



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Emotional Responses to Being Graded

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Though this particular meeting of the Academic Standing Committee was five or six years ago, my memory of a request as filed by a student yet lingers. Bonnie, not her real name, was petitioning for a grade change from “B” to “A” in our required ethics course. In the rationale section of the form, she explained that she would soon be going before the denomination’s ordination committee. Her dilemma was about her transcript and its interpretation by the lay committee. Bonnie feared that by having been given a grade of “B” in Introduction to Ethics she would be misconstrued as an unethical person. In the petition, Bonnie took great care to assure the faculty committee of her high character and high moral fiber. From my recollection, her writing conveyed a low-grade sense of desperation and shame.

Of course the committee recognized the confusion of her rationale and elected not to change the grade. A grade in a disciplinary course, even if the course is ethics, is not an assessment of personal decency. Similarly, an academic transcript is not a predictor of vocational success or failure. After the Academic Standing committee ruled, Bonnie’s advisor was asked to talk with her and explain our decision.

My hunch is that the sentiments and fears of Bonnie are more pervasive in students than we would



want to think. What are we communicating to students about their personal virtue and value in grading? When a transcript is interpreted by non-academic persons in authority, in Bonnie's case an ordination committee, are they clear that the grades are not a measure of the goodness of the candidate? What do grades mean to adult learners - many of whom are already highly accomplished in the vocation for which they study?

Once the joys and jitters of the beginning of the semester settle-in, I look to the next milestone - the first assignment. The part I enjoy about the first assignment is seeing the work of students up-close and personal. The part I dislike about the first assignment is grading. Specifically, I dread returning the graded assignments to students. My difficulty is the emotional response of students about their grades.

Returning graded assignments is a moment when the energies of the room rise and fall; spike and soar higher, then dip; quiver and swirl - all seemingly in simultaneous, mostly silent, drama. Students who receive a "good" grade, usually A, sit looking proud, feeling understood and sometimes smug or condescendingly satisfied. Some students look inquisitive, usually the A- or B+ grades, re-reading my comments and trying to make sense out of their "mistakes" or my poor judgment. Students with grades which are below B+ often allow their attention to drift or even pout for the remainder of the session unable to engage with the teacher who obviously is incompetent, misinformed, or down right prejudiced against them. Returning graded assignments is a moment loaded, overloaded, with student emotions and this moment, for me, has proven many times to be distractingly burdensome.

So many student reactions communicate that if I gave their assignment the highest grade then I "like" them and think they are "good" human beings. And, if I gave their assignments a lower grade, then I "dislike" them and think they are "bad" human beings. I am just as un-prepared for the emotions of joy, satisfaction and pride as I am for the emotions of frustration, disappointment or anger.

My spiritual practice for this weighty moment has turned to detachment. It is not my want to disconnect (not to become unattached) from the students nor to dampen their responses. I do

not want to shield myself from the emotions of my students. Detachment helps me to maintain my own composure and direction during their emotional highs and lows. I want to keep this moment in perspective as one moment among many throughout our shared experience of learning. I want to resist reacting to their mood with my own mood. The practice of detachment allows me to stay focused on the building of community in the course as well as upon the notion of mutual respect. Detachment, like submitting one's self to be graded in the creation of a transcript, requires hard work, discipline and commitment.

I have thought of Bonnie many times when I return the first, graded assignments in a course. Her heartfelt dilemma reminds me that while grading is not a determiner of character and worth, it is a sensitive experience to which I need to carefully tend.

This is the 3rd post in this series by Nancy Lynne Westfield this semester (Fall 2015).

<https://wabash.center/2015/09/emotional-responses-to-being-graded/>