Philosophies of Grading

Steven Lynn

University of South Carolina - Columbia, lynns@mailbox.sc.edu

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By Steven Lynn

"This student writes wretched, execrable stuff, and yet he tells me he made a B+ in Professor Whatshisname's class. When are we going to get some standards around here?"

With such a comment, my departmental colleagues began recently to discuss the grading in freshman English classes. Most agreed that there should be more uniformity in grading—but whose standard should be adopted?

We also quickly realized [what we knew already] that our differences in standards were the result of different assumptions regarding the purposes of grading. This statement was evolved as a simplification of the discussion: to distinguish the most common philosophies of grading and to suggest an ideal orientation toward which we all might strive.

The Keepers of the Gate

For Keepers of the Gate, students produce writing to certify their ability to pass. Keepers of the Gate assume that students have learned certain things in previous courses. Keepers at the graduate level assume that students learned at the undergraduate level what they need to know; Keepers at the undergraduate level assume that students learned everything in freshman English; and the first grade Keeper believes that the kid's parents should have taught him.

Obviously, some students don't meet the criteria to enter the City of Degrees. If every student did, the Keeper would be out of a job. So some Keepers are very selective, and almost no one meets their standards of certification.

Keepers of the Gate are not bound to explain their decisions to the applicants. If every student did, the Keeper would be out of a job. So some Keepers are very selective, and almost no one meets their standards of certification.

Keepers of the Gate are not bound to explain their decisions to the applicants. It is sufficient to grade and sort, but some Keepers do meticulously point out specific errors the applicant has made; so both the applicant and the Keeper can see the justice of the decision.

Keepers are not really interested in the process of writing; their job is to judge the products. Students submit their written applications, and the errors are marked and possible virtues noted. The Keeper returns the passport marked rejected, 30-day visitor's pass, working visa, or full citizenship granted. Those who are rejected should have tried harder, or come from better places, or known better, or something.

The Physicians to the Masses

Whereas Keepers see their responsibility to society and the state, Physicians to the Masses believe they work for their patients. There is illness and disease out there, and the purpose of examining writing is to diagnose that illness and cure it. Physicians often use broad red pens, bloodily excising grammatical tumors, splinting syntactical fractures, and medicating putrid content. This surgery is sometimes painful, but it's for the patient's own good.

After analysis of the writing sample, the Physician often devises exercises suitable to the patient's ailment and then takes another sample. Patients usually get better at doing the exercises; sometimes their writing samples clear up, too.

Sometimes, however, patients become anxious about whether they will survive the therapy and develop iatrogenic errors and "rebound effects," such as "Whom are you?" They may develop anemia and produce sentences like "I like the story. It is good. It is not long."

Some patients are treated by a Physician and never go back again unless they are forced to do so. They go through life hating Physicians and all the Physicians' instruments: the Wordspeare, the Shakespeare, the Keith, and the Shelby.
The Ministers to the Soul

These clergy do not have jobs; they have callings, which they perceive to be more noble than those of the lowly Physicians, who, after all, are only mechanics in turtlenecks. The Ministers nurture the spirit, so the supplicant's writing should be confessional and bare-souled. The novice believer is encouraged to dig deeply to find that which is authentic and true in and for himself. Ministers overlook little slips of propriety that mar particular acts of the self-seeking ritual and concentrate instead on involving the believer in the act of writing. This process must be repeated over and over again, each time becoming more authentic, more revealing, and more meaningful.

Ministers do not like to grade essays—judge not, lest ye be judged, they say—and instead of grading individual papers prefer instead to look at a lifetime, or at least a semester of writing, before committing themselves. They are, however, happy to write encouraging comments, providing mustard seeds of hope leading the believers to write even more next time.

Believers who have had ministerial educations are often shocked when they get out into the world and find that their values are out of step with the modern industrial complex. "Why," they ask, "doesn't my supervisor realize that this is really me? That the letter killeth, but the spirit makes me feel good?"

The Good Wizards of Everything

Wizards are astonishing: They have the ability to act as Keepers, Physicians, and Ministers. They uphold standards and keep the unwashed and ungrammatical out of the City, but this function is not their goal. They take no pride in turning travelers away, for they realize that the applicants may not themselves be at fault for their lack of credentials. In fact, Wizards believe that part of their job is to make applicants, regardless of their variety, acceptable to the City.

Wizards don't wonder why someone else hasn't already cleaned and groomed individual applicants; they know how scarce Wizards are, and how poor some environments are. They work hard with what they have, and they set reasonable standards for admission. They don't expect applicants to be perfect, but they do hope that applicants have learned the rewards of improving themselves and will continue to do so by studying.

Wizards also pay attention to the students' diseases, but they don't treat symptoms or fool around much with exercises. They look for the underlying causes of a particular problem, and when a pattern emerges, they focus on it. The Wizard's power is such that often just explaining the problem, person to person, cures it. Wizards know that students sometimes don't understand the comments made by Keepers, so they often grade papers in conference, in a friendly professional conversation. When faced with a severe case, the wise Wizard does not try to fix everything at once, knowing that this practice can depress and weaken the patient. The Wizard focuses on the most serious disease first.

Certainly Wizards do not neglect the soul. In fact, they value the life of the mind far above grammatical health and grooming. Their comments reward imagination and clear logic, and they direct students toward the acquisition of these qualities. Wizards know that nurturing the soul is an on-going process, and believers are required to submit the same piece of writing more than once and to develop and refine their efforts based on the Wizard's advice. Wizards, recognizing the misery and fear of those they serve, almost always find something encouraging to say.

It is of course much easier to declare oneself a Wizard than to actually perform the Wizard's work of miracles. But even confirmed Keepers, Physicians, and Ministers can grade with consideration toward the student's learning, and often perform thereby some impressive magic.

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