

Playing for Stakes

GRADING AND EVALUATION IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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“Does this count?” and “How much does this count?” are two of the questions high school students most often ask. They are also the questions that most frustrate their teachers. Students, looking at their questions from a practical perspective, are generally innocent of their irony. How much does *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* count? Does it count if we know who Suzanna Moodie was? How much does spelling count? And that short story we read just because it was funny - does that count? Read in a different way, these are issues that lie at the heart of the teaching of English.

The fact that students so often ask these questions and that teachers are so often depressed by them reflects the differences in priorities between teachers and students. For the English teachers at Oak River High School², a small town New England high school in which I carried out this study, the focus of what goes on in the English class is the learning. The texts at hand and how students learn to construct and reconstruct them is what counts. Class discussions, writing assignments, and tests - all the paraphernalia of evaluation - are ways of gaining insights into what students do with texts and language. For the teachers, grades are entirely secondary, a rather unsatisfactory means of communicating to students when and where they might increase their efforts.

These priorities are reversed for the students. To them, grades are what school is all about, and their importance increases sharply in the higher grades. Grades carry serious short-and long-term consequences. They determine whether a student goes to college and which colleges she goes to, whether she drives the car, plays on the basketball team, keeps a part-time job, and to a large extent, who her friends are. Since learning culminates in a grade and grades are the bases upon which opportunities are won and lost, students' attention tends to focus primarily upon making the grade and secondarily upon learning as a means to that important end. Tom and Andrew, talking about how grade anxiety affects their choices and work habits, illustrated this attitude.

AV So what you're saying then is that an awful lot of what goes on in high school has to do with grades and that grades have a lot to do with verification?

Andrew: That's the bottom line. And it gets more and more so as you get higher up in the grades. College is - the pressure to get good grades gets higher and higher and higher.

Tom: And conversely the amount that you get out of what you're learning gets lower, because you're doing things to get a grade. They're supposed to be equal, but you know, they're not really.

Andrew: And then you've got the teachers who say don't worry about the grade, it's what you learned and then they give you a bad grade even though you learned a lot. So you end up pumping gas at the Shell station because you didn't get into college and when people come in to get gas you tell them, "Hey, I learned a lot."

(Transcript 14A:03/11/89)

At Oak River, because of the high percentage of achievement-oriented, middle-class students, in academically prestigious courses competition for grades can be intense. One student's comment about feeling "like your feelings are being corrected" suggests the pressure students experience to perform, to say the right thing, to make the insightful comment. This tendency among students to focus on grades as all important caused concern

among English teachers at the school, who, in a series of conversations, talked about the potentially destructive effects of grading on learning in English class.

The four English teachers I talked to (Dick, Emma, Liz, and Anne) were not suggesting that grades and grading necessarily should be dispensed with in the high school. All felt that it was an essential part of the teacher's role to evaluate students' work and to communicate that evaluation to the students. They had reservations about alternative evaluation systems such as Pass/Fail grading and anecdotal comments, suggesting such unwieldy systems might not only be unacceptable to parents and students but might well in any case become grades in another form. Nonetheless, all these teachers had serious difficulties with the present grading system, and all had conflicts over their own practices of assigning grades. Many of these conflicts arose over the fact that grades mean very different things to different people, particularly to students and to teachers. And frequently teachers also had dilemmas over the weighting of various kinds of evaluation in determining grades: for example, did a student's progress over time count toward the final grade as much, more, or less than her overall performance as compared to her peers?

This article explores some of the grading issues that troubled these English teachers. I begin by distinguishing between grading students and evaluating students, as a way of introducing some of the complexities involved in evaluating students in English and rendering those evaluations in terms of a grade. Then I examine conversations with the English teachers, identifying their concerns and seeing these reflected in students' observations. Finally, I *explore* how these teachers addressed some of their concerns over grading through developing new or alternative evaluation practices.

The study informing this article was an eightmonth ethnography of a high school carried out three days a week over a one-year period, primarily in two high school English classrooms: a writing workshop taught by a teacher (Dick) with ten years' experience in teaching writing "process", and the literature classroom of a teacher (Emma) who was beginning reader-response journals in connection with developing a feminist pedagogy. The study focussed on exploring tensions between these pedagogies and the pedagogy implicit in the structures, routines, and culture of the high school as an institution.

