Giving up the Grade Chase for a Competency-Based Education

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The thrust of this article is twofold. The first objective is to expose the harmful effects of using the traditional grading system as a means of measuring students' learning and competencies. Instructors often use grades as an external means to motivate students to study and learn. The resultant anxiety experienced by many students in their attempts to obtain desired grades often interferes with the learning process. The use of grades, as administered solely by the instructor, causes students to compete rather than cooperate, to be dependent on their instructor for their learning, and to focus chiefly on grades rather than to take risks, to be creative, or to challenge concepts that are taught. A second objective is to present an alternative method of evaluating student competency through authentic assessment, which empowers students to take responsibility for their own learning and self-evaluation. Motivation should spring from the student's inner desire to learn and create knowledge, not from seeking high grades. Suggestions are offered regarding how the instructor and student roles must be altered to adjust to a new learning/evaluation paradigm.

Without a doubt, grades are the most important concern of every student who is bent on obtaining a college degree. Students are convinced that grades determine who is accepted into graduate programs and who gets the best jobs. Aaronsohn (1994, p. 1), in her survey of New England educators, concluded that university students were in unanimous agreement that, "...their preoccupying focus had been on the game of figuring out what right answers and what correct behaviors each teacher required of them, in order to get top grades. Rarely, if ever, had their personal goal been the permanent acquisition of content knowledge to say nothing of the construction of meaning." Students care much more about *how* they are doing than *what* they are doing (Kohn, 1993).

Unfortunately, most college instructors rarely receive training regarding how to assess student performance. They typically adopt the same strategy of evaluating student performance that their instructors used with them. Most instructors feel that grades are the best single indicator of a student's knowledge and understanding of the course material. Usually, a final grade is based on a few quizzes plus mid-semester and final examinations. Questions vary from short answers (true-false, multiple choice, fill-in) to a few essay questions. Besides tests, students are often expected to submit a term paper or project report.

Many educators now believe that the grading system, as currently used by most instructors, is an archaic, inaccurate, ineffectual, and potentially damaging means of reporting student performance (Kohn, 1993; Solomon & Solomon, 1993). The focus on getting good grades leads to cheating and/or engaging in special methods of study (cramming), oriented toward test performance rather than the acquisition of enduring knowledge (Deutch, 1985).

According to Smith (1986), "A teacher who cannot tell without a test whether a student is learning should not be in the classroom" (p. 259). Kohn (1993) stated, "Teachers and parents who care about learning need to do everything in their power to help students forget that grades exist" (p. 206).

Grades are devices that many instructors use to compel students to study (Glasser, 1990). However, research studies reveal that requiring students to focus on their performance can interfere with their ability to apply scientific principles to new situations, frequently reduce their creativity, create unnecessary anxiety, and suppress self-esteem (Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; deCharms, 1972; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

In this article, I will explain why the present grading system runs counter to the promotion of learning. An alternative evaluative procedure designed to improve the assessment process, promote greater student learning, and increase student motivation, will be presented.

WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE "GRADE GAME"

Some students learn the rules of the "grade game" early in their educational career. Other students never learn to

play the game well. Often, poor players become the college dropouts. Some students become resigned to the fact that they are C students. Recently, I quizzed a top-ranking undergraduate about how she obtained an A in anatomy class. "I finally figured it out," she said, "I take very careful notes, I reread and study them, memorize, and go into the test well prepared after a late-night cramming session." Asked if she read the assigned text carefully, she replied that she did not buy it because it was too expensive. "After the first test," she said. "it was easy. He's the kind of professor who tests straight out of his lectures."

I knew several students in her class. Most were struggling with their assigned readings, felt overworked, were confused about what to memorize, or felt they might be memorizing the "wrong" things. They were part of the large group of students who received grades of low Bs, Cs, and Ds. They were the poor "grade game" players. What amazed me was that the professor's game rules were known by so few students. Of course, the A grade students were unwilling to share their coveted grade-winning strategy with classmates. Sharing knowledge of the "rules" would only increase the competition. Winning meant everything to them.

