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Directions and Misdirections

Student Voices

I can remember flunking my first course ever in my whole life. It happened my junior year in college and it was a statistics course. It was a such a terrible feeling, as if the F stood for f—kg stupid." I did not want my parents to find out about it. I thought they would absolutely kill me, or even worse . . . give me some tiring lecture about how they were not paying my way through college for me to flunk courses. They eventually found out about it and were naturally disturbed by it. But, they also realized that I had been a good student all my life and would not say that one F would destroy my hopes of graduating from school and getting a good job. I must admit that it did give me some sort of a wake-up call. — *Will Boberg*

Most professors seem more comfortable putting a grade on everything for their own sake (less work) as well as the students. — *Julie Parrino*

I remember in grade 10 when I received an A+ on an English paper—the highest mark in the class. I was so happy because I never received these high grades in high school. My teacher sent me to a young authors conference where “real” authors viewed your paper and told you and everyone else their comments about it. The author totally tore up my paper and humiliated me in front of twenty other students. I was so upset that at the break I left and never came back for the rest of the conference. My teacher had to convince me that I did a really good job and it was worth the A+. But I wondered what grade my paper was really worth. — *Rachelle Whitfield*

If I were to get a grade of, say a B, I would feel I was in a B range and how do I get out of it? How many more points do I need to get that A? By not having a grade, I feel a freedom to play with my drafts, to add things or to take things out without being penalized. I enjoy revising. — *Jennifer Foster*

I think that by not having a grade, students tend to take the class less seriously. — *Sonal Patel*

The Origins and Evolution of Grading Student Writing

Pedagogical Imperatives and Cultural Anxieties

Grading, as it is commonly understood today, has not always been a feature of American higher education. During colonial times, college students did not typically receive grades of any sort. Rather, the formal evaluation of their scholastic achievement seems to have been restricted to an examination given near the end of their collegiate matriculation which was intended to certify that a level of intellectual competency and moral rectitude deemed appropriate for the college graduate had been attained. As Harvard College would declare in 1646: “Every scholar that on proof is found able to read the original of the old and new testament into the Latin tongue, and to resolve them logically[;] with-all being of honest life and conversation and at any public act hath the approbation of the overseers, and Master of the College may be invested with his first degree” (quoted in Smallwood, 8).

This “proof” was primarily attained through an oral examination, borrowed in large part from European practice, that soon evolved into a more formalized system of public and private recitations. These recitations, which chiefly measured a student’s proficiency in rote memorization, constituted the primary means of evaluating student achievement by the middle of the eighteenth century (Rudolph 1981, 146). Under this system, colleges designated several days at the conclusion of each academic year when students would come before their professors and a trustee committee to be examined on the year’s work. It was left to the trustees—who had the right to participate actively in the examination—to determine the success or failure of each student (Rudolph 1981, 146). However, as Frederick Rudolph points out, these examinations tended to be more “gestures in public relations” than rigorous interrogations, and “there [were] no surprises in these performances, [with] . . . no searching questions, no stimulation to the imagination, and no real testing of the student or of the teacher’s effectiveness” (145–46).

A certain dissatisfaction with this method of evaluation thus quickly manifested itself, and by the 1830s, leading colleges like Harvard and Yale had initiated the more rigorous system of biennial *written* examinations to be taken at the end of the sophomore and senior years (Rudolph 146; Smallwood 15).¹ Many colleges across the nation imitated this grading reform, for while these new examinations were still quite restrictive of student initiative and creativity in thinking, the fact that they were in writing did have the attractive benefit of enhancing the possibility of comparatively ranking individual student performances (Rudolph 146). They also had the effect of elevating the instructor to the principal position in the measurement of student achievement, with college trustees no longer the final arbiters and the more “public” qualities of the old examination procedure allowed to wither away.