Data included fieldnotes collected in the classrooms central to the study as well as sites throughout the school to which participating students and teachers led me (other classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, administrative offices, staff meetings, school outings, etc.); semi-structured and open-ended interviews with sixty students, and semi-structured and informal interviews with twelve teachers and two administrators; samples of student writing, class texts, handouts, assignments, school information bulletins, etc. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded for patterns and themes (Spradley, 1979) and interview data codes triangulated, wherever possible, with observational and textual data.

EVALUATING VERSUS GRADING

At various times throughout the year, I asked Dick and Emma to talk about the reading and writing processes of individual students I was following, and to comment on their progress in the course. I was impressed by the teachers' ability to talk at length about the reading and writing of students whom they saw only for about fifty minutes each day along with at least twenty other students. It became clear from their knowledge of their students and from the nature of the observations they made about them that these teachers engaged in continuous, informal, minute-to-minute evaluations of the sort Yetta Goodman (1989) called "kid-watching". Furthermore, these formative evaluations appeared of far greater significance to teachers in making instructional decisions than the more formal summative evaluations represented by tests and finished papers. Finally, formative evaluations, which had to do with students' progress across time, frequently conflicted in the teachers' minds with summative evaluations, which had more to do with ranking students' performances against their peers.

In January, Emma spoke about Mark as a reader and writer, illustrating her points with excerpts from his reading journal as she talked.

Emma began by saying Mark "seemed very concrete, very hard-working, able to amass data", but that at least earlier in the course "he'd really fall on his face when he tried to put that together in a cohesive way." He had trouble, she perceived, in putting observations about plot, action, and character together to make "a coherent, welldeveloped argument" revealing how he saw a book or poem. She had noted this tendency in both

his oral and written comments on his reading. She thought the journals had helped him “to make a cognitive leap, to talk and write about things in a more abstract, related way.”

I wondered how she thought the reading journals had helped with this.

Well, first of all I think just by the volume of writing he's done in the journals, he's gotten more comfortable with language, with writing his thoughts about literature. His writing doesn't sound as pedantic as it used to sound - incomprehensible, I mean just very hard to understand what he was saying... Perhaps because of the regularity of the journal, and because it's relatively non-threatening, his writing has gotten freer, much better, much clearer. He doesn't try to sound sophisticated and get into a muddle as he used to, or at least less so... There's a lot of growth here. He's speculating on things, letting himself go to explore. His writing was so stilted and overwritten, and I've noticed this semester it's much more natural. I've been encouraging him to ask questions of his reading in his journal - you can see he's doing this here [indicates later entries], as a way of developing connections, coherent interpretations. I want him to notice the difference between good and irrelevant questions; I see him working on this, thinking about this. He's asking important questions in class, too.

(Transcript 20: 04/12/89)

In an interview with Mark, I discovered that his interpretation of the journal's usefulness for him tallied with Emma's. He told me he was “working on asking good questions about the books... the kind of questions that help me tie the book together.” He also thought “the journal's good practice... I'm learning the kinds of things you say about novels when you write about them. I don't think I understood that last year.” (Transcript 23: 10/01/90)

Dick talked to me about David's growth as a writer in December, and his comments illustrated a similar reliance on continuously collected observational data. He saw David as “an imaginative young man, who has a real thing for metaphors, similes, figures of speech, images, symbols, etc.” While this was an aspect of his writing the class appreciated, Dick also noted that both he and David's peers had commented on “a problem with focus this fascination with word play sometimes creates.” David got carried away exploring metaphors, and in the process tended to “lose his direction.” Dick gave as an example an early draft of David's paper “Baby Back Ribs and Small Korean Men”, a story about a trip to a New York pub. The point of the story, the inextricable mixing of the world of the rich and elegant and the world of the dispossessed in New York City, was somewhat lost in David's fascination with details and images from the trip. His teacher and classmates suggested to him that he needed to select those images that connected to his focus, his theme.

But David had a very positive attitude, very willing and open, and the main thing was he was getting all this positive feedback about his clever images and wording. And that seemed to carry him through, to double his determination to get these other problems ironed out. Because he also has problems with some basic skills -spelling, punctuation, run-ons. And initially he seemed very fearful and would turn off if you focussed on those. But it turned out after a while that as long as he got plenty of support for his ideas, his ability to phrase things aptly, that he knew he was on secure footing with other members of the class as a writer. And so we didn't have a lot of problems dealing with [mechanics] because the technical problems were kept in perspective for him. And he seemed all the more eager to deal with them in order to strengthen writing that was already seen by others as good. And that has evolved over the semester.