Later, I spoke with a graduate student concerning her views about grade chasing. She explained that she learned how to play the game of getting good grades while attending high school. She was a "teacher pleaser" of the first rate. Her advice was to obey the teacher, do not disagree, be pleasant, get your assignments in on time, put down the "right" answers, and look interested. If she memorized the wrong things and scored poorly on a test, she volunteered to submit extra work. "Teachers always gave me an A for the extra effort," she confided, "even if I didn't master the material."

By the time she was a junior in college, she decided to major in speech pathology. Here, she became more interested in learning the material than merely focusing on grades and memorizing facts. She knew there was more to an education than simply memorizing lecture notes and text material. She told me, "I wanted to begin thinking for myself even if it meant disagreeing with my instructor. Now, I really don't care about grades anymore. Of course, grades are important, but my focus is strictly on learning. Grades take care of themselves."

The Instructor's Role in the Game

Teachers establish the rules of the "grade game" beginning in kindergarten and the basic rules continue to apply throughout college. The teachers' absolute authority and right to judge individuals permit them to decide student grades. Most teachers believe that without grades, students will not work. The teacher prepares the syllabus, determines attendance requirements, selects the text and bibliography, defines projects and written assignments, and constructs and grades all tests. Teachers establish grading criteria, prepare and present the lectures, assume responsibility for directing class activities, and assign grades according to their criteria. In addition, teachers criticize, praise, stereotype, judge, warn, or reassure students in their effort to promote learning. Teachers plan and direct classroom activities for students, establish deadlines for assignments, enforce classroom rules, and administer penalties for rule infractions.

The Student's Role in the Game

Many students rely heavily on teacher authority to direct their learning (Karpman, 1968). Therefore, students are obliged to be subservient to the teacher. The instructor is addressed by title and last name, whereas students are addressed by their first name. Students are expected to raise their hand for permission to talk. They depend on the teacher to evaluate not only their thinking, but also the products of their efforts.

Most students focus on getting the teacher's approval and avoiding disapproval. They learn to be quiet in class and to censor their own intellectual and social instincts. This atmosphere results in the creation of a competitive environment with other students. Their most important role is to determine what the teacher wants and then to do it without question.

Aaronsohn (1994) presented a list of teacher expectations composed by university student teachers. Among the 41 requirements for "good" elementary and high school students are as follow:

- obeys the teacher;
- participates in class;
- does things to impress the teacher;
- learns the material;
- cooperates;
- only talks when called on;
- follows all the rules;
- does not cause trouble;
- pays attention; and
- hands in work on time and tries to understand the lesson.

Among 37 "bad" behaviors listed are:

- outspoken;
- does not perform well academically;
- will not stop talking;
- does not do what is asked of them;
- breaks the rules;
- does not obey the teacher;
- does not meet the expectations of the teacher; and
- does not listen to the teacher

With some minor modifications, many of these descriptions also apply to the behavior of college students.

Harmful Effects of the "Grade Game"

Recently, I met two middle-aged students on their way to class. I noticed the bloodshot eyes of one student and asked if her allergies were bothering her. She explained

that she had not slept all night because she was worrying about an examination to be given that afternoon. She went on to explain that she never sleeps the night before a test. I thought she must be a real wreck after final exam week!

The threat of incessant testing and the struggle to maintain a high grade point average (GPA) keeps many students in a constant state of anxiety. According to Holt (1969), constant testing throughout one's educational career prevents and takes the joy out of learning and, in time, fogs one's capacity to learn to perceive and to remember. The grade threat drives students away from learning rather than attracts them toward it. Because teachers do not have to suffer the anxiety, they turn a deaf ear to the gut-wrenching feelings many students experience before and during test periods. "You've just got to expect that," said one professor.

Besides the anxiety associated with grade chasing, a second harmful effect is the misconception that students feel they must strive to get good grades to please the teacher. What they should be doing is constructing their own meaning out of classroom experiences. Judgmental teachers produce students who become dependent solely on outside verification of their learning. This dependency interferes with the development of personal responsibility. High achievers are especially susceptible to reliance on teacher approval. They seek and usually find role models they can emulate who will provide the positive feedback they need. The need for approval makes them dependent on what significant others think of their work (Kohn, 1993).

