

## SUMMER ASSIGNMENT: 2013-2014

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### BHS SUMMER READING

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In addition to your work for Language and Composition, you must complete the Brewster High School summer reading assignment, which is re-printed here:

*Read at least one full length fiction or non-fiction text this summer. To supplement this longer work, read from a newspaper or a magazine (in print or on the web) at least once a week. This will be assessed in the fall.*

A copy of this assignment will be distributed to you. A list of suggested texts will be available online by the end of the school year.

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### LANGUAGE & COMPOSITION SUMMER READING

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Our first unit in the fall deals with the machinery of education itself, including some of the unique aspects of our course. You will spend part of your summer thinking and writing about that unit's essential questions:

1. What do we individually and collectively consider to be the purpose of an education?
2. To what extent does the American educational system meet that purpose?
3. To what extent should your learning be autodidactic and inquiry-based?
4. What core knowledge and skills should every American learn in school?
5. To what extent are grades a toxic part of formal schooling?
6. How should we define and police collaboration and cheating in education?
7. To what extent is your learning intrinsically or extrinsically motivated?

To prime this engine, you will read seven articles about education. Your assignment is to

1. read the assigned texts;
2. take notes on how each text explores the broad topic of education;
3. attempt to clarify your thoughts on these texts and essential questions; and
4. prepare to enter a conversation about these texts and questions in September.

There is no prescribed way for taking notes on what you read, and you are encouraged to experiment with formats that make sense to you, so long as they allow you to explore the text insightfully. Annotate the essays, use Post-Its to mark key passages, complete a double-entry journal—do whatever you like.

Two mechanisms that have worked well for students in the past are Google Drive—using your BHS account—and writing in a compendium, which is a composition notebook. Note that if you haven't used your BHS Google account before (or if it's been a year or so since you used it), you will be able to find directions for access through any of our course websites. See below.

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### REQUIRED & SUGGESTED TEXTS

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Your required texts:

- *The Onion* (Issue 44-33), "6-Year-Old Stares Down Bottomless Abyss Of Formal Schooling"
- *RSA Animate* (4/13/2011), "Changing Education Paradigms" by Sir Ken Robinson
- *Harper's Magazine* (9/2003), "Against School" by John Taylor Gatto

- *Educational Leadership* (11/2011), “The Case Against Grades” By Alfie Kohn
- *Slate* (5/1/2013), “The Case Against Grades” by Michael Thomsen
- *Popular Science* (4/24/2013), “Why I Let My Students Cheat On Their Game Theory Exam” by Peter Nonacs
- *Deadspin* (5/18/2013), “The Outrage Over Students ‘Cheating’ Is Mostly Harmful Nonsense” by Sam Eifling

There are, of course, many more examples of excellent writing about the subject. You should click on any hyperlinks in the online versions of the required texts; just doing that will give you a ramiform look at how people view education. You could also get lost in a more traditional sense: Read Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “On Education” to get a 19<sup>th</sup> century perspective, and then juxtapose him with the June 2013 issue of *Harper’s*, which has Thomas Frank’s “Getting to Eureka.” You might also dig into *Harper’s* archives for the September 2009 issue and Mark Slouka’s “Dehumanized,” which deals with the importance of the humanities in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

If you’re interested in a more tongue-in-cheek text, you might search for Drew Magary’s story of retaking the SAT at age 35 or Craig Ferguson’s “Why Everything Sucks” (the essay or the monologue). There are also dozens of excellent commencement addresses at this time of year—everything from a newly filmed versions of David Foster Wallace’s Kenyon College Address to Joss Whedon’s somewhat morbid commencement address at Wesleyan to the infamous “You Are Not Special” speech at a high school graduation.

The point is that you need me only to give you a baseline and a sense of direction. I’m providing the formula and materials; you will provide the catalyst. Spend some time chasing down different viewpoints and kinds of arguments. Fight the summer’s sort of inevitable atrophy.

Copies of the required texts will be available in the main office, in the English Department, through your teacher’s BHS website, or through our course website:

- Course Portal: <http://damagesplus.wordpress.com/>

That is a portal, or a site that links to each iteration of this course. Note that the current school year must end before new sites are created for the 2013-2014 school year. While you’re waiting, you can browse those previous iterations, which is one of the best ways to prepare for September.

Any further questions can be emailed to Mr. Eure: [meure@brewsterschools.org](mailto:meure@brewsterschools.org).



YOU KNOW, SCHOOL WOULDN'T BE SO BAD IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO GO EVERY DAY.

...AND IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO LEARN ANYTHING... AND IF YOU TOOK AWAY ALL THE TEACHERS AND ALL THE OTHER KIDS. IF IT WAS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT, SCHOOL WOULD BE GREAT.



A LOT OF THINGS ARE LIKE THAT.

NOBODY ASKS ME HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE. I'VE GOT TONS OF IDEAS!

© Bill Watterson

From *The Onion*

Issue 44-33 • Aug 15, 2008

## 6-YEAR-OLD STARES DOWN BOTTOMLESS ABYSS OF FORMAL SCHOOLING



*First-grader Connor Bolduc does not have the capacity to imagine the scope of the hell he is in for.*

CARPENTERSVILLE, IL—Local first-grader Connor Bolduc, 6, experienced the first inkling of a coming lifetime of existential dread Monday upon recognizing his cruel destiny to participate in compulsory education for the better part of the next two decades, sources reported.

"I don't want to go to school," Bolduc told his parents, the crushing reality of his situation having yet to fully dawn on his naïve consciousness. "I want to play outside with my friends."

While Bolduc stood waiting for the bus to pick him up on his first day of elementary school, his parents reportedly were able to "see the wheels turning in his little brain" as the child, for the first time in his life, began to understand how dire and hopeless his situation had actually become.

Basic math—which the child has blissfully yet to learn—clearly demonstrates that the number of years before he will be released from the horrifying prison of formal schooling, is more than twice the length of time he has yet existed. According to a conservative estimate of six hours of school five days a week for nine months of the year, Bolduc faces an estimated 14,400 hours trapped in an endless succession of nearly identical, suffocating classrooms.

This nightmarish but undeniably real scenario does not take into account additional time spent on homework, extracurricular responsibilities, or college, sources said.

"I can't wait until school is over," said the 3-foot-tall tragic figure, who would not have been able, if asked, to contemplate the amount of time between now and summer, let alone the years and years of tedium to follow.

The concept of wasting a majority of daylight hours sitting still in a classroom when he could be riding his bicycle, playing in his tree fort, or lying in the grass looking at bugs—especially considering that he had already wasted two years of his life attending preschool and kindergarten—seemed impossibly unfair to Bolduc. Moreover, sources said, he had no idea how much worse the inescapable truth will turn out to be.

Shortly after his mommy, homemaker Ellen Bolduc, 31, assured him that he would be able to resume playtime "when school lets out," Connor's innocent brain only then began to work out the implication of that sentence to its inevitable, soul-crushing conclusion.

When pressed for more detail on the exact timing of that event, Mrs. Bolduc would only reply "soon." At that point, the normally energetic child grew quiet before asking a follow-up question, "After [younger sister] Maddy's birthday?" thereby setting the stage for the first of thousands of rushing realizations he will be forced to come to grips with over the course of his subsequent existence.

Madison Ellen Bolduc was born on Sept. 28.

After learning that the first grade will continue for eight excruciating months beyond that date, it was only a matter of time before Bolduc inquired into what grade comes after first grade, and, when told, would probe further into how many grades he will have to complete before allowed to play with his friends.

The answer to that fatal question—12, a number too large for Bolduc to count on the fingers of both hands—will be enough to nearly shatter the boy's still-forming psyche, said child psychology expert Eli Wasserbaum.

"When you consider that it doesn't include another four years of secondary education, plus five more years of medical school, if he wants to follow his previously stated goal to grow up to be a doctor like his daddy, this will come as an interminably deep chasm of drudgery and imprisonment to [Connor]," said Wasserbaum. "It's difficult to know the effect on his psychological well-being when he grasps the full truth: that his education will be followed by approximately four decades of work, bills, and taxes, during which he will also rear his own children to face the same fate, all of which will, of course, be followed by a brief, almost inconsequential retirement, and his inevitable death."

"Even a 50-year-old adult would have trouble processing such a monstrous notion," Wasserbaum added. "Oh my God, I'm 50 years old."

The first of Bolduc's remaining 2,299 days of school will resume at 8 a.m. tomorrow. On the next 624 Sundays, he will also be forced to attend church.

