes naturally. We're grade junkies — convinced that we'd never learn without the A's and F's to keep us going. Grades have prevented us from growing up. No matter how old a person is — when he attends school, he's still a child, tempted with lollipops and threatened with spankings.

## Wanting to learn is learning

Learning happens when you want to know. Ask yourself: did you need grades to learn how to drive? To learn how to talk? To learn how to play chess — or play the guitar — or dance — or find your way around a new city? Yet these are things we do very well — much better than we handle that French or Spanish that we were graded in for years in high school. Some of us, though, are certain that, while we might learn to drive or play chess without grades, we still need them to force us to learn the things we don't really want to learn — math, for instance. But is that really true? If for any reason you really want or need some math — say, algebra — you can learn it without being graded. And if you don't want it and don't need it, you'll probably never get it straight, grades or not. Just because you pass a subject doesn't mean you've learned it. How much time did you spend on algebra and geometry in high school? Two years? How much do you remember? Or what about grammar? How much did all those years of force-fed grammar do for you? You learn to talk (without being graded) from the people around you, not from gerunds and modifiers. And as for writing — if you ever do learn to write well, you can bet your sweet ass it won't be predicate nominatives that teach you. Perhaps those subjects that we would never study without being graded are the very subjects that we lose hold of as soon as the last test is over.

Still, some of us maintain that we need grades to give us self-discipline. But do you want to see real self-discipline? Look at some kid working on his car all week-end long. His parents even have to drag him in for dinner. And yet, if that kid had been compelled to work on cars all his life and had been continually graded on it, then he'd swear up and down that he needed those grades to give him self-discipline.

## Grades perpetuate intellectual slavery

It is only recently — and out of school — that I have begun to understand self-discipline in writing. It grows out of freedom, not out of coercion. Self-discipline isn't staying up all night to finish a term paper; that's slave work. Self-discipline is devising one paragraph fanatically for weeks — for not other reason than that you yourself aren't happy with it. Self-discipline is following a problem through tedious, repetitive laboratory experiments, because there's no other way of finding out what you want to know. Or it can be surfing all day long every single day for an entire summer until you are good at it. Self-discipline is nothing more than a certain way of pleasing yourself, and it is the last thing anyone is likely to learn for a grade.

Coercion inside school probably leads many of us to develop our self-discipline in areas untouched by the classroom. Who knows? If movie-going, dancing and surfing were the only required subjects, there might well be a poetic renaissance. I suspect that most kids fool around with writing on their own at some point — diaries, poetry, whatever — but this interest rarely survives school. When you learn that writing is intellectual slave work, it's all over.

Do you think you're a lazy student? No wonder! Slaves are almost always lazy.

Suppose I go to college: I want to be a chemist or a high school teacher or an accountant. Are grades really my only reason for learning the field? Is getting graded going to turn me on to my subject? Or is it more likely to turn me off? How sad this is. History is so engrossing. Literature is so beautiful. And school is likely to turn them dull or even ugly. Can you imagine what would happen if they graded you on sex? The race would die out.

Wouldn't it be great to be free to learn? Without penalties and threats, without having to play childish competitive games for gold and silver stars? Can you even imagine what the freedom to learn might be like?

Perhaps this kind of freedom sounds attractive to you but you're convinced that it isn't suited to our society. Even if the grading system can be shown to work against learning, you may assume that grades are still necessary to evaluate people — to screen people for various kinds of work.

## Personal evaluation, not only grades

But think about it. Do you really believe that the best way to determine someone's qualifications is to grade him — A, B, C, D, F — week by week, day by day, in everything he studies for 16 years of school? Is this monstrous rigamarole honestly necessary in order to determine who gets which jobs?

There are far better ways to determine a person's qualifications. Many fields already do their own screening by examination; the bar exam is one instance. In some areas — journalism, for example — supervised on-the-job experience would probably be the most effective screening and qualifying technique. Other fields might call for a combination of methods. Engineers, for example, could be qualified through apprenticeship, plus a demonstration of reasonable competency on exams at various levels — exams on which they would, of course, get an unlimited number of tries.

In a great many fields, no screening technique is necessary at all. Countless employers, public and private, require a college degree for no really good reason, simply because it enables their personnel departments to avoid making any meaningful individual evaluation and because it indicates some degree of standardization. There is no reason why a person should be forced to spend four years of his life in college just to get a decent job and then discover that he would have been much better off working in the field itself for four years and pursuing his own learning interests on a less rigid and formal basis.

Still it might be argued that eliminating grades entirely would require too sudden a shift in our society. I could maintain that the sudden shift is desirable. In any case, though, society is not likely to face the simultaneous abandonment of grading by every school in the country. Furthermore, on a campus where there is enormous resistance to abolishing grades one could put forth a fairly good half-way compromise the credit system — which is, from my point of view, worth trying even though it falls short of what should be the real goal: no grades at all.

## End processing with gold stars

Under this system, some courses could be made totally free of grading; basic Algebra, say, or drawing or poetry writing. The rest would be run on a credit basis. If you meet the minimum requirements of a course, you get credit for it. No A's or C's or silver stars. Just credit. And if you don't meet the requirements, nothing happens. You don't lose anything or get penalized; you just don't get credit for that course. This is not the pass-fail system. Pass-fail is a drag; if you don't pass a course, you get hurt. Under the credit system you simply either get credit or you don't. All that your record shows is the courses you've earned credit for (not the ones you've attempted). And when you get credit for enough courses, you can get some kind of certification or credential, if you want one, according to the number and type of courses you've taken. And these should not be just a few assembly-line four-year degrees: AB, DS and so on; there should be scores of more meaningful and varied certifications and degrees. Or maybe there should be none at all, just a list of the courses for which you have credit.

What's wrong with that? College becomes something more like a place for learning and growth, not fear and anxiety. It becomes a learning community, not a gladiatorial arena where you're pitted in daily battle against your fellow students. In elementary and secondary schools, of course there is an even weaker pretext for grading and even more to be gained by its abolishment.

And we mustn't be too quick to assume that abolishing A's and F's would make our colleges still more overcrowded. If we eliminate the pointless Mickey-Mouse requirements that are foisted on everyone, if we eliminate the gold-star games and all the administrative paperwork and class busywork that go along with them, if we reduce the overwhelming pressure for a meaningless, standardized degree, then perhaps we'll end up with learning facilities that can accommodate even more students than the number that get processed in the factories that we currently operate.

And if an employer wants not just degrees but grade-point averages too, the colleges will explain that that's not what they are there for. Graduate schools, for their part, will probably not present a serious problem. They already put heavy emphasis on criteria other than GPA's. They stress interviews, personal recommendations; most of them already give their own entrance exams anyway. Besides, the best graduate schools will probably be delighted to get some live students for a change.

But what about the students themselves? Can they live without grades? Can they learn without them? Perhaps we should be asking ourselves: can they really learn with them?