A third harmful factor is the limiting effect that the threat of receiving poor grades has on student creativity (deCharms, 1972). "Good-grade-getting" encourages students to stay within the safe boundaries of "correct" answers. They avoid taking risks in creating ideas they fear might be "wrong" or disapproved by the teacher. This fear is often reflected in their free writing assignments (Aaronsohn, 1994). Dependent students want to be told what to write about and, if left unguided, will try to write about what they think the teacher wants them to write rather than follow their own intuition and interests.

At the turn of the present century, the grading system was designed to weed out the incompetent, the nontraditional learners, and the "loafers." Instructors believed that only a limited number of A grades should be awarded. If the majority of students fall into the 90%–100% group, a bell-shaped grade curve is applied to produce the "right amount" of As, Bs, Cs, and so forth. The bulk of the grades must fall into the C range. Even today, when student grades cluster in the high B and A range, many instructors worry that "grade inflation" has occurred because they don't have a neat bell-shaped curve.

Many undergraduates have learned not only to accept lower grades, but also to expect them. Low grades serve to confirm the fact that they are not as bright as the students who get higher grades. Many minority students fall into this group because of lack of educational opportunity in the elementary or high school, inadequate teaching, and a long history of conditioning. The poor grades these students receive serve to keep them separated from the high achievers.

Thus, the effect of the grade system is to categorize students into smart, not-so-smart, and dumb groups. Near mid-semester, most students can identify individuals who belong in each of these three groups. Their evaluations are based mostly on the student underground grapevine of knowledge concerning the grades others receive. "Grade peek-a-boo" is a universal practice in the classroom when tests are returned. This knowledge has a powerful effect on building and limiting social structures within the class. It also affects each individual's self-esteem.

SHIFTING THE ASSESSMENT PARADIGM

Authentic Assessment

Those who wish to avoid the detrimental effects of the teacher-dominated grading system must seek a different approach to evaluate students. Kohn (1993) argued that the only legitimate reason to evaluate student performance is to help students learn more effectively in the future. The use of *authentic assessment* has been suggested as a positive alternative to the traditional grading system because many hazards inherent in traditional grading procedures are eliminated.

Authentic assessment implies that the student play an active role in deriving a grade while the instructor takes on an advisory nonjudgmental facilitating role. Solomon and Solomon (1993) maintained that the only way to teach students how to accept responsibility is to give them responsibility. The authentic assessment model places the responsibility for learning squarely with the student. The focus of classroom activities is on the learner, his or her peers, and the material of study. Kohn (1993) maintained that internal motivation (the inner desire to learn and self-reward) is preferred to external motivation (grades and teacher praise).

A first step toward converting to an authentic assessment system is to remove test grades. Student failures and successes resulting from quizzes and tests are considered diagnostic learning tools, not scores averaged to derive a final grade. Only outcome performance competencies should result in a grade. And competencies should be predetermined jointly by the teacher and students. Competencies consist of the basic core knowledge that must be mastered to meet course requirements. A student may display his or her competencies near the end of the semester, thereby allowing time to repeat the evaluation if necessary.

An important difference between the traditional grade-oriented evaluation process and authentic evaluation is the change in the student/teacher roles. In an authentic evaluation, the external control of the teacher is removed. Never is the teacher acting in a judgmental way, either in a positive or negative direction. The teacher does not criticize, evaluate, grade, or praise the student's work, for this would be an intrusion into the student's role of self-evaluation (Kohn, 1993). To develop the internal locus of control, the power and authority to judge are transferred to

the learner. Thus, the primary assessment tool is self-evaluation, not teacher evaluation. This practice of self-evaluation and self-regulation contributes to the development of the student's maturity and acceptance of his or her responsibility for learning.

Aaronsohn (1994) listed 20 behaviors that teachers and students have identified that could be evaluated. They range from basic level behaviors (attendance, completing assignments, etc.) to mid-level (reworking assignments resulting from self-critical and teacher analysis, seeking appropriate assistance when necessary, etc.) and finally high-level behaviors (willingness to take risks through creative learning activities, questioning authority, etc.). Thus, the teacher and the students work together as a team to design the competencies to be mastered. The student takes advantage of the teacher's expertise and knowledge to help plan a course of action. The teacher serves as advisor but the student makes final decisions.

