

On Rummel and Grades and Learning

One difficulty with experimenting in college teaching is that the results are often disappointing. Shortly after the class begins, for example, it becomes clear that what is occurring has more to do with experience than with experimentation. That is, the hypothesis turns out to be only partly related to the events while the methodology seems hopelessly unsuited to the unfolding experiment. By terms end, the findings or conclusions often as not are applicable only to one particular experience. Much of this becomes irrelevant if the class itself is successful (and by successful here I mean anything from exhilaration and pleasure to student output). But when this also fails, when the experience itself turns sour, entrapping students and professor in the process, the temptation is to damn this form of experimentation, accept the present academic system, and go back to one's proper research and teaching.

This has happened to me on several occasions, and I take it that something like this – the sour experience – transpired in Professor Rummel's class: the attendance dropping 30%, the lack of reading and commitment by the students, the "loss of momentum" so that "by the end of the term it seemed as though the class was idling along, engaged in first gear, with the foot off the accelerator and clutch." He writes with admirable detachment, the social scientist observing class behavior and giving us his conclusions about the experiment, but I suspect that it became difficult for him, perhaps even frustrating, to meet the class, week in and week out, and watch it slowly slide from view.

Still, despite the detachment, despite the questionnaires and the factor analysis, it is difficult for me to see this as a social science experiment. To begin with, I am unclear what hypothesis he is testing. I would guess that he was interested in evaluating the effect of course grades on a student's performance. But that is only an indirect part of the situation he describes; in fact, I find that his conclusions are based on an inaccurate perception of what actually took place within the class. What he ignores, of course, is the social context in which he and the students are functioning; he looks at behavior as though it existed outside of a social system.

On the obvious level (and I am sure he is aware of it), there is the student's relation to the rest of the university. Pressure, competition, grades – these are realities in the student's life, although he hears a good deal about creativity, originality, and learning. When Professor Rummel announces that everyone will receive an "A" and that no exams will

be given, his students pick up another message as well. They hear it as "free time" for other courses; Rummel may have opted out, but the rest of the faculty, they know, is competing for their time. His conclusion is that "a no exam, all A" system is not as good as a graded requirements system in the present University setting." Mine is somewhat different: If you are going to try an educational experiment, you do not wait to acknowledge the presence of the larger social system in your conclusion. It may be necessary first to alter a number of conditions – though these may not be sufficient – before your experiment can take place. For example, if one really wants to examine the effect of no grades and no exams on student performance, one pre-condition might have to include the elimination of grades and exams for the student in all of his classes.

But there is another, perhaps more significant, context which is ignored or denied. Namely, the interaction that occurs in the classroom. It is a truism that the professor is a participant in the class and so, by extension, a part of the experiment itself. Within the context of the class it means that students pick up his cues; it means they respond to his behavior as well as to his words. Presumably, an "A" grade for all students is a signal that coercion has been removed and that a new, undefined reward system has been instituted; now all students are free "to explore those aspects of peace and war closer to their interests." Nevertheless, all the major decisions still appear to be determined by the professor. He decides to change the course structure; he provides them with the conceptual framework in the beginning lectures; assigns the books; delineates the theory; and determines the extent of required activity for the student, (i.e. data-collecting to test out his, the professor's theory.) In short, he makes the decisions, sets the agenda, supplies the framework, expounds the theory . . . but gives the students freedom to explore in depth those aspects of the subject that interest them. It really does not differ very much from most of their classes, be they lectures or seminars, except that he has given them a respite in the form of an automatic "A".