From *RSA Animate*

April 13, 2011

## CHANGING EDUCATION PARADIGMS

by Sir Ken Robinson

Every country on earth at the moment is reforming public education. There are two reasons for it. The first of them is economic. People are trying to work out “how do we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st century”? How do we do that, given that we can’t anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week as the recent turmoil is demonstrating? How do we do that?

The second, though, is cultural. Every country on earth is trying to figure out how do we educate our children so they have a sense of cultural identity and so that we can pass on the cultural genes of our communities while being part of the process of globalization; how do we square that circle? The problem is, they’re trying to meet the future by doing what they did in the past, and on the way they’re alienating millions of kids who don’t see any purpose in going to school. When we went to school, we were kept there with a story which is if you worked hard and did well, and got a college degree, you would have a job. Our kids don’t believe that! And they’re right not to, by the way. You’re better having a degree than not, but it’s not a guarantee anymore, and particularly not if the route to it marginalizes most of the things that you think are important about yourself. And so people say we have to raise standards if this is a breakthrough. You know, like, really? Yes! We should! Why would you lower them? I haven’t come across an argument that persuades me of lowering them. But raising them, of course we should raise them.

The problem is, the current system of education was designed and conceived and constructed for a different age. It was conceived in the intellectual culture of the enlightenment and in the economic circumstances of the industrial revolution. Before the middle of the 19th century there were no systems of public education. Not really... I mean you could get educated by Jesuits, you know, if you had the money. But public education, paid for from taxation, compulsory to everybody, and free at the point of delivery, that was a revolutionary idea. And many people objected to it. They said “It’s not possible for many street kids, working class children, to benefit from public education. They’re incapable of learning to read and write, and why are we spending time on this?”

So there’s also built into it a whole series of assumptions about social structure and capacity. It was driven by an economic imperative of the time, but running right through it was an intellectual model of the mind, which was essentially the Enlightenment view of intelligence that real intelligence consists in this certain type of reductive reasoning and a knowledge of the classics, originally, what we’ve come to think of as academic ability. And this is deep in the gene pool of public education, that there are really two types of people, academic and non-academic, smart people and non-smart people. And the consequence of that is that many brilliant people think they’re not because they’ve been judged against this particular view of the mind.

So we have twin pillars: economic and intellectual. And my view is that this model has caused chaos in many people’s lives. It’s been great for some; there have been people who have benefited wonderfully from it. But most people have not. Instead they suffer this: this is the modern epidemic, and it’s as

misplaced, and it's as fictitious: this is the plague of ADHD. Now this is a map of the instance of ADHD in America or prescriptions for ADHD. Don't mistake me; I don't mean to say there is no such thing as Attention-Deficit Disorder. I'm not qualified to say if there is such a thing. I know that a great majority of psychologists and pediatricians think there is such a thing. But it's still a matter of debate. What I do know for a fact is it's not an epidemic. These kids are being medicated as routinely as we had our tonsils taken out, and on the same whimsical basis and for the same reason: medical fashion.

Our children are living in the most intensive stimulating period in the history of the earth. They're being besieged with information and coerced for attention from every platform: computers, from iPhones, from advertising hoardings, from hundreds of television channels. And we're penalizing them now for getting distracted. From what? Boring stuff. At school, for the most part. It seems to me not a coincidence, totally, that the instance of ADHD has risen in parallel with the growth of the standardized testing. Now these kids are being given Ritalin and Aderol and all manner of things, often quite dangerous drugs, to get them focused and calm them down. But according to this, Attention-Deficit Disorder increases as you travel east across the country. People start losing interest in Oklahoma, they can hardly think straight in Arkansas, and by the time they get to Washington they've lost it completely (and there are separate reasons for that, I believe). It's a fictitious epidemic.

If you think of it, the arts, and I don't say this exclusively to the arts, I think it's also true of science and of maths, but I say about arts particularly because they are the victims of this mentality currently, particularly. The arts especially address the idea of aesthetic experience. An aesthetic experience is one in which your senses are operating at their peak, when you are present in the current moment, when you are resonating with the excitement of this thing that you're experiencing, when you are fully alive. An anesthetic is when you shut your senses off and deaden yourself to what's happening. And a lot of these drugs are that. We are getting our children through education by anesthetizing them. And I think we should be doing the exact opposite. We shouldn't be putting them to sleep, we should be waking them up to what they have inside of themselves! But the model we have is this: I believe we have a system of education that is modeled on the interests of industrialism and in the image of it.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Schools are still pretty much organized on factory lines: ringing bells, separate facilities, specialized into separate subjects. We still educate children by batches, you know, we put them through the system by age group. Why do we do that? Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are? You know, it's like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture. Well, I know some kids who are much better than other kids at the same age in different disciplines, or at different times of the day, or better in smaller groups than large groups, or sometimes they want to be on their own. If you're interested in the model of learning you don't start from this production line mentality. It's essentially about conformity and it's increasingly about that as you look at the growth of standardized testing and standardized curricula. And it's about standardization.

I believe we've got to go in the exact opposite direction. That's what I mean about changing the paradigm. There was a great study done recently of divergent thinking. It was published a couple years ago. Divergent thinking isn't the same thing as creativity. I define creativity as the process of having original ideas that have value. Divergent thinking isn't a synonym but it's an essential capacity for creativity. It's the ability to see lots of possible answers to a question, lots of possible ways of interpreting a question, to think (what Ed De Bond would probably call) laterally, to think not just in

linear or convergent ways, to see multiple answers, not one! So, I mean, there are tests for this. One kind of cod example would be people might be asked to say “how many uses can you think of for a paper clip?” All those routine questions. Most people might be able to come up with ten or fifteen. People who are good at this might come up with two hundred. And they do that by saying, “well, could the paper clip be two hundred feet tall and made out of foam rubber?” You know, like “does it have to be a paper clip as we know it, Jim”.

Now there are tests for this, and they gave them to fifteen hundred people in a book called “Break Point and Beyond”. And on the protocol of the test, if you scored above a certain level, you’d be considered to be a genius at divergent thinking. Okay? So my question to you is, what percentage of the people tested, of the fifteen hundred, scored at genius level for divergent thinking? Now you need to know one more thing about them: these were kindergarten children. So what do you think? What percentage at genius level? Eighty? You think eighty? Okay. Ninety-eight percent. Now, the thing about this was it was a longitudinal study. So they re-tested the same children five years later, age of eight to ten. What do you think? Fifty? They re-tested them again five years later at ages thirteen to fifteen. You can see a trend here, can’t you?

Now, this tells an interesting story, because you could have imagined it going the other way, couldn’t you? You start off not being very good, but you get better as you get older. But this shows two things. One is, we all have this capacity, and two, it mostly deteriorates. Now a lot of things have happened to these kids as they’ve grown up. A lot. But one of the most important things that happened to them, I am convinced, is that by now, they have become educated. They know they’ve spent ten years in school being told there’s one answer, it’s in the back. And don’t look! And don’t copy! Because that’s cheating! I mean, outside schools, that’s called collaboration, you know, but inside schools...

Now this isn’t because teachers want it this way, it’s just because it happens that way. It’s because it’s in the gene pool of education. We have to think differently about human capacity. We have to get over this old conception of academic, non-academic, abstract, theoretical, vocational... and see it for what it is, a myth. Second, you have to recognize that most great learning happens in groups, that collaboration is the stuff of growth. If you atomize people and separate them and judge them separately, we form a kind of disjunction between them and their natural learning environment. And thirdly, it’s crucially about the culture of our institutions, the habits of institution and the habitats that they occupy.

*2008 transcription of an RSA Animate that was adapted from a talk given at the RSA by Sir Ken Robinson, world-renowned education and creativity expert and recipient of the RSA's Benjamin Franklin award.*

From *Harper's Magazine*

September, 2003

## Against School:

### *How public education cripples our kids, and why*

by John Taylor Gatto

I taught for thirty years in some of the worst schools in Manhattan, and in some of the best, and during that time I became an expert in boredom. Boredom was everywhere in my world, and if you asked the kids, as I often did, *why* they felt so bored, they always gave the same answers: They said the work was stupid, that it made no sense, that they already knew it. They said they wanted to be doing something real, not just sitting around. They said teachers didn't seem to know much about their subjects and clearly weren't interested in learning more. And the kids were right: their teachers were every bit as bored as they were.

Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teachers' lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there. When asked why *they* feel bored, the teachers tend to blame the kids, as you might expect. Who wouldn't get bored teaching students who are rude and interested only in grades? If even that. Of course, teachers are themselves products of the same twelve-year compulsory school programs that so thoroughly bore their students, and as school personnel they are trapped inside structures even more rigid than those imposed upon the children. Who, then, is to blame?