David's also working on writing shorter, simpler sentences. He would write these thirty, forty word sentences one after another, and I said grab a few morsels every now and then and just drop them in for a change. He grabbed on to that, like [reads] “Second is our faithful pal Chuck. “...

So what you have here is writing that is vastly improved over the semester. In these [later drafts] the topic is organically connected, so that you can isolate parts and not damage the meaning... And I think with David, this is because he sees the value of input from others, he appreciates it and knows how to use it, and so he learns more.

(Transcript 22A: 12/12/89)

David, who in interviews talked about his need to revise for coherence and mechanics (Transcript 22B: 12/12/89), shared Dick's evaluation of his writing, as Mark shared Emma's.

The sort of evaluation Dick and Emma engage in as they talk about these two students comes not so much from ranking the students' performances against their peers as from watching students' development in journals, drafts, and class interactions. It is a sort of contextualized evaluation, taking into consideration the person and who the person is. The aim is not to judge the quality of the students' work per se, but to attempt to see what and how the student is learning in order to assist that learning. These formative evaluations also involve dialogue and negotiation between teacher and student, as the teacher attempts to help the student see himself or herself more clearly.

Such continuous, dynamic evaluations are of prime concern to English teachers because of their immediacy to decisions about teaching and learning in reading and writing. Unfortunately, formative evaluations, central as they are to how we teach or what we learn, cannot be represented in terms of a grade. In fact sometimes it is difficult to reconcile formative evaluation with summative evaluation, or grades. For instance, Patrick's papers are better than David's; yet formative evaluations provide ample evidence that David has progressed more within the course than Patrick. Who gets the "A"? David? Patrick? Both? The likelihood is that the grade is, to the students, a more pressing issue than the learning.

In late November, I attended a group grading session among four English teachers in the high school - an event which in itself suggested teachers' uneasiness about grades. Each teacher brought photocopies of five or six student papers for each of the other teachers to read and grade. The grading sessions were followed by discussions of why the teachers assigned the grades they did.

Emma brought Mark's latest paper, an examination of character and responsibility in *The Scarlet Letter*. Each of the other teachers except one ranked Mark's paper a grade lower than Emma had. The teacher whose grade for the paper corresponded with Emma's had taught Mark the previous year, and prefaced her comments with, "May I say this paper shows tremendous progress?" (Fieldnotes: 22/11/89, p.4)

As the afternoon wore on, it became quite clear that the teachers were in considerable agreement on the standards by which they were grading. The papers needed to develop a clear focus or line of argument, supported by reference to the text under discussion. Clarity of expression was important, naturally, so that the reader could make out what the writer was saying. The teachers also looked for evidence that the writer had made the text her own, had explored and developed her own responses to it. Sometimes there were differences among the teachers on the emphasis they placed on these criteria: Emma, perhaps because she tended to teach younger, less experienced students, placed slightly more emphasis on focus and clarity than on originality and liveliness, at least by comparison to one other teacher, whose students were more mature.

In general, there was substantial agreement among the teachers on the grades they assigned each paper. But in almost every case, the teacher who taught the student ranked the paper higher than did her colleagues. This phenomenon made for some interesting exchanges. One of the teachers suggested that a paper by a student of Emma's was "orderly, correct, and logical, but lacks spark. It's a little dull, he hasn't taken on the book, hasn't put much of himself into it."

"But what if he's an orderly, logical person?" Emma asked. "Or if that's his response to this book? Is it fair to give them an essay formula and then criticize them for not being themselves?" (Fieldnotes, 22/11/89, p. 8)

Similarly, when Emma suggested another teacher's student "might be more clear if he drew on some examples from the play", the teacher responded, "I don't care about that. [The paper] has vitality and personality." (Fieldnotes, 22/11/89, p.10)

No doubt it is unsurprising that these teachers grade a little higher when they know the students. Yet the incident suggests something of the tension teachers feel between their two roles of ranking students' papers and of teaching flesh-and-blood students who are learning and changing. They are roles these teachers often found difficult to reconcile.

THE TROUBLE WITH GRADES: TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Every school day Anne and Liz met in Anne's room for lunch and conversation. Anne's room separated Dick's classroom from Emma's so that I walked by her open door daily, until one day I asked if I could join them.