As the student completes work, the teacher provides intensive written feedback and continues an ongoing constructive content dialogue with the student. One important role played by the teacher is to provide options to the student when problems arise. The student selects the options and must adjust to the selection he or she made if an option is not appropriate.

When students engage in choosing a grade, Aaronsohn (1996) recognizes two options open to them: (1) What can I present as evidence to the teacher that I have achieved competency? and (2) What do I honestly find myself having learned from the class? She feels that instructors must change the way they think about assigning grades.

A grade depends on a variety of factors. These factors include:

- the depth of the student's knowledge of the course content;
- how time was spent during the class;
- the energy expended to track down, use, and integrate alternate sources of information;
- the depth of risk-taking;
- the level of communication with their peers; and
- the quality of group cooperative work.

Other important factors include the students' depth of observations from simply sitting with the group to actually applying knowledge, their depth of reading and writing, their depth of involvement with others, and the depth of focus on success in the course as they accumulate knowledge to create new meaning. She points out that such lists are not checksheets, but a guide to help students through the process of self-evaluation. Finally, she recommends that each student schedule a half-hour conference with the instructor to review these factors.

The Portfolio

An important activity that can contribute heavily in determining the final grade is use of the portfolio—a formalized collection of the student's work showing accomplishments throughout the course. Written papers, homework assignments, in-class activities, projects, and similar activities are kept in the portfolio. Contributions to team efforts in a cooperative learning environment are also included in the student's portfolio, along with reports of other ongoing activities such as distance learning, bibliographic work, service learning, special projects, and research papers. Measurement devices are used to help the student evaluate progress in the selected areas. These devices consist of learning experiences that provide feedback in and of themselves.

Elbow (1991) argued that portfolios are a valid form of assessment because their content represents a measure of the student's real abilities, not just night-before-cramming and short-term memory measures. On the other hand, the weakness of portfolio measurement lies in the reliability of measures employed. Students differ greatly in learning styles, the things they value, and their ability to assemble relevant materials. The intent of assessment is to obtain an accurate measure of each individual's professional growth. What instructors search for in a well-organized portfolio are a comprehensive *goal* statement, a thoughtful *reflection* statement, and clear-cut *caption* statements heading each piece of work included.

Looking at the substance of the evidence, the instructor and the student together decide to what extent the evidence supports successful accomplishment of the stated goals. Some student entries fail to give the instructor evidence that significant learning and growth have occurred. Other entries may lack evidence that links the document to the established goals of the class. This problem occurs when students include too much extraneous material that does not fit with the stated goals. The portfolio is not merely a file in which to put everything the student did during the course. It is a carefully selected group of documents that attests to the student's learning.

Instructor have a key role to play in helping students build the portfolio (Barton & Collins, 1993). First, they must specify the essential knowledge and goals that are to be learned during the course. Second, they must help students discover ways they can display their mastery of this knowledge. Third, they must help students link what is taught within the class within and across the courses they have taken and will take. In summary, teaching, learning, reflection, and assessment are all intertwined as evidence is assembled within the portfolio. The successful outcome of a class is that students know what is expected of them and how to document their learning authentically. Equally important is their ability to reflect thoughtfully on this newly acquired knowledge. The portfolio allows students to display their achievements by focusing on their strengths. It encourages students to take ownership of their learning and shape knowledge to fit their personal goals.

What Research Tells Us About Authentic Assessment

Aaronsohn (1994) and her colleagues conducted an ERIC search of articles containing reference to authentic assess-

ment during the years 1982–1992. Forty-five articles addressed this topic. Thirty-three of these articles documented the successes of authentic assessment and advocated its use. Nine articles recommended further research to verify its success, but were supportive of this assessment technique. Only two articles, both by the same authors, recommended continued use of multiple-choice tests but pointed out several limitations of this testing procedure.