The change to an emphasis on scored writing provided impetus to the growing use of grades as definitive markers of a student’s academic merit and worth. To be sure, prior to the Revolutionary War, an *implied* grading system had begun to take shape in colleges, seen chiefly in the designation and ranking of graduating seniors for parts in commencement exercises (i.e., the selection of valedictorian, salutatorian, etc.), but it was not until 1785 that an American college developed and employed a clearly defined scale of measurement to differentiate and rank its students. In that year, Yale adopted the four tiered system of *Optimi*, *Second Optimi*, *Inferiores*, and *Pejores*, most probably borrowing the terminology from the English system of “Honor Men,” “Pass Men,” “Charity Passes,” and “the Unnamed” (students whose names were not published in university records [Smallwood 107–8]). By 1813, Yale had modified their ranking system to one based on a numerical scale of 1–4, a change that permitted much more dis-

crimination among individual students (Yale used both whole numbers and decimals), and, when coupled with the advent of the graded written examination, helped to stimulate a growing interest in elaborate and intricate marking systems. Harvard, for example, soon adopted a 20-point grading scale that was even more quickly replaced by a 100-point scale, as the quest for even greater exactness in measurement continued to spur innovations in grading (Smallwood 108).

The new, quantified method of evaluation was generally applied across the board in academic courses. Each recitation, and indeed nearly every part of the student's work, was graded and averaged into an overall number representing the relative ranking of the student's performance in college (Rudolph 147). As Ezekiel Belden would note in his account of undergraduate life at Yale, in the early 1840s: "A mark is recorded of each recitation denoting its merit. These marks range from 0 to 4. Two is considered as the average; and a student not receiving this average in all the studies of a term, is obliged to leave his class, and not allowed to re-enter it, until he can pass an examination in all branches to which his class has attended" (quoted in Smallwood 47). Grades had thus, by the antebellum period, become definitive markers of student achievement and of the worthiness of individual students to remain within the academic community.

The fascination with the ranking and discriminating potentialities, inherent within the grading system, intensified through the collapse of the classical curriculum and the advent, in the years following the Civil War, of higher education's developing commitment to training the nation's emerging professional elite. As colleges moved away from the recitation model, with its concentration on the classical languages and the tenets of faculty psychology, and toward a Harvard-inspired philosophy of education that would foreground, in the words of President Charles W. Eliot, "the systematic study of the English language" (59) in a new elective system of undergraduate study, they did not abandon the old grading procedures. Rather they sought to adapt the grades ever more perfectly to pedagogical and institutional imperatives. Thus, Freshman Composition became a fundamental part of the general education curriculum at Harvard during the 1880s, the very same decade that the school moved to replace its numerical scale of grading with one based on a five letter grade (A through E) system (Smallwood 51). Obviously, one academic innovation did not necessarily imply or produce the other, but it is worth noting their relative contiguity in time. And just as Harvard's way of teaching writing "swept over the land" (Lounsbury 866) through the powerful influence of its English A course (established in 1885), so too did Harvard's new marking system serve as an influential model widely imitated across the landscape of American higher education.

To be sure, the essential configurations of the system for grading student writing, which emerged during the latter stages of the nineteenth century, look exceedingly familiar from a late twentieth century perspective; few today, for instance, would be astonished by Professor Charles Copeland's explanation of the grading scales in Harvard's freshman writing program:

One may, however, explain A (a mark rarely given) as signifying that a man's work not only is correct, but has some maturity of thought, some distinction of style, some originality; B (90 to 78), that the work, though less distinguished, still shows more individual qualities than the average; C (78 to 60), that it is in the main sound and intelligent—that the writer need not take any further course in composition unless he wishes to do so; D (60 to 40), that it is faulty or irregular, and that in his Sophomore year the writer must take a half-course in composition; and E, that he must take English A again (76).

