The role of final grades in university education

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It is curious, and depressing, that in the thirty-two pages of the Arbitrator's Award on the dismissal of Denis Rancourt, there is no discussion of the role final course grades play in education. When administrators are quoted on the value of final grades, they talk about their usefulness to graduate schools and employers, not about their value in teaching or learning.

Denis Rancourt was a professor of physics at the University of Ottawa until 31 March 2009, when the university formally dismissed him. Rancourt grieved that dismissal through his union, the Association of Professors of the University of Ottawa. Just last week, the arbitrator in the case, Claude H. Foisy, found the dismissal to be justified and denied the grievance. ("Arbitrator upholds University of Ottawa's firing of tenured professor," January 28, 2014.)

The short account of the case is that Rancourt was fired for giving each student in his Solid State Physics course, twenty-three in total, an A+. The short account isn't entirely accurate. Rancourt was fired for violating a requirement to evaluate students' performance objectively and in a manner appropriate to the course. That all his students received an A+ was cited in evidence that Rancourt did not grade objectively, but wasn't in itself the grounds for his dismissal.

Interestingly, the arbitrator differed from the dean who began the dismissal proceedings on the matter just how Rancourt violated the grading requirement. The dean held that Rancourt used a student-centred grading approach that wasn't objective. The arbitrator held that Rancourt assigned final grades solely on the basis of attendance, thereby failing to grade the performance of his students. That the arbitrator was concerned to show that Rancourt was not using a student-centred approach but grading solely on the basis of attendance would seem to indicate that if Rancourt had been grading as the dean alleged he was, Rancourt's grievance would have succeeded.

Rancourt, for his part, maintains that he did not grade by attendance but used a student-centred approach. In his telling, for each student, Rancourt would, in consultation with that student, determine the student's learning potential; Rancourt assigned final grades on the basis of how close a student came to realizing her potential.

What divided Rancourt and the dean, then, was whether this method counted as objective under the language of the requirement. Though the Award itself doesn't tell us what the dean thought "objective" means, we are probably right to suppose that his conception involved measuring performance against a common standard of mastery of course material. Objective, then, implies one standard for everyone.

Rancourt, though, says that his method of assigning final grades is also objective, in that it is an objective matter to what degree a student has risen to her potential as a learner in a course. A standard can be objective whether common or individual.

Academic freedom with respect to teaching is relevant here if Rancourt's dismissal depends on how the objectivity requirement is to be interpreted. Since Rancourt's interpretation is a fair reading of the words on the page, academic freedom would leave him free to grade according to that interpretation. If others at Ottawa U do not approve of his method of grading, they should seek to have the regulation made more specific, so that it cannot be interpreted to allow student-centred grading.

But, again, the arbitrator found that Rancourt violated the regulation by failing to assign grades on the basis of performance. On his finding, questions of objectivity needn't be asked.

One issue that this case raises for all of us is just what grading should be for, particularly what role it should play in learning.

I'm sure that all teachers at all levels agree that grades, final grades, especially, can get in the way of learning. Fears of getting a low grade can bring stress and cause a student to perform badly. A student's sense that getting a high grade in a particular course will take a lot of time and effort can convince that student not to take that course, for, she thinks, a low grade will look bad on her transcript. (Students avoid philosophy courses for this reason.) Even as universities begin to stress collaboration, collaboration itself becomes corrupted, as the ability of students to collaborate becomes itself an object of competitive grading.

High grades are rewards external to the pursuit of understanding and intellectual development, and the psychologists tell us that people who look to external rewards rather than to the rewards internal to the activities themselves are unhappy and unpleasant. Writers on education like Alfie Kohn think it amazing that there are any students at all at university who care about education for its own sake, after twelve years of having been herded through a school system by nothing but carrots and sticks. We university professors can assure him that there aren't many.

There are, I think, plenty of good reasons from the point of view of learning to seek different ways to assign grades, or to go with simple pass/fail schemes.

What is there on the other side? Well, there's the idea that without a bit of external reward, few students would be motivated to try at all, and even the students who do value internal rewards would lose momentum over the four years of degree study.

In the Award in the Rancourt arbitration, what we hear from the side of administrators is the fear that unless we all grade according to a common standard, grades and universities will lose their status as credentializing agents. Universities, this worry implies, are to train students for employment and citizenship, and to let people know who has been well trained and whose training is just adequate.

Whatever one thinks of the method of grading Denis Rancourt says he used, if one cares about education one cannot be indifferent to the problems he thought he was addressing. The University of Ottawa, though, in its response to Rancourt, does not seem to care about them at all.

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