After that, I quite regularly stayed for lunch with these two teachers, talking with them about women's literature, English teaching, politics, and my research, as Dick or Emma or the intern Jan wandered in and out, joining the conversations when they could. Anne and Liz were experienced, committed teachers, vitally interested in the current debates preoccupying their profession. They were thoughtful, engaging talkers and equally thoughtful listeners: excellent company. One day near the end of my research I asked the teachers to talk about grades and grading. I was not surprised to discover that, like Dick and Emma, these teachers had certain concerns and conflicts around the issue. They did not like to give grades and found the current controversy over whether the school should move from an eight- to a ten-point spread for letter grades "ridiculous." On the other hand, like Dick and Emma they were perhaps as uncomfortable with the notion of not giving grades as they were with grading. Three of the issues they raised that day were themes I had heard before, in conversations with Dick and Emma and with students.

One of these themes was that a grade communicates very little. It tells the student nothing about the evaluation process that has gone into arriving at the grade, nothing about the criteria upon which the grade is based - although that is precisely what the student needs to know in order to learn and thereby improve the grade. At the same time, because grades have such power in student's lives, they are likely to be so focused on the grade that they miss the explanation of it. Through this muddle, grades may end up meaning very different things to the teacher who gives them and the student who receives them.

"What I have trouble with in grading is the conflict," Anne said.

I have this kid, he's just super, he can think circles around us. But he cannot speak or write in a way that we can see where he's going. He uses ten words when he could use two, he has run-on sentences, he puts three or four 'but's all in one sentence, yet the reasoning is terrific. But you can't write it that way because the reader keeps tripping... So, my conflict is how do you get the kid to identify their strengths and weaknesses without feeling that you don't like them?

... I think our function as teachers and as adults working with kids is to help them understand where they need help.

... But a "C" means you don't like the kid, or they're no good at this, or they're bad.

(Transcript 24: 24/01/90)

Anne's point is that grades can be threatening enough to students that they have precisely the opposite effect from the teacher's intentions: instead of communicating something to the student, they can shut down communication between teacher and student.

Both Anne and Liz referred to another potential communication problem with grades that may be of particular concern to English teachers, given the nature of their discipline. This is the "whatdo-you-want?" syndrome; when the teacher asks a student what she thinks, the student answers, in effect, "what do you want me to think?" Communication is short-circuited as the teacher tries to understand what the student is thinking, saying, or writing while the student concentrates on trying to guess what the teacher wants her to say, think, or write. Liz saw this (among other things) as connected to "being safe, saying the safe thing ... their reluctance to take risks."

Whether or not there is any truth in it, the perception among students that getting good grades was a matter of teacher-pleasing appeared fairly widespread. Patrick talked about it as "the easiest thing to do - figure out what the teacher wants and give it to them." Todd and Mike believed unquestioning acquiescence to teachers was the making of an "A" student. Andrea suggested it in her comments about the competition "to say the right thing" (Fieldnotes, 20/10/89, pp. 2-6.). And I saw examples of it at work in both Dick's and Emma's classrooms, even though these teachers took measures to demonstrate that they were genuinely interested in hearing students' honest positions.

In Dick's class, teacher-pleasing for the grade took the form of occasional students who, like Sarah, revised their papers according to Dick's whether or not they understood or agreed with the comments. In Emma's class, Tom, an academically strong and quite mature student, was reluctant to talk to Emma about his problems with keeping the journal nightly "because it kind of puts you in a compromising position to say this doesn't work the

best because it's easy to cheat." When I pointed out that Emma's response was much more likely to be focussed on finding a way for the journal to work, Tom said,

...I can see where you're coming from, but I can also say that it makes me nervous. I worry about the impression she might get. It's hard to say it in a way that sounds like you're not just trying to get out of the work. She might think I don't take the course seriously...

(Transcript 15: 27/10/89)

Tom was not a student from whom Emma or anyone else would expect laziness or manipulateness.

It is hardly news that students engage in teacher-pleasing in an attempt to get high grades. But the practice is of particular concern to these English teachers because of the nature of their teaching. All are working toward ideals of student-centered teaching, and all believe that they are primarily teaching processes, i.e. the processes of reading and writing. When these are one's instructional philosophies, the propensity of teacher-given grades to interfere with honest communication between teachers and students becomes a more distressing predicament.

Student-centered teaching assumes that instruction begins "where the student is", which in turn assumes honest communication between teacher and student. Similarly, teaching reading and writing processes begins in the initial encounter between students and texts in which students ask, "What sense do I make of this?" When students read or write merely to fulfill an assignment, when they begin by attempting to find someone else's meaning, they circumvent the premises upon which student-centered teaching and the learning of processes are based. If these teachers are more troubled by the sort of game-playing that grading may encourage than some of their colleagues, it is because within their philosophical systems such games are more threatening.

