



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Grade: a number, letter, etc., indicating the relative quality of a student’s work in a course, examination, or special assignment; mark.”

-Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language

As my semester in library school wound down last week, I started to think again about school, learning and grades. It feels odd to have my work graded - and it brings back many thoughts I have had in the past, starting with one idea in particular: grades don’t make sense to me.

For most of my earlier school life, I did pretty well. I like to learn and I like to think and I like most of the subjects that are taught in school. Well, I didn’t like history, but maybe it takes some living first to appreciate the ironies and lessons of history.

However, being graded didn’t motivate me to learn. Grades were the result of my work, not the reason for it. And that is still true. I am doing my best and I’m in school because I want to be there. So, I can’t help wondering: Why the grades? Especially in graduate school, why not teach everything pass/fail? Why not use teacher comments as guides, rather

than using a system that tells me little about how I can improve or how well I understand the subject?

In this library school program, grades are a combination of participation, papers and, for some classes, exams of some kind. The first time I took a test, I was so anxious about it I didn’t sleep at all the night before. And even though I did fine, I don’t remember any of the facts I memorized for it.

Every day at the library I see school children come in and do their homework or study for tests. And I wonder how they feel about what they are doing. Do they enjoy it? Are they studying because they want to learn? Or is it the grades? I remember when my children were in middle school, there was already pressure to achieve, so that they could get into good classes in high school, so they could go to a good college, so they could go to a good graduate school. And all

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along they were being guided not by their own interests, but by the teacher’s grades.

Grading can be particularly difficult for those students who are apprehensive either about the class or about exams. As one friend told me, “In the college classes I liked, I got good grades. And in the classes where I struggled, getting a low grade made the class even worse.” He also commented on how difficult a participation grade can be for a shy student.

I found a recent KidsPoll/KidsHealth survey that showed that of the 1004 9-to-13-year-olds polled, “53% worried daily or weekly about whether their hard work will garner an A or an F” (www.akronchildrens.org/press/health/2004/back2school.html).

After being in school for the last year and a half, I can completely understand this worry. And it isn’t just about the grade itself – there is

something about being graded that feels like a judgment on who I am. It’s challenging to set aside my feelings and see the grade or the points as helpful feedback.

After being in the real world for quite a while – as opposed to the school world – I can say that the managers I’ve had aren’t giving me grades. They are letting me learn from my mistakes and they are assuming that I am going to do my work because it is my job, because it interests me and because they respect me enough to trust me. I wish my teachers could do the same.