REQUIRED ROLE CHANGES

Changes in Instructor's Behaviors

Instructors must change the way they address students so that they facilitate rather than dictate student learning. They must think of the student more as a colleague than an "underling." They should avoid language that is judgmental when it should be facilitating. For example, rather than making a judgmental statement such as, "Your writing is unclear," rephrase the evaluation to, "Here are some suggestions that might help to emphasize this point to make sure the reader understands the theme." Encourage the student to learn to formulate and select options.

Don't talk about the worth of a student's work as "good" or "bad." Those who sit in judgment of student performance, that is, determine whether good or bad things happen to the student, create a warped working relationship with students (Kohn, 1993). When instructors use evaluative language, these words create in the student a feeling of dependence on the instructor. Instructors who are judgmental assume a position of higher authority and knowledge, thereby creating an invisible dividing line between student and instructor. The instructor must adopt the role of consultant, who provides options from which students are free to select (Gordon, 1974).

Statements that imply warning, praising, interpreting, criticizing, intimidation, and evaluating often place the instructor in a power position. Instead, language that paraphrases, describes, and clarifies should be substituted. The type of language that keeps students in a continual dependence on outside authority is to be avoided because learning occurs from a process of constructing knowledge, not from passively receiving information (Gordon, 1974, 1989). Karpman (1968) pointed out that these alternate forms of communication help establish the instructor as a facilitator rather than a "rescuer."

Besides the type of language instructors use to couch their comments, they must participate as more active listeners. Those instructors who have elected to include computer conferencing as part of the communication network of their class are enabled to read student comments about activities in the class and how well they think these activities contribute to their learning. Traditional lecture-only formats provide almost no opportunity for honest and extended student–instructor dialogue. Minority and shy students seldom have the opportunity to express themselves during lecture-discussion dominated classes.

Instructors should begin asking higher order questions in their dialogues with students to help them become involved with the content. Instead of explaining what an author wrote about a topic, a shift to, "What do you think the author meant when he said...?" allows the students to begin creating their own knowledge. Follow-up questions such as, "How does this concept fit with your experiences?" help students relate what they are learning to their own belief system.

Finally, instructors must be willing to relinquish their power position by allowing students to play a more active role in the planning and design of the course as a shared cooperative venture. This implies that students should be actively engaged in preparing the syllabus, establishing class procedure and basic requirements plus grievance procedures. Students must be encouraged to focus on evaluating their own and each others' work rather than depend solely on the teacher for criticism and evaluation.

Changes Required in Student Behaviors

The major change in student behaviors occurs when students are allowed to take responsibility for their learning. Students must begin using their instructor as a resource person who can give them options for learning. The student's role is marked by active participation and leadership rather than that of a passive observer and recipient of knowledge packets.

Students are responsible for actively participating in group work with their peers, for organizing their study schedule, and for planning learning activities on their own rather than depending solely on the instructor. In short, they must begin to take the initiative in learning. This means that they must seek information from a variety of sources, take risks in presenting their innovative ideas to others, relate new information to their experiences, reflect on the experiences and ideas contributed by others, and engage in active dialogue with their peers and their instructor. They must be in an environment where they can make choices about what they learn and how they learn it (Glasser, 1990).

Learning how to trust their peers and develop a caring relationship through helping others learn is an important part of class participation. They must give up the competitive "me only" model. Finally, learning to honestly self-evaluate is a skill that will not come easy to students who are used to being evaluated by others. It is estimated that it may take 1 or more years to develop these skills. One student in my class put it this way:

> After 17 years of learning in the standard method, it has been a bit of an adjustment putting myself in the driver's seat (taking charge of my own learning). I am finally regulating my own learning and putting a bigger effort into a class that is student driven. (Mowrer, 1994)

Difficulties Instructors Can Expect

The threat of removing the instructor's grade power prompts many questions. Instructors ask, "If I do not give grades, how will I know the students are learning? How

can I motivate students to study if I do not give grades? What can I do about students who meet only minimal requirements and opt for a grade of A? What about those students who are almost A students?"