We all are. My grandfather taught me that. One afternoon when I was seven I complained to him of boredom, and he batted me hard on the head. He told me that I was never to use that term in his presence again, that if I was bored it was my fault and no one else's. The obligation to amuse and instruct myself was entirely my own, and people who didn't know that were childish people, to be avoided if possible. Certainly not to be trusted. That episode cured me of boredom forever, and here and there over the years I was able to pass on the lesson to some remarkable student. For the most part, however, I found it futile to challenge the official notion that boredom and childishness were the natural state of affairs in the classroom. Often I had to defy custom, and even bend the law, to help kids break out of this trap.

The empire struck back, of course; childish adults regularly conflate opposition with disloyalty. I once returned from a medical leave to discover that all evidence of my having been granted the leave had been purposely destroyed, that my job had been terminated, and that I no longer possessed even a teaching license. After nine months of tormented effort I was able to retrieve the license when a school secretary testified to witnessing the plot unfold. In the meantime my family suffered more than I care to remember. By the time I finally retired in 1991, I had more than enough reason to think of our schools - with their long-term, cell-block-style, forced confinement of both students and teachers - as virtual factories of childishness. Yet I honestly could not see why they had to be that way. My own experience had revealed to me what many other teachers must learn along the way, too, yet keep to themselves for fear of reprisal: if we wanted to we could easily and inexpensively jettison the old, stupid structures and help kids take an education rather than merely receive a schooling. We could encourage the best qualities of youthfulness - curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for



surprising insight - simply by being more flexible about time, texts, and tests, by introducing kids to truly competent adults, and by giving each student what autonomy he or she needs in order to take a risk every now and then.

But we don't do that. And the more I asked why not, and persisted in thinking about the "problem" of schooling as an engineer might, the more I missed the point: What if there is no "problem" with our schools? What if they are the way they are, so expensively flying in the face of common sense and long experience in how children learn things, not because they are doing something wrong but because they are doing something right? Is it possible that George W. Bush accidentally spoke the truth when he said we would "leave no child behind"? Could it be that our schools are designed to make sure not one of them ever really grows up?

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Do we really need school? I don't mean education, just forced schooling: six classes a day, five days a week, nine months a year, for twelve years. Is this deadly routine really necessary? And if so, for what? Don't hide behind reading, writing, and arithmetic as a rationale, because 2 million happy homeschoolers have surely put that banal justification to rest. Even if they hadn't, a considerable number of well-known Americans never went through the twelve-year wringer our kids currently go through, and they turned out all right. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln? Someone taught them, to be sure, but they were not products of a school system, and not one of them was ever "graduated" from a secondary school. Throughout most of American history, kids generally didn't go to high school, yet the unschooled rose to be admirals, like Farragut; inventors, like Edison; captains of industry, like Carnegie and Rockefeller; writers, like Melville and Twain and Conrad; and even scholars, like Margaret Mead. In fact, until pretty recently people who reached the age of thirteen weren't looked upon as children at all. Ariel Durant, who co-wrote an enormous, and very good, multivolume history of the world with her husband, Will, was happily married at fifteen, and who could reasonably claim that Ariel Durant was an uneducated person? Unschooled, perhaps, but not uneducated.

We have been taught (that is, schooled) in this country to think of "success" as synonymous with, or at least dependent upon, "schooling," but historically that isn't true in either an intellectual or a financial sense. And plenty of people throughout the world today find a way to educate themselves without resorting to a system of compulsory secondary schools that all too often resemble prisons. Why, then, do Americans confuse education with just such a system? What exactly is the purpose of our public schools?

Mass schooling of a compulsory nature really got its teeth into the United States between 1905 and 1915, though it was conceived of much earlier and pushed for throughout most of the nineteenth century. The reason given for this enormous upheaval of family life and cultural traditions was, roughly speaking, threefold:

- 1) To make good people.
- 2) To make good citizens.
- 3) To make each person his or her personal best.

These goals are still trotted out today on a regular basis, and most of us accept them in one form or another as a decent definition of public education's mission, however short schools actually fall in

achieving them. But we are dead wrong. Compounding our error is the fact that the national literature holds numerous and surprisingly consistent statements of compulsory schooling's true purpose. We have, for example, the great H. L. Mencken, who wrote in *The American Mercury* for April 1924 that the aim of public education is not

to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence. . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim. . . is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States . . . and that is its aim everywhere else.

Because of Mencken's reputation as a satirist, we might be tempted to dismiss this passage as a bit of hyperbolic sarcasm. His article, however, goes on to trace the template for our own educational system back to the now vanished, though never to be forgotten, military state of Prussia. And although he was certainly aware of the irony that we had recently been at war with Germany, the heir to Prussian thought and culture, Mencken was being perfectly serious here. Our educational system really is Prussian in origin, and that really is cause for concern.

The odd fact of a Prussian provenance for our schools pops up again and again once you know to look for it. William James alluded to it many times at the turn of the century. Orestes Brownson, the hero of Christopher Lasch's 1991 book, *The True and Only Heaven*, was publicly denouncing the Prussianization of American schools back in the 1840s. Horace Mann's "Seventh Annual Report" to the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1843 is essentially a paean to the land of Frederick the Great and a call for its schooling to be brought here. That Prussian culture loomed large in America is hardly surprising, given our early association with that utopian state. A Prussian served as Washington's aide during the Revolutionary War, and so many German-speaking people had settled here by 1795 that Congress considered publishing a German-language edition of the federal laws. But what shocks is that we should so eagerly have adopted one of the very worst aspects of Prussian culture: an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens - all in order to render the populace "manageable."

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It was from James Bryant Conant - president of Harvard for twenty years, WWI poison-gas specialist, WWII executive on the atomic-bomb project, high commissioner of the American zone in Germany after WWII, and truly one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century - that I first got wind of the real purposes of American schooling. Without Conant, we would probably not have the same style and degree of standardized testing that we enjoy today, nor would we be blessed with gargantuan high schools that warehouse 2,000 to 4,000 students at a time, like the famous Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado. Shortly after I retired from teaching I picked up Conant's 1959 book-length essay, *The Child the Parent and the State*, and was more than a little intrigued to see him mention in passing that the modern schools we attend were the result of a "revolution" engineered between 1905 and 1930. A revolution? He declines to elaborate, but he does direct the curious and the uninformed to Alexander Inglis's 1918 book, *Principles of Secondary Education*, in which "one saw this revolution through the eyes of a revolutionary."

Inglis, for whom a lecture in education at Harvard is named, makes it perfectly clear that compulsory schooling on this continent was intended to be just what it had been for Prussia in the 1820s: a fifth column into the burgeoning democratic movement that threatened to give the peasants and the proletarians a voice at the bargaining table. Modern, industrialized, compulsory schooling was to make a sort of surgical incision into the prospective unity of these underclasses. Divide children by subject, by age-grading, by constant rankings on tests, and by many other more subtle means, and it was unlikely that the ignorant mass of mankind, separated in childhood, would ever reintegrate into a dangerous whole.

Inglis breaks down the purpose - the actual purpose - of modern schooling into six basic functions, any one of which is enough to curl the hair of those innocent enough to believe the three traditional goals listed earlier:

- 1) The *adjustive* or *adaptive* function. Schools are to establish fixed habits of reaction to authority. This, of course, precludes critical judgment completely. It also pretty much destroys the idea that useful or interesting material should be taught, because you can't test for reflexive obedience until you know whether you can make kids learn, and do, foolish and boring things.
- 2) The *integrating* function. This might well be called "the conformity function," because its intention is to make children as alike as possible. People who conform are predictable, and this is of great use to those who wish to harness and manipulate a large labor force.
- 3) The *diagnostic and directive* function. School is meant to determine each student's proper social role. This is done by logging evidence mathematically and anecdotally on cumulative records. As in "your permanent record." Yes, you do have one.
- 4) The *differentiating* function. Once their social role has been "diagnosed," children are to be sorted by role and trained only so far as their destination in the social machine merits - and not one step further. So much for making kids their personal best.
- 5) The *selective* function. This refers not to human choice at all but to Darwin's theory of natural selection as applied to what he called "the favored races." In short, the idea is to help things along by consciously attempting to improve the breeding stock. Schools are meant to tag the unfit - with poor grades, remedial placement, and other punishments - clearly enough that their peers will accept them as inferior and effectively bar them from the reproductive sweepstakes. That's what all those little humiliations from first grade onward were intended to do: wash the dirt down the drain.
- 6) The *propaedeutic* function. The societal system implied by these rules will require an elite group of caretakers. To that end, a small fraction of the kids will quietly be taught how to manage this continuing project, how to watch over and control a population deliberately dumbed down and declawed in order that government might proceed unchallenged and corporations might never want for obedient labor.