However, it is also important to recognize that Copeland's easy confidence about grades and grading conceals a certain anxiety over methods of evaluation even as colleges moved inexorably toward the kind of scale developing at Harvard. Copeland himself admitted that "of course, grades that stand for an instructor's impression of a piece of writing cannot be mathematically precise" (76), thereby giving voice to the perceived problems in objectivity and standardization in the grading of composition that would plague writing instructors and administrators for a number of years. No perfect solution to the problem of reliability in grading ever emerged; even the early twentieth century efforts of behaviorist reformers like Edward C. Thorndike of Columbia Teacher's College, who proposed "scientific" measurement scales to replace the dependency upon personal judgment in the marking of compositions, soon succumbed to critiques assailing their essential validity (Younglove).

All of these twists and turns in the evolution of grading are important, and, taken as a whole, they suggest a variety of pedagogical, institutional, and social pressures shaping the methods by which student writing came to be evaluated in the current-traditional classroom. But, I wish to focus the remainder of this essay on one particular element in the evolution of grading: an imperative shaping the modes of discriminating among student writers, which I believe can be labelled as something of a constant in this long history, for its origins can be seen to extend as far back as the earliest days of higher education on the new continent and to be present throughout the various incarnations of grades and grading systems so far discussed in this essay.

In his magisterial study, *The Emergence of the American University* (1965), Laurence Veysey remarks that "the university in the United States

had become [by the early twentieth century] largely an agency for social control" (440), a conclusion that the last thirty years of historical inquiry have done little to undermine. And the grading system, with its obvious ties to the disciplinary function of education, must be regarded as an important component of the quest to exercise and impart "social control." Indeed, Veysey himself has argued that much of the impetus for reforming the grading system in the early twentieth century, and especially for demanding "tougher" standards in grading (e.g., the end to the time-honored tradition of the "gentleman's C"), can be traced to "a protest against moral laxity and student dissipation, rooted in the conscience of the Progressive Era" (254). Just as attacks on hedonism and moral laxity among the general citizenry animated the reformist political rhetoric of the day, so too were "lazy" students condemned and stricter grading standards imposed to remedy the situation (254).

Grading has always been turned outward toward the community-at-large as much as it has inwardly focussed on student performance in the classroom; the political state and the state of education were and are inextricably linked, and grades, because they involve degrees, rank, and difference, are at the heart of the matter. Thus, this "social history" of grading is an essential constant in the evolution of grades and grading in the writing classroom. It is also the principal issue that I wish to explore in the remaining pages of this essay.

From the very beginnings of American higher education, a scholastic grade or ranking meant more than a simple measure of academic achievement; in point of fact, colonial colleges most probably classified students not on the basis of scholarly merit but "according to the social position of their families" (Smallwood 41). Once grading came to be driven explicitly by academic performance, this conflation of scholastic success and social behavior did not disappear, but merely re-surfaced under the form of a grading calculus that linked scholarship and character. As a 1770 College of William and Mary faculty report would declare, graduation examinations (and the class-rankings which derived from them) had the particular merit of inducing students "to use their best Endeavors to render their whole Conduct acceptable and approved by the President and Masters, . . . [thus encouraging them] to persevere in the same Good Conduct afterwards [after graduation]" (quoted in Smallwood 24).

During the antebellum era, grades and class rankings were most generally determined by an average of academic marks; what the historian Charles Smallwood terms the "personality factor"; and what Samuel Osgood described in 1861 as "considerations of personal character" that would modify undergraduate rankings should a student's "faults" be "so strong as to show [him to be] in open indolence or vice" (Smallwood 66; quoted in Smallwood 66).

Only in 1869 did Harvard begin the de-linking of such formal ties between grades and social character when its faculty voted to separate matters of scholarship and conduct in grading (Smallwood 74). But as the required writing course began to take shape in the new world of academic merit earned in a non-classical, elective curriculum, the social function of grading did not fade away, nor did it even slip very far below the surface. Indeed, President Eliot of Harvard decided to give voice to just this continuing concern in his 1869 inaugural address, justifying the ranking of students on the grounds that it “reinforces higher motives. In the campaign for character, no auxiliaries are to be refused,” even if those means carry with them the acknowledged danger of inciting an excessive “self-reference” in those “aspirants” to high rank (67).