These are legitimate but difficult questions to answer. These questions are perplexing partly because instructors usually tend not to trust students to take responsibility for their learning. It is difficult for most instructors to envision students working productively and effectively in groups or learning on their own with little assistance from the instructor. The problem is that most undergraduate students have never been allowed to take responsibility for their learning. For example, if the instructor is late to class, most wait 10 minutes and leave! The thought never seems to occur to them that they could conduct the class themselves. When the instructor asks students to complete an assignment that carries no points toward their grade, often they tend to not complete it! Based on the "teacher-dominated" paradigm in which the instructor accepts all responsibility for student learning, allowing students to plot their own course of learning and then grade themselves would be a *coup de gráce*.

Recently, I listened to an instructor in the College of Business describe a team approach to learning. Students are assigned text readings. When they enter class, they are given a 15–20 question multiple-choice test covering the assigned readings. While the instructor grades their papers, the students discuss the questions within their 4-member team and discuss their answers in order to arrive at a consensus. These answers are also scored by the instructor. Individual quiz scores account for a percentage of their grades and a certain percentage is awarded for the team score.

I was puzzled by the fact that the instructor averaged the student's individual quiz scores toward their grade even though they may have learned the correct answers during their team effort. In one sense, they were being punished for inaccurate reading or poor memory, as reflected in their individual quiz score. Perhaps they had not read at all. Their grade did not reflect what they now know; rather, it was a reflection of how well they read the text and prepared for class. When I asked him why he averaged in the individual quiz scores, he responded that if he did not count these scores, the students would neither read the material nor prepare for class. "Then what you are saying," I said, "is that you don't trust your students to read the material on their own." His answer was quite revealing: It was an emphatic, bold, underscored, "No I don't!" Clearly, this instructor was attempting to motivate his students with threats of punishment rather than leading them toward an inherent interest in the course material. He used his power position to make students learn whether they wanted to or not. This is a common practice in many elementary school teachers. It is surprising to find it used so extensively within the university setting.

I think that the greatest deterrent for instructors who consider the adoption of an authentic assessment model is the threat of losing their controlling power over students. They fear that if they relinquish their power to punish and reward, the students will not learn anything. This compulsive need by some instructors to control students and their view of students as dependent on them for learning are the greatest roadblocks to "letting go" of their traditional teaching/grading system. What makes matters worse is that initially, when changing the instructional paradigm, students will plead for their guidance because they are so teacher dependent and unwilling to accept responsibility for their own learning. They besiege their instructors with questions and requests such as, "What do you want me to do? How many pages should I write? How well did I do compared with others? Is that going to be on the test?" Instructors who yield to the temptation of this kind of requested "leadership" are destined to fall back on the authority-driven, "teacher-pleasing" instructional model to which most students are so accustomed.

Most instructors lack the knowledge and skills necessary to use the authentic assessment model because they have experienced nothing but the traditional non-trusting teaching model during their own education. Also, the authentic assessment model is supported by few administrators. Few colleagues are even aware that such an alternate teaching model exists. No one is available with whom instructors can discuss problems they will encounter while attempting to change paradigms.

In my own case, I attempted to plan a syllabus in concert with a small group of first-year graduate students. After several weeks, they lodged a complaint with the department chair. They felt that they did not know what was expected of them or how they would be graded. Promptly, I was summoned and told to prepare a detailed syllabus for them with detailed objectives, assignments, due dates, and so forth. Not yet having the power of my convictions and feeling unstable in this new venture, I wrote the syllabus, prepared the bibliography, included due dates for all work, and told them what they "had" to do, all without student input. The students seemed satisfied.

Difficulties Students Can Expect

The chief difficulty students experience in adapting to an authentic assessment model is accepting responsibility for their learning that accompanies freedom from teacher judgments and mandates. Their dependence on the teacher for approval is etched into their belief system because of 12–15 years of teacher-dominated classroom training. They are so tied to accepting grades as an indication of teacher approval or disapproval that they fail to recognize that learning is a process, not a pursuit of teacher feedback.