Patrick said, "It is easier to just figure out what the teacher wants"... The final theme I want to look at on the issue of grading is teachers' perceptions that teacher-given grades are just too easy. At various times, all the English teachers suggested that the grading system somehow asks too little of students, absolves them of their responsibility for their learning, encourages passivity, or discourages risk-taking.

Anne: ...with the pressures to have a grade for everything, when the teacher gives the grade, that in some way absolves the kids. They don't get the grade, the teacher gives it to them.

Liz: ...And the students support teacher-given grades too. I mean it's much easier and it's much safer. They don't want to have to be so responsible - It's like the students who won't open up and be vulnerable in discussions, they don't want to take any risks.

Emma: With the response journals, I'm trying more and more to put the responsibility where it belongs: on the kids. But it's hard. They come from a mind-set where they're always trying to get the grade. Kids who are not necessarily great students get A's on the journals because it has to do with how willing they are to examine what they think. Trying to second-guess me doesn't work because that's not the criterion... it's hard because grades are uppermost in their minds.

Emma: Writing is for thinking. It's for communal thinking. Writing helps me figure out what I think. It allows contact with another... I often think people who can write break down the isolation of being human. I want the kids to see that. The kids think writing is to do an assignment and get a grade.

Dick: I asked them to evaluate themselves because I want them to take more responsibility for their learning. When I give them a grade, they don't have to look at themselves; they don't have to think about the quality of their writing; they don't have to think about what they need to work on and how they're going to do it. I want them to participate in that, and to articulate it to me.

(Transcript 24: 24101190)

The "responsibility" that the teachers wanted students to take had to do with students concentrating less on what the grade was and more on how the grade was arrived at. They were aware that students found it easy to put grades down to personal preferences (i.e. give the teacher what she likes). When students "took responsibility

for their learning”, they recognized and participated in the standards upon which the grades were based, honestly looking at their own work in terms of those standards and making decisions about where they needed effort. That process could as readily be called “learning”.

These teachers saw the grading system as engendering a passive, hoop-jumping view of learning inconsistent with the definition above. Tom’s unwillingness to tell his teacher that the journals didn’t work for him, Sarah’s reluctance to openly disagree with her teacher’s suggestions, the general eagerness to please the teacher places the full responsibility for curriculum on the teacher’s shoulders. She becomes the arbiter of learning, responsible for all decisions about what is to be learned and how it is to be approached, while simultaneously deprived of the very information she needs to make those decisions wisely. The students, on the other hand, sit back and wait for school to happen to them.

The passivity of high school students is a complex response to many institutional and cultural factors (see, for example McNeil, 1988; Powell et al, 1985). But undoubtedly one of those factors is that what counts for them in the end is the grade. It doesn’t pay to take risks, make mistakes, take a chance at trying something you’re not good at if it means you risk ending up pumping gas at the Shell. “To get good grades you have to get the work done,” Jack told me. “And it’s easier to just do it, get it done, don’t think about it too much. It’s easier to take notes, write the exam, and don’t get too involved.” (Fieldnotes, 20/10/89, p.6).

ADDRESSING THE TROUBLE WITH GRADES: ALTERNATIVES

These teachers had a number of strategies for ameliorating some of the difficulties they saw grades creating. To reduce grade anxiety and preoccupation with grades, some graded “easier”, giving commitment, effort, and progress as much weight in determining grades as products (i.e., individual test scores, paper grades, and so on). All regularly talked with students about the criteria for grades, attempting to ensure students understood what the grades were based on. One teacher told her students they all had a “B” in the course to begin with, and discussed explicitly the ways they could work up or down from that baseline.

Two of the teachers, Dick and Liz, developed a grading system that is particularly interesting because it is so uncommon in the high school. Both used negotiated grades in one of the courses they taught - Liz in her Senior Seminar, and Dick in his Writers Workshop. In these systems, students evaluate their own work according to a predetermined set of criteria. The teacher evaluates the student’s work as well, and then teacher and student meet to talk about their various evaluations and negotiate a grade. Though Dick and Liz had developed different systems for negotiated grading, they found similar benefits and problems in the practice.