That, unfortunately, is the purpose of mandatory public education in this country. And lest you take Inglis for an isolated crank with a rather too cynical take on the educational enterprise, you should know that he was hardly alone in championing these ideas. Conant himself, building on the ideas of Horace Mann and others, campaigned tirelessly for an American school system designed along the same lines. Men like George Peabody, who funded the cause of mandatory schooling throughout the

South, surely understood that the Prussian system was useful in creating not only a harmless electorate and a servile labor force but also a virtual herd of mindless consumers. In time a great number of industrial titans came to recognize the enormous profits to be had by cultivating and tending just such a herd via public education, among them Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

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There you have it. Now you know. We don't need Karl Marx's conception of a grand warfare between the classes to see that it is in the interest of complex management, economic or political, to dumb people down, to demoralize them, to divide them from one another, and to discard them if they don't conform. Class may frame the proposition, as when Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, said the following to the New York City School Teachers Association in 1909: "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks." But the motives behind the disgusting decisions that bring about these ends need not be class-based at all. They can stem purely from fear, or from the by now familiar belief that "efficiency" is the paramount virtue, rather than love, liberty, laughter, or hope. Above all, they can stem from simple greed.

There were vast fortunes to be made, after all, in an economy based on mass production and organized to favor the large corporation rather than the small business or the family farm. But mass production required mass consumption, and at the turn of the twentieth century most Americans considered it both unnatural and unwise to buy things they didn't actually need. Mandatory schooling was a godsend on that count. School didn't have to train kids in any direct sense to think they should consume nonstop, because it did something even better: it encouraged them not to think at all. And that left them sitting ducks for another great invention of the modern era - marketing.

Now, you needn't have studied marketing to know that there are two groups of people who can always be convinced to consume more than they need to: addicts and children. School has done a pretty good job of turning our children into addicts, but it has done a spectacular job of turning our children into children. Again, this is no accident. Theorists from Plato to Rousseau to our own Dr. Inglis knew that if children could be cloistered with other children, stripped of responsibility and independence, encouraged to develop only the trivializing emotions of greed, envy, jealousy, and fear, they would grow older but never truly grow up. In the 1934 edition of his once well-known book *Public Education in the United States*, Ellwood P. Cubberley detailed and praised the way the strategy of successive school enlargements had extended childhood by two to six years, and forced schooling was at that point still quite new. This same Cubberley - who was dean of Stanford's School of Education, a textbook editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Conant's friend and correspondent at Harvard - had written the following in the 1922 edition of his book *Public School Administration*: "Our schools are . . . factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned. . . . And it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down."

It's perfectly obvious from our society today what those specifications were. Maturity has by now been banished from nearly every aspect of our lives. Easy divorce laws have removed the need to work at relationships; easy credit has removed the need for fiscal self-control; easy entertainment has removed the need to learn to entertain oneself; easy answers have removed the need to ask questions. We have become a nation of children, happy to surrender our judgments and our wills to political

exhortations and commercial blandishments that would insult actual adults. We buy televisions, and then we buy the things we see on the television. We buy computers, and then we buy the things we see on the computer. We buy \$150 sneakers whether we need them or not, and when they fall apart too soon we buy another pair. We drive SUVs and believe the lie that they constitute a kind of life insurance, even when we're upside-down in them. And, worst of all, we don't bat an eye when Ari Fleischer tells us to "be careful what you say," even if we remember having been told somewhere back in school that America is the land of the free. We simply buy that one too. Our schooling, as intended, has seen to it.

Now for the good news. Once you understand the logic behind modern schooling, its tricks and traps are fairly easy to avoid. School trains children to be employees and consumers; teach your own to be leaders and adventurers. School trains children to obey reflexively; teach your own to think critically and independently. Well-schooled kids have a low threshold for boredom; help your own to develop an inner life so that they'll never be bored. Urge them to take on the serious material, the *grown-up* material, in history, literature, philosophy, music, art, economics, theology - all the stuff schoolteachers know well enough to avoid. Challenge your kids with plenty of solitude so that they can learn to enjoy their own company, to conduct inner dialogues. Well-schooled people are conditioned to dread being alone, and they seek constant companionship through the TV, the computer, the cell phone, and through shallow friendships quickly acquired and quickly abandoned. Your children should have a more meaningful life, and they can.

First, though, we must wake up to what our schools really are: laboratories of experimentation on young minds, drill centers for the habits and attitudes that corporate society demands. Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants. Don't let your own have their childhoods extended, not even for a day. If David Farragut could take command of a captured British warship as a preteen, if Thomas Edison could publish a broadsheet at the age of twelve, if Ben Franklin could apprentice himself to a printer at the same age (then put himself through a course of study that would choke a Yale senior today), there's no telling what your own kids could do. After a long life, and thirty years in the public school trenches, I've concluded that genius is as common as dirt. We suppress our genius only because we haven't yet figured out how to manage a population of educated men and women. The solution, I think, is simple and glorious. Let them manage themselves.

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## The Case Against Grades

By Alfie Kohn

*"I remember the first time that a grading rubric was attached to a piece of my writing... Suddenly all the joy was taken away. I was writing for a grade -- I was no longer exploring for me. I want to get that back. Will I ever get that back?"*

*-- Claire, a student (in Olson, 2006)*

By now enough has been written about academic assessment to fill a library, but when you stop to think about it, the whole enterprise really amounts to a straightforward two-step dance. We need to collect information about how students are doing, and then we need to share that information (along with our judgments, perhaps) with the students and their parents. Gather and report -- that's pretty much it.

You say the devil is in the details? Maybe so, but I'd argue that too much attention to the particulars of implementation may be distracting us from the bigger picture -- or at least from a pair of remarkable conclusions that emerge from the best theory, practice, and research on the subject: *Collecting information doesn't require tests, and sharing that information doesn't require grades.* In fact, students would be a lot better off without either of these relics from a less enlightened age.

Why tests are not a particularly useful way to assess student learning (at least the kind that matters), and what thoughtful educators do instead, are questions that must wait for another day. Here, our task is to take a hard look at the second practice, the use of letters or numbers as evaluative summaries of how well students have done, regardless of the method used to arrive at those judgments.

### **The Effects of Grading**

Most of the criticisms of grading you'll hear today were laid out forcefully and eloquently anywhere from four to eight decades ago (Crooks, 1933; De Zouche, 1945; Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971; Linder, 1940; Marshall, 1968), and these early essays make for eye-opening reading. They remind us just how long it's been clear there's something wrong with what we're doing as well as just how little progress we've made in acting on that realization.

In the 1980s and '90s, educational psychologists systematically studied the effects of grades. As I've reported elsewhere (Kohn, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c), when students from elementary school to college who are led to focus on grades are compared with those who aren't, the results support three robust conclusions:

\* *Grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning.* A "grading orientation" and a "learning orientation" have been shown to be inversely related and, as far as I can tell, every study that

has ever investigated the impact on intrinsic motivation of receiving grades (or instructions that emphasize the importance of getting good grades) has found a negative effect.

\* *Grades create a preference for the easiest possible task.* Impress upon students that what they're doing will count toward their grade, and their response will likely be to avoid taking any unnecessary intellectual risks. They'll choose a shorter book, or a project on a familiar topic, in order to minimize the chance of doing poorly -- not because they're "unmotivated" but because they're rational. They're responding to adults who, by telling them the goal is to get a good mark, have sent the message that success matters more than learning.

\* *Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.* They may skim books for what they'll "need to know." They're less likely to wonder, say, "How can we be sure that's true?" than to ask "Is this going to be on the test?" In one experiment, students told they'd be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group remembered fewer facts a week later (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987).

Research on the effects of grading has slowed down in the last couple of decades, but the studies that are still being done reinforce the earlier findings. For example, a grade-oriented environment is associated with increased levels of cheating (Anderman and Murdock, 2007), grades (whether or not accompanied by comments) promote a fear of failure even in high-achieving students (Pulfrey et al., 2011), and the elimination of grades (in favor of a pass/fail system) produces substantial benefits with no apparent disadvantages in medical school (White and Fantone, 2010). More important, no recent research has contradicted the earlier "big three" findings, so those conclusions still stand.