When an instructional paradigm is shifted, students experience high levels of anxiety about not knowing where they stand in class compared with others. Students are so used to placing responsibility for their learning on the instructor that they resent not being reminded of their obligations. They want to be told exact due dates and deadlines, what journal articles to read, when to read the next chapter, and how many pages to write for their term paper. Many students feel very uncomfortable when there are no right and wrong answers. They continue to give the instructor what they think he or she wants rather than risk following their own hunches (Holt, 1967). Most of all, they

are uncertain if they are accomplishing anything because they receive no grade on their papers from the instructor. I observed many of these feelings of insecurity that students expressed in their electronic forum postings:

> I must admit, I too have put phonetics on the back burner because I had deadlines in other areas. I'm afraid I am pushed by deadlines-requirements. A couple other members in my group have mentioned the same thing, we haven't put the effort into this class because we haven't HAD TO. (Mowrer, 1994)

Another student simply could not accept the fact that she would not be graded by the instructor. She said,

> I know you are going to spring a test on us one of these days and I would like to feel more prepared. (Mowrer, 1994)

Some students feel strongly that it is the instructor's job, not the responsibility of the student, to assign grades. One student put it this way:

> It's difficult for me in a way not to have grades in this class...grades are probably more important in grad school than in the undergraduate program because a B average has to be maintained in every class or you have to take it over...maybe it's not such a bad thing. But after so long of worrying about my GPA, it's hard to let it go and just learn. (Mowrer, 1994)

The fundamental problem is that most students simply do not know how to evaluate themselves. Often, well-qualified, compulsive students will feel reluctant to award themselves a grade of A. They may set their standards too high. On the other hand, a few who meet only minimum requirements will argue that they deserve a grade of A. Why not? It's free, and all of their friends are electing A as a grade for themselves. They may choose to ignore the instructor's recommendations. Students must be well prepared to assess themselves (Haberman, 1992).

Aaronsohn (1994) reported that trying to get university students to participate in cooperative projects with their peers was one of her most difficult tasks. Most students are exposed only to individual, competitive grading structures that keep them from sharing ideas with peers or helping others with concepts that they already mastered. Furthermore, they are unable to seek assistance from others and cannot even argue effectively. An "I'm right, you're wrong" attitude or stony silence prevails, with little attempt to suggest, "We have a problem here."

The students Aaronsohn and her collaborators observed were afraid to expose their inner thoughts, afraid to fumble, and afraid to create together because of their terror of peer judgment. They were even reluctant to expose their written thoughts to each other. The basic problem was a lack of mutual trust—a lack of trust they had learned from their teachers beginning in first grade. Aaronsohn's speculation was that it could take as long as one semester or even 1 school year to help students shift learning paradigms and begin feeling comfortable with their empowerment.

Accountability

Will abandonment of teacher-given grades work? Aaronsohn (1996) reported that when teacher judgment is removed, the students put time, energy, intelligence, and thoughtfulness into the tasks selected. Her data showed that most students worked more rigorously, more diligently, and more important, more thoughtfully when their papers were read with great attention by their peers and their instructor. At mid-semester, just about everyone met the class bottom-line expectation and produced high-quality work. They continue to explore their own identities and abilities.

Shortly after mid-semester, one student in my class evidenced satisfaction with her new-found responsibility. Although at first she was confused because she did not know what was expected of her, she finally realized that taking some positive action toward interacting with the course content was important. Yet, in her electronic forum posting, she still finds it difficult to kiss grades good-bye.

> I know what you are trying to do with this class and I think it is a great effort. I have thought over what I have to do to put more of an effort into this class. I want to learn the material—not just for a good grade (although I'm interested in that), but to really get a grasp of what phonetics is about and how it can aid me in my education and (hopefully) my profession. (Mowrer, 1994)

Students need to know early in the semester how grades will be awarded. I have listed a handout (see Appendix) that I provide students who are enrolled in a phonetics class. I have listed three methods of determining their final grade as options from which they can choose how they would like to be graded. None of the tests or quizzes I give in class receives grades. They are used as diagnostic tools to help the students evaluate what could improve their competencies.