I am suggesting that the key factor in this experience experiment is Professor Rummel's overall behavior, not just his grading practice. What I conclude from his account is that when *he* removes the *real* reward and/or penalty from his classroom, in a standard university setting, and alters nothing else, many of his students cease working on problems that he has set for them. This may seem to resemble his conclusions, but I think I am emphasizing something else. Specifically, that often grades are

directly related to coercion, and only secondarily, or peripherally, do they affect learning. At present, they function in the student's life as a form of pressure: they are sanctions or rewards applied to his performance; often he takes them as a measure of his worth, and so his self-esteem gets caught up in the grading system. To this end, he will do one or several of the following: a) apply himself, which is to say, take notes in class, read the texts, "get the framework" the professor lays out for him; b) cheat on exams; c) crib term papers; d) stay up all night cramming for particular exams; e) "psych out" the professor; f) flatter him, flirt with him, etc. (This is not true for all students, though in my experience it is true for many of them.)

In reality, grades offer the professor a way of perpetuating the system as it now operates – for otherwise, students might cease to attend our classes or perform the work we assign them. In a modest-sized experimental freshman program at M.I.T. this year, where grades have been abolished, social scientists have learned, to their chagrin, that when the students are bored they not only fail to read the assignments but soon cease attending class altogether. What does the professor do when he is the only one who turns up for his seminar? He can initiate sanctions (grades) and thereby command attendance, or at least force some work to be done. That was not possible within the terms set at M.I.T. this year and so the seminars were simply dropped. (A mistake, I think). Given my teaching goals – and for the sake of argument, let us say they do not differ radically from those Professor Rummel outlines in his conclusion -- I cannot conclude as he does that "a graded requirements system" works better – either at M.I.T. or in his course, unless I add that the grading system depends on rewards and punishment; but then I am not sure that the teaching goals themselves are compatible with that particular dependency. Often it is the reward structure itself which shapes the behavior of students and professor; and that structure is only indirectly concerned with learning and knowledge and critical ability. The best of the students and professors are able to ignore it and to become engaged with ideas, with questions, with learning. But what of the rest, the bulk of the academic community?

No, I have to assume that he, and we at M.I.T., are doing something wrong, quite apart from grades. I don't know whether the encounter between teacher and professor in Rummel's case, or at M.I.T., is forced, dishonest, artificial, tedious, banteringly personal, or what, but it is clear to me that it is defective. Certainly, feedback, for students and professor, is needed. Feedback first on per-

formance, on what is wrong. Conceivably grades and exams and straight lectures are what is wanted by professor and students; the latter indicated they would have liked exams but everyone to receive an "A" grade in Professor Rummel's class. It might have helped if this had been determined during the course. At M.I.T. it might have been preferable (given the teaching goals) for the professor to have summoned the class together and insisted that they, and he, discuss why the seminar failed. Was it the subject matter (poverty in America)? His approach? Their commitment to other projects? The responsibility, for the failure, was a joint one and needed to be shared. Indeed, the fact that responsibility was not shared at the outset – in both experiments – may account in part for the negative results.

I believe the students in Professor Rummel's class were signalling some such request when they stated they would like exams, but no alteration in their "A" grade. To many students, preparing for examinations is the only way they know of assuming responsibility for learning. But this is more a sad commentary on what we tend to produce than anything we should perpetuate. Exams are, to be sure, one way of providing feedback and stimulus for students. I am not urging that they be discontinued. But so are other forms of interaction. The class was saying – if I understand their questionnaire response – we need some form of stimulus and some kind of responsibility, but please don't start judging us again. It is actually what most students are requesting when they ask for an end to grades, usually in the form of a Pass-Fail (though not all students want this, or are even comfortable with it). They are not saying that they want to be free to learn (regardless of their rhetoric). What they are asking is to be excused from part of the system, to be given some freedom from the pressure, and the kind of competitiveness it generates. They are asking, in some instances, if it is possible for them to be judged as persons, or perhaps not be judged at all.

It may be unfeasible for professors to accede to some of these requests; but they merit consideration and testing. At the least they highlight, for me, how important a role grades play in the professional life of the faculty, our disclaimers and dislike of the procedure notwithstanding. For without grades, we cannot force students to obey, instead, we *are forced* to discover other mechanisms which involve them, and us, in the learning process. Until we take this charge seriously, I suspect we will continue to reinforce the present university system, and to project our own attitudes and values onto our "better students."