### Why Grading Is Inherently Problematic

*A student asked his Zen master how long it would take to reach enlightenment. "Ten years," the master said. But, the student persisted, what if he studied very hard? "Then 20 years," the master responded. Surprised, the student asked how long it would take if he worked very, very hard and became the most dedicated student in the Ashram. "In that case, 30 years," the master replied. His explanation: "If you have one eye on how close you are to achieving your goal, that leaves only one eye for your task."*

To understand why research finds what it does about grades, we need to shift our focus from educational measurement techniques to broader psychological and pedagogical questions. The latter serve to illuminate a series of misconceived assumptions that underlie the use of grading.

*Motivation:* While it's true that many students, after a few years of traditional schooling, could be described as motivated by grades, what counts is the nature of their motivation. Extrinsic motivation, which includes a desire to get better grades, is not only different from, but often undermines, intrinsic motivation, a desire to learn for its own sake (Kohn 1999a). Many assessment specialists talk about motivation as though it were a single entity -- and their recommended practices just put a finer gloss on a system of rewards and punishments that leads students to chase marks and become less interested in the learning itself. If nourishing their *desire* to learn is a primary goal for us, then grading is problematic by its very nature.

*Achievement:* Two educational psychologists pointed out that “an overemphasis on assessment can actually undermine the pursuit of excellence” (Maehr and Midgley, 1996, p. 7). That unsettling conclusion -- which holds regardless of the quality of the assessment but is particularly applicable to the use of grades -- is based on these researchers’ own empirical findings as well as those of many others, including Carol Dweck, Carole Ames, Ruth Butler, and John Nicholls (for a review, see Kohn 1999b, chapter 2). In brief: the more students are led to focus on *how well* they’re doing, the less engaged they tend to be with *what* they’re doing.

It follows that all assessment must be done carefully and sparingly lest students become so concerned about their achievement (how good they are at doing something -- or, worse, how their performance compares to others’) that they’re no longer thinking about the learning itself. Even a well-meaning teacher may produce a roomful of children who are so busy monitoring their own reading skills that they’re no longer excited by the stories they’re reading. Assessment consultants worry that grades may not accurately reflect student performance; educational psychologists worry because grades fix students’ attention *on* their performance.

*Quantification:* When people ask me, a bit defensively, if it isn’t important to measure how well students are learning (or teachers are teaching), I invite them to rethink their choice of verb. There is certainly value in *assessing* the quality of learning and teaching, but that doesn’t mean it’s always necessary, or even possible, to *measure* those things -- that is, to turn them into numbers. Indeed, “measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning” (McNeil, 1986, p. xviii) -- a realization that offers a refreshing counterpoint to today’s corporate-style “school reform” and its preoccupation with data.

To talk about what happens in classrooms, let alone in children’s heads, as moving forward or backward in specifiable degrees, is not only simplistic because it fails to capture much of what is going on, but also destructive because it may change what is going on for the worse. Once we’re compelled to focus only on what can be reduced to numbers, such as how many grammatical errors are present in a composition or how many mathematical algorithms have been committed to memory, thinking has been severely compromised. And that is exactly what happens when we try to fit learning into a four- or five- or (heaven help us) 100-point scale.

*Curriculum:* “One can have the best assessment imaginable,” Howard Gardner (1991, p. 254) observed, “but unless the accompanying curriculum is of quality, the assessment has no use.” Some people in the field are candid about their relativism, offering to help align your assessment to whatever your goals or curriculum may be. The result is that teachers may become more adept at measuring how well students have mastered a collection of facts and skills whose value is questionable -- and never questioned. “If it’s not worth teaching, it’s not worth teaching well,” as Eliot Eisner (2001, p. 370) likes to say. Nor, we might add, is it worth assessing accurately.

Portfolios, for example, can be constructive if they replace grades rather than being used to *yield* them. They offer a way to thoughtfully gather a variety of meaningful examples of learning for the students to review. But what’s the point, “if instruction is dominated by worksheets so that every portfolio looks the same”? (Neill et al. 1995, p. 4). Conversely, one sometimes finds a mismatch between more thoughtful forms of pedagogy -- say, a workshop approach to teaching writing -- and a depressingly standardized assessment tool like rubrics (Wilson, 2006).



## Improving Grading: A Fool's Errand?

*"I had been advocating standards-based grading, which is a very important movement in its own right, but it took a push from some great educators to make me realize that if I wanted to focus my assessment around authentic feedback, then I should just abandon grades altogether." —New Jersey middle school teacher Jason Bedell (2010)*

Much of what is prescribed in the name of "assessing for learning" (and, for that matter, "formative assessment") leaves me uneasy: The recommended practices often seem prefabricated and mechanistic; the imperatives of data collection seem to upstage the children themselves and the goal of helping them become more enthusiastic about what they're doing. Still, if it's done only occasionally and with humility, I think it's possible to assess for learning. But *grading* for learning is, to paraphrase a 1960's-era slogan, rather like bombing for peace. Rating and ranking students (and their efforts to figure things out) is inherently counterproductive.

If I'm right -- more to the point, if all the research to which I've referred is taken seriously -- then the absence of grades is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for promoting deep thinking and a desire to engage in it. It's worth lingering on this proposition in light of a variety of efforts to sell us formulas to improve our grading techniques, none of which address the problems of grading, per se.

\* It's not enough to replace letters or numbers with labels ("exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," and so on). If you're sorting students into four or five piles, you're still grading them. Rubrics typically include numbers as well as labels, which is only one of several reasons they merit our skepticism (Wilson, 2006; Kohn, 2006).

\* It's not enough to tell students in advance exactly what's expected of them. "When school is seen as a test, rather than an adventure in ideas," teachers may persuade themselves they're being fair "if they specify, in listlike fashion, exactly what must be learned to gain a satisfactory grade...[but] such schooling is unfair in the wider sense that it prepares students to pass other people's tests without strengthening their capacity to set their own assignments in collaboration with their fellows" (Nicholls and Hazzard, 1993, p. 77).

\* It's not enough to disseminate grades more efficiently -- for example, by posting them on-line. There is a growing technology, as the late Gerald Bracey once remarked, "that permits us to do in nanoseconds things that we shouldn't be doing at all" (quoted in Mathews, 2006). In fact, posting grades on-line is a significant step backward because it enhances the salience of those grades and therefore their destructive effects on learning.

\* It's not enough to add narrative reports. "When comments and grades coexist, the comments are written to justify the grade" (Wilson, 2009, p. 60). Teachers report that students, for their part, often just turn to the grade and ignore the comment, but "when there's only a comment, they read it," says high school English teacher Jim Drier. Moreover, research suggests that the harmful impact of grades on creativity is no less (and possibly even more) potent when a narrative accompanies them. Narratives are helpful only in the absence of grades (Butler, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2011).

\* It's not enough to use "standards-based" grading. That phrase may suggest any number of things -- for example, more consistency, or a reliance on more elaborate formulas, in determining grades;

greater specificity about what each grade signifies; or an increase in the number of tasks or skills that are graded. At best, these prescriptions do nothing to address the fundamental problems with grading. At worst, they exacerbate those problems. In addition to the simplistic premise that it's always good to have more data, we find a penchant shared by the behaviorists of yesteryear that learning can and should be broken down into its components, each to be evaluated separately. And more frequent temperature-taking produces exactly the kind of disproportionate attention to performance (at the expense of learning) that researchers have found to be so counterproductive.

The term "standards-based" is sometimes intended just to mean that grading is aligned with a given set of objectives, in which case our first response should be to inquire into the value of those objectives (as well as the extent to which students were invited to help formulate them). If grades are based on state standards, there's particular reason to be concerned since those standards are often too specific, age-inappropriate, superficial, and standardized by definition. In my experience, the best teachers tend to be skeptical about aligning their teaching to a list imposed by distant authorities, or using that list as a basis for assessing how well their students are thinking.

Finally, "standards-based" may refer to something similar to criterion-based testing, where the idea is to avoid grading students on a curve. (Even some teachers who don't do so explicitly nevertheless act as though grades ought to fall into something close to a normal distribution, with only a few students receiving As. But this pattern is not a fact of life, nor is it a sign of admirable "rigor" on the teacher's part. Rather, "it is a symbol of failure -- failure to teach well, failure to test well, and failure to have any influence at all on the intellectual lives of students" [Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986].) This surely represents an improvement over a system in which the number of top marks is made artificially scarce and students are set against one another. But here we've peeled back the outer skin of the onion (competition) only to reveal more noxious layers beneath: extrinsic motivation, numerical ratings, the tendency to promote achievement at the expense of learning.