Benefits of Using Authentic Assessment

Once students get past the fear that grades present and realize they are not enrolled in class simply to please the teacher, they can begin to focus on engaging in learning tasks. They can take the time required to think deeply about theoretical concepts and the practical applications to which new learning can be used. The focus shifts from just getting a good grade to discovering what is interesting about a subject. The freedom from constant dependence on teacher requirements, directives, and judgment allows them to use the teacher as a concerned and well-informed helper in the learning process. For the first time, they are able to respond to their teacher as a colleague, not a superior who they must address only by formal title. Students become happier, as evidenced by their open and cheerful attitude. They willingly embrace homework activities and suggested assignments.

Another major benefit of grade liberation is evidenced as students take a greater responsibility for directing their learning. Inner motivation creates the drive to learn that is so characteristic of the mature individual. Solomon and Solomon (1993) stressed that a key mission of the university is to give students the freedom to acquire the knowledge that allows them to gain wisdom. They state:

> Wisdom is knowing what one wants, what is important, what is really worth working and living for, and why. Wisdom means understanding oneself and other people, having a deep appreciation of emotions and the calamities that can befall a human being. (p. 21)

Kohn (1993) responded in a similar manner while describing the mission of the university:

> We want students to become rigorous thinkers, accomplished readers and writers and problem solvers who can make connections and distinctions between ideas. But the most reliable guide to a process that is promoting these things are not grades or test scores; it is the student's level of interest. (p. 146).

The university classroom is one of the last places during one's lifetime where an individual can draw on the undivided support of a knowledgeable instructor and caring peers required to question thinking, explore alternatives, and sort out feelings and attitudes (Jersild, 1955).

CONCLUSION

Authentic assessment implies much more than another way of evaluating students. It is a philosophy of education that differs radically from traditional techniques that are primarily teacher-centered and teacher-driven. Authentic assessment is a way of learning that places the responsibility of learning squarely on the student, who becomes the active participant in the learning process.

Those educators who have initiated changes in their traditional teaching toward a structure of more student-oriented learning environments report success in helping students take responsibility for their education (Aaronsohn, 1994, 1996; Glasser, 1990; Kohn, 1993; Solomon & Solomon, 1993). The results of their efforts offer a promising learning paradigm to future students. To bring about this change in teaching philosophy at the university level will require both great effort and extreme risk by students and instructors alike.

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APPENDIX. GRADE DERIVATION PROPOSAL

My goal: To assist each student in obtaining the best possible grade based on solid evidence of student learning. This learning will be demonstrated by the evidence to verify the student's knowledge of and performance skills in six areas of phonetic science as listed below:

Review of competencies to be mastered:
Ability to:

1. Write all English IPA symbols, narrow transcription markings, and suprasegmental markings.
2. List voicing, manner, and place features of all English consonants and position features of vowels.
3. Define basic vocabulary used in the science of phonetics.
4. Transcribe English words spoken correctly and incorrectly in citation form in broad transcription.
5. Transcribe English spoken sentences marking phonemes with appropriate narrow transcription (requires knowledge of accommodation rules).
6. Translate written IPA phonetic transcription into English orthographic script.

Composition of tests:

- No new information
- No surprises
- Drawn from homework and class activity activities and text readings
- Similar to "memory tests" but more extensive
- No supplementary materials allowed

Test Preference

A. ***External evaluation:*** by instructor
Graded by formula: Total possible points minus number missed converted to percentage score. 90–100% = A and so on. Time required is $1^{1}/_{2}$ hours. In-depth analysis of all areas.

B. ***External/Internal:*** by student/instructor
External: graded by instructor. Consists of a mini-test sampling all six areas (similar to the memory tests). Time = $^{1}/_{2}$ hour. Counts $^{1}/_{4}$ of final grade.
Internal: Portfolio presentation by student during $^{1}/_{2}$-hour conference. Student assigns percentage grade that counts $^{3}/_{4}$ toward final grade. Based on evidence included in portfolio. Included is evidence of active participation in SL, EF, group activities, tutoring, creative activities, overall effort, homework assignments, etc.

C. ***Internal***: by student and validated by instructor
Internal: Evidence presented by student based on portfolio evidence listed in B above during $^{1}/_{2}$ hour conference plus instructor verification based on brief "spot" probes of student knowledge such as, name 6 alveolar fricatives, function of velum, brief transcription, etc.