



THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE EVALUATION; PROMOTING LEARNING WITHOUT GRADES  
Or: “Here’s How You’re Doing”

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The recent publicity over rampant grade inflation at Harvard leaves most of us glad that we do not give grades at New College. There are many things about Harvard that we envy—its endowment comes to mind. Still, we are quite happy not to have to worry about the implications of seeing 91 percent of graduating students receive honors at graduation, as occurred at Harvard in 2001. With our system of narrative evaluations of student work, we have opted instead for an approach that provides the student with genuinely informative and useful feedback while also eliminating the tensions that often exist between students and teachers when all parties know that “a grade” lies at the end of their shared experience. Although labor intensive, our system of narrative evaluations retains strong faculty support, largely because it has helped to produce a campus atmosphere permeated by the love of learning rather than by a scheme of rewards and punishments.

Coupled with an assessment of “Satisfactory,” “Unsatisfactory,” and “Incomplete” for the semester’s work, the narrative evaluation itself is a description of the course (or tutorial, or independent study) and its requirements, followed by a detailed critique of the student’s individual performance. Comments in the evaluations direct positive and confidence-guiding attention to a student’s strengths while also identifying weaknesses in performance and how they might be addressed. In preparing narrative evaluations, professors are not struggling with a grading curve or with seemingly arbitrary distinctions between very close grades. Instead, professors analyze and comment upon all the components of a student’s work—papers, tests, participation in discussion, lab and study work—providing feedback on each aspect. In a Spanish language course, for example, this translates into individual comments on a student’s comprehension of spoken Spanish, and the ability to read, write, and speak the language. These comments can be remarkably frank, since the evaluation goes only to the student and to his or her faculty sponsor (though students are free to include copies of their narrative evaluations in their graduate school and employment applications). Indeed, new students often struggle with their first set of evaluations, not only because they are accustomed to the simplicity of a grade when they wonder, “How am I doing?,” but also because they typically have little or no experience with the kind of candor they are suddenly receiving from experienced and respected mentors.

Because of the specific and individualized nature of narrative evaluations, no two evaluations are exactly alike. As a result, our system not only eliminates all suspicions of a grade-grubbing element in the student-teacher relationship, but it also eliminates the most obvious grounds for competition among students themselves. As with all features of New College’s educational program, the goal is to encourage the sense of cumulative competence and personal responsibility embedded in the College’s first guiding principle: “Each student is responsible in the last analysis for his or her own education.”

Obviously, students can ignore their professors’ suggestions for improvement and move on to other fields and disciplines where they are more comfortable. Or—typically in consultation with their faculty sponsors—students can challenge themselves to take their learning to a higher level, or to see in the criticism of their work a flaw in a fundamental skill, such as analytical writing, that is not confined to a single course or field. Most do choose to step up to the challenge of active learning, gradually apprehending that they are being invited to assume ownership of their own learning experience rather than being pummeled into a shape dictated by a grading system. In short, the proper response to a set of

detailed narrative evaluations is a fuller, healthier sense that learning is a lifelong process to be cultivated with self-awareness.

I was reminded of many of these issues in the spring of 2001 when, for the first time since my own arrival at New College in 1992, I spent a semester as a Visiting Professor at another institution, one with a traditional grading system—in this case, Brown University. In addition to a graduate seminar, I taught an entry-level undergraduate Religious Studies course, “Faith and Reason.” Not surprisingly, the students were top-notch, and the mix of students from many different fields and backgrounds created a dynamic classroom atmosphere.

But as soon as the first paper assignment became due, I confronted issues I had frankly forgotten about since leaving Oberlin nearly a decade earlier. In discussions with my graduate teaching assistant about coordinating our grading policies, I became newly aware of how arbitrary the grading of some forms of written work can be. Moreover, it became clear to me in the course of numerous discussions with students, both before their papers were due and (especially!) after they’d been graded and returned, that a genuine interest in the subject matter and in learning for learning’s sake was considerably diluted by an anxious concern about the “grade.” In a syndrome hardly confined to Brown, there was particular concern that an entry-level elective course, designed to round out the student’s schedule, not be allowed to threaten the students’ overall grade point average. In a phrase I had not heard in years, I was actually asked numerous times the question: “What do I need to do to get a better grade on my next paper?” I was by no means unsympathetic to this concern, especially when it came from the pre-med’s in the class. I was simply—and appreciatively—aware of what a different atmosphere I had come to take for granted here at New College, thanks to the absence of grades.

Our system is by no means perfect, and it depends heavily on the sustained commitment and conscientiousness of the entire faculty. And I am quick to add that there are many other things besides our evaluation system that make New College, as the State of Florida’s Honors College, a very special place. Still, the abiding respect for learning for learning’s sake that pervades the environment here is very real and something often remarked upon years later by New College graduates. Without question, the role that our system of narrative evaluations plays in engendering this environment is a central one. Perhaps the absence on our campus of a football team, or of fraternities and sororities, has given us a warped sense of campus traditions. Be that as it may, as onerous as our evaluation system is for our faculty, you would be hard-pressed to find a more fiercely defended tradition at New College.