If we begin with a desire to assess more often, or to produce more data, or to improve the consistency of our grading, then certain prescriptions will follow. If, however, our point of departure isn't mostly about the grading, but about our desire for students to understand ideas from the inside out, or to get a kick out of playing with words and numbers, or to be in charge of their own learning, then we will likely end up elsewhere. We may come to see grading as a huge, noisy, fuel-guzzling, smoke-belching machine that constantly requires repairs and new parts, when what we should be doing is pulling the plug.

### **Deleting—or at Least Diluting—Grades**

"Like it or not, grading is here to stay" is a statement no responsible educator would ever offer as an excuse for inaction. What matters is whether a given practice is in the best interest of students. If it isn't, then our obligation is to work for its elimination and, in the meantime, do what we can to minimize its impact.

Replacing letter and number grades with narrative assessments or conferences -- qualitative summaries of student progress offered in writing or as part of a conversation -- is not a utopian fantasy. It has already been done successfully in many elementary and middle schools and even in some high schools, both public and private (Kohn, 1999c). It's important not only to realize that such

schools exist but to investigate *why* they've eliminated grades, how they've managed to do so (hint: the process can be gradual), and what benefits they have realized.

Naturally objections will be raised to this -- or any -- significant policy change, but once students and their parents have been shown the relevant research, reassured about their concerns, and invited to participate in constructing alternative forms of assessment, the abolition of grades proves to be not only realistic but an enormous improvement over the status quo. Sometimes it's only after grading has ended that we realize just how harmful it's been.

To address one common fear, the graduates of grade-free high schools are indeed accepted by selective private colleges and large public universities -- on the basis of narrative reports and detailed descriptions of the curriculum (as well as recommendations, essays, and interviews), which collectively offer a fuller picture of the applicant than does a grade-point average. Moreover, these schools point out that their students are often more motivated and proficient learners, thus better prepared for college, than their counterparts at traditional schools who have been preoccupied with grades.

In any case, college admission is surely no bar to eliminating grades in elementary and middle schools because colleges are largely indifferent to what students have done before high school. That leaves proponents of grades for younger children to fall back on some version of an argument I call "BGUTI": Better Get Used To It (Kohn, 2005). The claim here is that we should do unpleasant and unnecessary things to children now in order to prepare them for the fact that just such things will be done to them later. This justification is exactly as absurd as it sounds, yet it continues to drive education policy.

Even when administrators aren't ready to abandon traditional report cards, individual teachers can help to rescue learning in their own classrooms with a two-pronged strategy to "neuter grades," as one teacher described it. First, they can stop putting letter or number grades on individual assignments and instead offer only qualitative feedback. Report cards are bad enough, but the destructive effects reported by researchers (on interest in learning, preference for challenge, and quality of thinking) are compounded when students are rated on what they do in school day after day. Teachers can mitigate considerable harm by replacing grades with authentic assessments; moreover, as we've seen, any feedback they may already offer becomes much more useful in the absence of letter or number ratings.

Second, although teachers may be required to submit a final grade, there's no requirement for them to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can be invited to participate in that process either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by simply permitting students to grade themselves. If people find that idea alarming, it's probably because they realize it creates a more democratic classroom, one in which teachers must create a pedagogy and a curriculum that will truly engage students rather than allow teachers to coerce them into doing whatever they're told. In fact, negative reactions to this proposal ("It's unrealistic!") point up how grades function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a necessary or constructive way to report information about their performance.

I spoke recently to several middle and high school teachers who have de-graded their classes. Jeff Robbins, who has taught eighth-grade science in New Jersey for 15 years, concedes that "life was easier with grades" because they take so much less time than meaningful assessment. That efficiency

came at a huge cost, though, he noticed: Kids were stressed out and also preferred to avoid intellectual risks. “They’ll take an easier assignment that will guarantee the A.”

Initially Robbins announced that any project or test could be improved and resubmitted for a higher grade. Unfortunately, that failed to address the underlying problem, and he eventually realized he had to stop grading entirely. Now, he offers comments to all of his 125 students “about what they’re doing and what they need to improve on” and makes abbreviated notes in his grade book. At the end of the term, over a period of about a week, he grabs each student for a conversation at some point -- “because the system isn’t designed to allow kids this kind of feedback” -- asking “what did you learn, how did you learn it. Only at the very end of the conversation [do] I ask what grade will reflect it... and we’ll collectively arrive at something.” Like many other teachers I’ve spoken to over the years, Robbins says he almost always accepts students’ suggestions because they typically pick the same grade that he would have.

Jim Drier, an English teacher at Mundelein High School in Illinois who has about 90 students ranging “from at-risk to A.P.,” was relieved to find that it “really doesn’t take that long” to write at least a brief note on students’ assignments -- “a reaction to what they did and some advice on how they might improve.” But he never gives them “a number or grade on anything they do. The things that grades make kids do are heartbreaking for an educator”: arguing with teachers, fighting with parents, cheating, memorizing facts just for a test and then forgetting them. “This is not why I became a teacher.”

Without grades, “I think my relationships with students are better,” Drier says. “Their writing improves more quickly and the things they learn stay with them longer. I’ve had lots of kids tell me it’s changed their attitude about coming to school.” He expected resistance from parents but says that in three years only one parent has objected, and it may help that he sends a letter home to explain exactly what he’s doing and why. Now two of his colleagues are joining him in eliminating grades.

Drier’s final grades are based on students’ written self-assessments, which, in turn, are based on their review of items in their portfolios. He meets with about three-quarters of them twice a term, in most cases briefly, to assess their performance and, if necessary (although it rarely happens) to discuss a concern about the grade they’ve suggested. Asked how he manages without a grade book full of letters or numbers, Drier replies, “If I spend 18 weeks with them, I have a pretty good idea what their writing and reasoning ability is.”

A key element of authentic assessment for these and other teachers is the opportunity for students to help design the assessment and reflect on its purposes -- individually and as a class. Notice how different this is from the more common variant of self-assessment in which students merely monitor their progress toward the teacher’s (or legislature’s) goals and in which they must reduce their learning to numerical ratings with grade-like rubrics.

Points of overlap as well as divergence emerge from the testimonies of such teachers, some of which have been collected by Joe Bower (n.d.), an educator in Red Deer, Alberta. Some teachers, for example, *evaluate* their students’ performance (in qualitative terms, of course), but others believe it’s more constructive to offer *only feedback* -- which is to say, information. On the latter view, “the alternative to grades is description” and “the starting point for description is a plain sheet of paper, not a form which leads and homogenizes description” (Marshall, 1968, pp. 131, 143).

Teachers also report a variety of reactions to de-grading not only from colleagues and administrators but also from the students themselves. John Spencer (2010), an Arizona middle school teacher, concedes that “many of the ‘high performing’ students were angry at first. They saw it as unfair. They viewed school as work and their peers as competitors....Yet, over time they switch and they calm down. They end up learning more once they aren’t feeling the pressure” from grades.

Indeed, research suggests that the common tendency of students to focus on grades doesn’t reflect an innate predilection or a “learning style” to be accommodated; rather, it’s due to having been led for years to work for grades. In one study (Butler, 1992), some students were encouraged to think about how well they performed at a creative task while others were just invited to be imaginative. Each student was then taken to a room that contained a pile of pictures that other people had drawn in response to the same instructions. It also contained some information that told them how to figure out their “creativity score.” Sure enough, the children who were told to think about their performance now wanted to know how they had done relative to their peers; those who had been allowed to become immersed in the task were more interested in seeing *what* their peers had done.

Grades don’t prepare children for the “real world” -- unless one has in mind a world where interest in learning and quality of thinking are unimportant. Nor are grades a necessary part of schooling, any more than paddling or taking extended dictation could be described that way. Still, it takes courage to do right by kids in an era when the quantitative matters more than the qualitative, when meeting (someone else’s) standards counts for more than exploring ideas, and when anything “rigorous” is automatically assumed to be valuable. We have to be willing to challenge the conventional wisdom, which in this case means asking not how to improve grades but how to jettison them once and for all.

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From *Slate*  
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## The Case Against Grades:

*They lower self-esteem, discourage creativity, and reinforce the class divide*

by Michael Thomsen

There is always something or someone to blame in our struggle for education reform. Sometimes it's the "bad teachers" who get the blame. Other times it's standardized testing, insufficient funding, or slow-moving bureaucracy. I blame grades.

Grading students, from A to F, has become synonymous with education itself. Report-card day is an American rite of passage. Yet, there's reason to believe the structure of grading students is the biggest culprit in America's long, steady decline in education—SAT reading scores are at a [40-year low](#), and one [recent study ranked the U.S. 17<sup>th</sup>](#) in education, worse than Poland, Canada, Ireland, South Korea, and Denmark. It's becoming increasingly clear that the rigid and judgmental foundation of modern education is the origin point for many of our worst qualities, making it harder for many to learn because of its negative reinforcement, encouraging those who do well to gradually favor the reward of an A over the discovery of new ways of thinking, and reinforcing harsh class divides that are only getting worse as the economy idles.