Liz: I guess what I like best is my Senior Seminar in literature where we discuss early in the course how the course is going to run, and how many papers they’re going to write, and whether they’re going to share them with each other, and what about grades. And in the three years I’ve taught that course they elect not to have grades [on papers], they just want my comments. We negotiate what the criteria for doing well in the course are, we agree to that at the beginning. And then they have a conference with me at the end of the quarter - they could have it at any time but they usually pick the end of the quarter. They come in with some written rationale for why they should get the grade they think they should get, and we negotiate the grade.

(Transcript 24: 24/01/90)

One of the differences between Liz’s and Dick’s approach to negotiated evaluation was that Dick and his students did not negotiate curricular details at the beginning, although Dick regularly invited course evaluation and often modified his practices according to student feedback. Liz’s approach may have had an advantage over Dick’s here, in that, because her students had a hand in determining the evaluation criteria, they were not being asked to evaluate their performances according to someone else’s criteria. They were perhaps more likely to understand the criteria upon which they were evaluating themselves.

However, Dick’s course handled this issue in a different way. Because the main feature of the course was the workshop, which was really all about the evaluation of students’ writing, the students in Dick’s course - along with the teacher, of course - were actually creating, evolving, and modifying the evaluative criteria (“the standards”) for the course throughout it. They took their lead from the teacher, who represented the community of “expert”

writers in the appropriate discipline, and who led largely by reviewing general topics he had determined many students needed to work on (egs: tense consistency, effective openings, etc.).

In the student workshops, members were then conscious of these standards and “practiced” applying them to their own and each other’s writing. But the evaluative criteria emerging from the workshops were by no means limited to those the teacher introduced. Students, drawing on their substantial if often tacit knowledge of the conventions of good writing, participated in articulating, recognizing, and applying evaluative criteria that far surpassed, in both numbers and sophistication, what one teacher could possibly address in one semester.

The fact that students were reading and evaluating each other’s papers in workshops also helped ease one of the difficulties of negotiated evaluations that arose in Liz’s classroom. She found that negotiated evaluations were

very difficult for them... I did it myself, though, so I understand. I’d turn in a paper and say “Oh I thought it was awful and you gave me an “A “, or I thought it was really good and you gave me a “C”.

(Transcript 24: 24/01/90)

Like the students who see grades as evidence of the teacher’s personal preferences, students in Liz’s class may have had difficulty evaluating their work partly because they were doing this largely individually. In the workshop, students had ample opportunity to see their peers’ writing, to find out what the community of writers their age looked like. Evaluation assumes comparison, either with a former self or with others; it is impossible to evaluate oneself against nothing. Because Dick’s students were continuously evaluating each other’s writing, they had a clearer, stronger sense of themselves as writers.

Both Liz and Dick found that they learned a great deal about their students and themselves as teachers through negotiating grades. One of the things they learned was that sometimes their evaluation of a student’s work was based on a misinterpretation, or at least on an interpretation that differed from the student’s. When the student explained herself, the teacher’s evaluation changed. This happened to Dick when students pointed out that his responses to their drafts were based on misunderstandings of their intentions for the paper (eg: “If I follow your advice, this will be a serious paper. I meant it to be light.”). Liz talked about a student whose evaluation changed after the girl pointed out that she was a quiet person, and had actually contributed a great deal to class discussion for a quiet person.

Negotiated grades went some way toward addressing the main problems the teachers had with grading. They encouraged rather than discouraged honest communication between teachers and students. They also required that students think about, enter into, and apply the standards of the community - the standards upon which grades are based - to their own work. Students were asked to become actively involved in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, in deciding where they need to increase their efforts, and how and why they need to do this. The practice placed some of the responsibility for learning on the student, asking her to become a full participant in her own education.

Dick and Liz cited very similar problems with their negotiated grading schemes. For one thing, negotiating grades with students is a timeconsuming process, and time is in short supply in the high school. Furthermore, both teachers found that self evaluation was very difficult for students. This is not surprising given that evaluating students is clearly very difficult for teachers, too. The problem is exacerbated by the human condition through which it is more difficult to see ourselves than to see others.

But the fact that self evaluation is difficult for students is in the end perhaps a stronger argument for implementing it than for avoiding it. School, after all, is where students go to learn to do things they can’t yet do. Whether selfevaluation is a valuable thing to learn is not an argument I can pursue here; I assume most educators would agree it is. It is enough to say here that the ability to evaluate one’s work and one’s learn

ing is essential to a catch-phrase dear to educators’ hearts: self evaluation is “learning how to learn”.

NOTES

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2. To preserve confidentiality, “Oak River” is a pseudonym for this school.

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