A 2002 study at the University of Michigan found that [80 percent of students surveyed based their self-worth on academic performance](#)—more than cited family support as a source of self-esteem. A 2006 study at King's College showed [adolescents with low self-esteem were more likely to have poor health](#), be involved in criminal behavior, and earn less than their peers. Since it's overwhelmingly poor students who are prone to bad grades, a self-reinforcing loop is created. Poverty leads to bad grades and low self-esteem, which leads to more poverty and social dysfunction.

In its earliest forms, education was a Socratic practice of self-knowledge; an isolated act of enshrining religious traditions; or, most commonly, an informal transfer of skill on the homestead, with parents teaching children how to plant, harvest, raise livestock, or practice some craft passed through generations. That all began to change in 1792 when William Farish, a tutor and soon-to-be chemistry professor at Cambridge, became an early advocate of [evaluating student performance](#) through quantifying test results. A century later, [the logic transformed into a letter-based scale](#) first seen at Mount Holyoke College in 1897. By the 1930s, the ABC approach had been adopted by a wide group of schools and universities around the country and, not coincidentally, would be reabsorbed by a number of industrial interests, including dairy, beef, poultry, and plywood. (That's some A+ plywood!)

These changes coincided with the rapid expansion of compulsory education in America, a legal standard that had been adopted by all 50 states by 1917. Grades were the foundation of this expansion, providing data points for a system in which one person would get a corner office and another would be lost to a life flipping burgers or changing motor oil. If you want to succeed in life, stay in school, get good grades.

The catch is that fear of negative outcomes has been repeatedly shown to be a major impediment to learning. A [survey of students at the University of Cape Town](#) found that stress and fear of failing tests led to "classic symptoms of procrastination and avoidance," confusion and low self-esteem. " ... [I]t's



one of those things where if I have to fail a test, I'm Like, 'Oh my goodness, I can't fail a test.' It's like a really serious strain," one subject reported. Another showed the classic habit of grade-weighted failure leading to disengagement: "But I just didn't like the fact that I had failed, so I just moved on to something else." These responses are echoed by a number of studies that show students' [willingness to take on challenging tasks diminishes when grades are involved](#), but without grades, students left on their own [tend to seek out more challenging problems](#).

John Taylor Gatto, a one-time New York State Teacher of the Year turned fierce education critic, proposed an education system built around "independent study, community service, adventures in experience, large doses of privacy and solitude, [and] a thousand different apprenticeships." Schools built on these values have flourished in the margins of state-funded, graded education throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The most famous example is the Montessori schools, noted for their lack of grades, multiage classes, and extended periods where students can chose their own projects from a selected range of materials. The schools have educated many of today's wealthiest entrepreneurs, including Google's Larry Page and Sergei Brin, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Wikipedia creator Jimmy Wales, business management legend Peter Drucker, and video game icon Will Wright.

A 2006 comparison in Milwaukee found that [Montessori students performed better than grade-based students at reading and math](#); they also "wrote more creative essays with more complex sentence structures, selected more positive responses to social dilemmas, and reported feeling more of a sense of community at their school." Some contend that Montessori schools attract more affluent and successful parents, who give their children an inherent advantage, but the Milwaukee study was built around a random lottery for Montessori enrollment. All the children in the study came from families with similar economic backgrounds, with average incomes ranging between \$20,000 and \$50,000.

Free schools have taken the gradeless structure even further, treating the school as an open space where students are not only allowed to self-direct but are given equal responsibility in the organization and rule-making of the school itself. The Summerhill School in England is one of the most recognizable and longest-running, founded in 1921 by A.S. Neill. Summerhill is built around the idea of creating stable, happy, and compassionate humans capable of filling any role in society—a janitor being no less a success than a doctor. In place of dedicated courses, students are free to follow their own interests while teachers observe and nudge them toward new ways of thinking about what they're drawn to. Students with an interest in cooking, for instance, might learn the basics of chemistry by way of thickening a sauce. Those drawn to playing soccer might learn to improve their game with some fundamental principles of Newtonian physics.

Schools inspired by the Summerhill model have flourished in recent years, with free schools operating around the country from Portland, Ore., to Sudbury, Mass. The Brooklyn Free School has earned attention for its open structure and regular democratic meetings, where students debate how to handle problems like boredom and whether playing video games on the school computers should be considered a learning activity. The higher tuition costs do tend to attract wealthier families with well-supported children, but many go out of their way to provide assistance to low-income families, favoring diversity over bill-paying. The Manhattan Free School in Harlem makes do on an annual budget of \$100,000 and [collects full tuition from only 20 percent of its students](#). The Brooklyn Free School [operates on a sliding scale of tuition](#), collecting full payment from only half of its students, with some paying as little as \$20 every few weeks.



It's a common misnomer to assume no student evaluation happens in environments like these, but in most cases free-school environments require more teacher attention than traditional classrooms. Instead of testing for comprehension of a select group of facts or ideas, teachers constantly monitor a child's behavior, support an array of student experimentation, and subtly encourage efforts that best match the student's abilities. In free schools failure is not a punishment for bad study habits but the sign of students testing their knowledge to see if it holds true in practice. In our soccer analogy, success wouldn't be evaluated by students scoring goals but in gradually learning how and why the ball curves in some cases and goes straight in others, a process that would surely produce many more misses than scores.

And free schools perform reasonably well. A survey of former students at Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts found 80 percent of its students went on to college or professional school, and 20 percent enrolled in graduate programs. In 1998, [75 percent of Summerhill students who took Britain's certificate-qualification exams passed](#).

Abandoning grades would be a massive shock, but holding onto them has not forestalled decay, from waves of school closures for poor standardized test results to the trillion-dollar debt guillotine awaiting college students who'll struggle to win unpaid internships for all their hard work. Eliminating grades would not singlehandedly bring salvation. There is a whole new world of challenges and complications in a classroom without pedagogy and rank. But it would be an ideal place to start anew, to stop motivating students, teachers, and underperformers with the fear of being flunked, fired, or shut down. Without that dysfunctional ranking we could instead form a child's education around his or her eagerness to discover, contribute, and share. An A-to-F grade scale is only a distraction from that process and in many cases an outright deterrent. It's time to admit that system has no place in our future.

From *Popular Science*

April 24, 2013

## Why I Let My Students Cheat On Their Game Theory Exam

by Peter Nonacs/ Zócalo Public Square

On test day for my Behavioral Ecology class at UCLA, I walked into the classroom bearing an impossibly difficult exam. Rather than being neatly arranged in alternate rows with pen or pencil in hand, my students sat in one tight group, with notes and books and laptops open and available. They were poised to share each other's thoughts and to copy the best answers. As I distributed the tests, the students began to talk and write. All of this would normally be called cheating. But it was completely OK by me.

Who in their right mind would condone and encourage cheating among UCLA juniors and seniors? Perhaps someone with the idea that concepts in animal behavior can be taught by making their students live those concepts.

Animals and their behavior have been my passions since my Kentucky boyhood, and I strive to nurture this love for nature in my students. Who isn't amazed and entertained by videos of crafty animals, like Betty the tool-making crow, bending wires into hooks to retrieve baskets containing delicious mealworms? (And then hiding her rewards from a lummox of a mate who never works, but is all too good at purloining the hard-won rewards of others?)

Nevertheless, I'm a realist. Almost none of my students will go on to be "me"—a university professor who makes a living observing animals. The vast majority take my classes as a prelude to medical, dental, pharmacy, or veterinary school. Still, I want my students to walk away with something more than, "Animals are cool." I want them to leave my class thinking like behavioral ecologists.

Much of evolution and natural selection can be summarized in three short words: "Life is games." In any game, the object is to win—be that defined as leaving the most genes in the next generation, getting the best grade on a midterm, or successfully inculcating critical thinking into your students. An entire field of study, Game Theory, is devoted to mathematically describing the games that nature plays. Games can determine why ant colonies do what they do, how viruses evolve to exploit hosts, or how human societies organize and function.

So last quarter I had an intriguing thought while preparing my Game Theory lectures. Tests are really just measures of how the Education Game is proceeding. Professors test to measure their success at teaching, and students take tests in order to get a good grade. Might these goals be maximized simultaneously? What if I let the students write their own rules for the test-taking game? Allow them to do everything we would normally call cheating?

A week before the test, I told my class that the Game Theory exam would be insanely hard—far harder than any that had established my rep as a hard prof. But as recompense, for this one time only, students could cheat. They could bring and use anything or anyone they liked, including animal behavior experts. (Richard Dawkins in town? Bring him!) They could surf the Web. They could talk to each other or call friends who'd taken the course before. They could offer me bribes. (I wouldn't take them, but neither would I report it to the dean.) Only violations of state or federal criminal law such as kidnapping my dog, blackmail, or threats of violence were out of bounds.

Gasps filled the room. The students sputtered. They fretted. This must be a joke. I couldn't possibly mean it. What, they asked, is the catch?

"None," I replied. "You are UCLA students. The brightest of the bright. Let's see what you can accomplish when you have no restrictions and the only thing that matters is getting the best answer possible."

Once the shock wore off, they got sophisticated. In discussion section, they speculated, organized, and plotted. What would be the test's payoff matrix? Would cooperation be rewarded or counter-productive? Would a large group work better, or smaller subgroups with specified tasks? What about "scroungers" who didn't study but were planning to parasitize everyone else's hard work? How much reciprocity would be demanded in order to share benefits? Was the test going to play out like a dog-eat-dog Hunger Games? In short, the students spent the entire week living Game Theory. It transformed a class where many did not even speak to each other into a coherent whole focused on a single task—beating their crazy professor's nefarious scheme.

On the day of the hour-long test they faced a single question: "If evolution through natural selection is a game, what are the players, teams, rules, objectives, and outcomes?" One student immediately ran to the chalkboard, and she began to organize the outputs for each question section. The class divided tasks. They debated. They worked on hypotheses. Weak ones were rejected, promising ones were developed. Supportive evidence was added. A schedule was established for writing the consensus answers. (I remained in the room, hoping someone would ask me for my answers, because I had several enigmatic clues to divulge. But nobody thought that far afield!) As the test progressed, the majority (whom I shall call the "Mob") decided to share one set of answers. Individuals within the Mob took turns writing paragraphs, and they all signed an author sheet to share the common grade. Three out of the 27 students opted out (I'll call them the "Lone Wolves"). Although the Wolves listened and contributed to discussions, they preferred their individual variants over the Mob's joint answer.

In the end, the students learned what social insects like ants and termites have known for hundreds of millions of years. To win at some games, cooperation is better than competition. Unity that arises through a diversity of opinion is stronger than any solitary competitor.

But did the students themselves realize this? To see, I presented the class with one last evil wrinkle two days later, after the test was graded but not yet returned. They had a choice, I said. Option A: They could get the test back and have it count toward their final grade. Option B: I would—sight unseen—shred the entire test. Poof, the grade would disappear as if it had never happened. But Option B meant they would never see their results; they would never know if their answers were correct.

."Oh, my, can we think about this for a couple of days?" they begged. No, I answered. More heated discussion followed. It was soon apparent that everyone had felt good about the process and their overall answers. The students unanimously chose to keep the test. Once again, the unity that arose through a diversity of opinion was right. The shared grade for the Mob was 20 percent higher than the averages on my previous, more normal, midterms. Among the Lone Wolves, one scored higher than the Mob, one about the same, and one scored lower.

Is the take-home message, then, that cheating is good? Well ... no. Although by conventional test-taking rules, the students were cheating, they actually weren't in this case. Instead, they were changing their goal in the Education Game from "Get a higher grade than my classmates" to "Get to the best answer."

This also required them to make new rules for test-taking. Obviously, when you make the rules there is no reason to cheat. Furthermore, being the rule-makers let students behave in a way that makes us a quintessentially unique species. We recognize when we are in a game, and more so than just playing along, we always try to bend the rules to our advantage.

Morally, of course, games can be tricky. Theory predicts that outcomes are often not to the betterment of the group or society. Nevertheless, this case had an interesting result. When the students got carte blanche to set the rules, altruism and cooperation won the day. How unlike a “normal” test where all students are solitary competitors, and teachers guard against any cheating! What my class showed was a very “human” trait: the ability to align what is “good for me” with what is “good for all” within the evolutionary games of our choosing.

In the end, the students achieved their goal: They earned an excellent grade. I also achieved my goal: I got them to spend a week thinking like behavioral ecologists. As a group they learned Game Theory better than any of my previous classes. In educational lingo, “flipping the classroom” means students are expected to prepare to come to class not for a lecture, but for a question-and-answer discussion. What I did was “flip the test.” Students were given all the intellectual tools beforehand and then, for an hour, they had to use them to generate well-reasoned answers to difficult questions.

The best tests will not only find out what students know but also stimulate thinking in novel ways. This is much more than regurgitating memorized facts. The test itself becomes a learning experience—where the very act of taking it leads to a deeper understanding of the subject.

*This article originally appeared on Zócalo Public Square and was republished with permission. Peter Nonacs is a professor in the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Department at UCLA.*

From *Deadspin*

May 18, 2013

## The Outrage Over Students "Cheating" Is Mostly Harmful Nonsense

by Sam Eifling



*Photo credit of art installation meant to illustrate the 857 American students who drop out of school every hour of every school day: Getty*

The *Wall Street Journal* asked a question with an obvious answer this week under the headline ["How Could a Sweet Third-Grader Just Cheat on That School Exam?"](#) A quick answer is, because human beings are a naturally social species that has survived and flourished for thousands of years by collaborating and discovering division of labor. A less obvious answer then is, because school insists on labeling those perfectly natural behaviors "cheating," when mostly it's mostly a case of school not knowing how to teach.

Kids, you already grasp this intuitively, but I'ma write the long version for you here.

Most schoolwork builds an artificial world in which your superior cares foremost about evaluating your work and offering you feedback on it. By the time you're 25, at the latest, you'll realize this setup amounts to an uproarious hoax. No one who works has time to tell you how to do your job better, because everyone is working his or her ass off just to get his or her work done and maybe have time to go to the gym or to cook actual dinner at the end of their gantlet of a commute. Feedback is a luxury good unless you botch something in a dire way. Don't wait up for it.

Mostly it's up to you just to do good work. To do the best work, you need the help of other people. This goes for everything ever, so let me repeat it: You will need other people to help you do the best work possible. How you get this help is a matter of using the resources at your disposal. Those tools include: horse-trading, bullying, threatening, manipulating, cajoling, networking, buying, massaging, or simply building a reputation for honesty and integrity that draws other people into your orbit. Or it's all of the above. But your job, no matter what your job is, is really to figure out how to do the best work, and unless you're Ted Kaczynski, your job is going to involve cultivating working relationships with other people.

Thus your schooling, administered properly, should encourage you to maximize your relationships as they relate to the work you do for school. But chances are, you're being evaluated almost exclusively on cloistered, individual assignments. This will give you the illusion that you can do good work as an autonomous working unit. And you can, but only to a limited degree. If singleton work is all you spend your time doing, then you're not getting ready for a world in which there's no central authority figure judging the quality of your work. Most of the time, in life, you'll be expected to perform well as part of a group and that work will be evaluated, loosely, by other groups or by the public at large. Aside from extra-curriculars such as orchestra or volleyball or theater or yearbook, schools don't make use of that structure. By setting you up to succeed at school, school is mostly preparing you for a perilous fantasy.

So, please, when you read this hand-wringing about "cheating," take it with a giant grain of salt. You're not little criminals for helping one another or for sharing ideas or asking someone what the answer is. You're not "cheating" the system. You are instead demonstrating an aptitude for discerning how things really work. You're collaborating, you're maximizing resources, and you're managing risk. If schools were really preparing you for the 80 percent of your life that happens after you graduate, they'd evaluate you en masse, in dynamic groups. They'd encourage you to find ways to help the people around you, and they'd encourage you, implicitly or explicitly, to look for the talents of the people around you and try to complement them with your own abilities.

Am I encouraging you to "cheat"? No, I don't think I am. That old adage about you "only cheating yourself" is largely true. There are a bunch of bullsh\*tters with bullsh\*t degrees and bullsh\*t titles who skate only so far before the people who have done the real work their whole lives call them on their bullsh\*t. Don't be a bullsh\*tter. And don't take credit for work someone else did, because it's not only a lie, it will piss off the person who just did the real work and you'll be left flat on your lying, lazy ass. But don't be a chump, either. Look around at the lawyers, the bankers, the politicians, the business leaders, the scientists, the filmmakers, the musicians, the tech innovators, the athletes, and ask yourself: Did these people rise by performing excelling in an infinite series of discrete, individually graded tasks? Or did they find other talented people and collaborate with them? Answer that question for yourself, then get together with your friends and insist to your educators that you'd like to be prepared accordingly.