To be sure, Eliot’s interest in waging this “campaign for character” was motivated by more than a simple institutional desire for a more virtuous student population. Eliot’s claim that Harvard’s scholarly environs provide society’s best “safeguards against sloth, vulgarity, and depravity” (67) resonated far beyond the walls of the college. The years between 1870 and 1920 were, in fact, dominated by quite broadly based fears among the professional class concerning its place in an uncertain world and its own hedonistic impulses set free in an emerging consumerist culture (Ehrenreich 248). College-trained professionals of this era inhabited an increasingly urbanized nation, where they were free of the traditional restraints upon consumption that had obtained in an earlier time’s closely knit small-town settings. But in this age of relative material excess, professionals were also besieged by the need to prove their worth (both financial and social) through hard work and a self-evident dedication to their profession.² Not coincidentally, professional literature from the new field of composition (a part of the curriculum which President Eliot enthusiastically supported) was exhorting writing instructors to correct with enthusiasm those students whose composing practices seemed “careless” (Hill, *Foundations* 105) and “lax” (Copeland 41). To instill “discipline” was among the primary imperatives in grading, since “[l]azy and careless students appear everywhere” (Tieje, et al. 590) and “a slovenly disregard for good form” (Slater 3) were said to dominate student writing. As John Rothwell Slater would complain in his *Freshman Rhetoric* (1913, revised 1922), “No professional salary could pay a teacher with any literary sense for reading some of the rubbish that lazy freshmen write” (150). Or listen to the “model” instructor’s comments Charles Copeland of Harvard provides on a failing theme produced in his freshman writing course: “This is discreditable work. Your spelling is weak, your sentences are a mere slop of ‘and’ and ‘but,’ and your paragraphs are bunches of words without any organic relation to the whole composition. The progress of the whole theme is careless and erratic” (93). Can one not

locate within this way of reading and marking student discourse the anxieties of an age and cultural ethos much influenced by Progressivist reforms, Spenserian Social Darwinism, the "survival of the fittest," and by what Josiah Strong described, in his immensely popular 1889 text, *Our Country*, as the need to train up a "race of unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it . . . [and] having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind" (214)? Certainly Copeland knew something of Strong's refrain when he explained how, with "[a] few slashes of the pen," the composition instructor could "show a beginner how to transform loose, shambling sentences into firm ones that march with confidence" (40). Grades were a primary tool for instilling this kind of "vigor" (Copeland 40) in student writing (and, by implication, in their character); among the composition course's most primary tasks was to be, as A. S. Hill—the originator of English A at Harvard College—would put it, the development of a "self-control [in a student] which a young man old enough to be in college should exercise in the matter of writing, as in other things" (*Principles* 100–1).

These "other things" evoked by Hill thus figure large in the evolution of grading scales and procedures in the current-traditional writing classroom. Grading practices, in fact, reproduced social practices, and in more than just the pursuit of personal and cultural "vigor." The historian Robert Wiebe has characterized the years between 1877 and 1920 in the United States as ones marked by a nearly all-consuming "search for order" as the nation struggled to overcome the dislocations of the Civil War and a rapid urbanization that initiated the collapse of most antebellum structures of social control. Arising in its place was an emergent technology of discipline, including most certainly the much larger and more culturally influential post-war system of higher education.³

Grades clearly had a role to play in this regard, particularly as they were deployed in the new required writing courses. Despite Copeland's suggestion that grades reflect an essay's relative degree of "individual qualities" and "distinction of style," the current-traditional system of grading was far more powerfully driven by an obsession with mechanical correctness at the sentence level.⁴ As R. E. Tije and his colleagues at the University of Illinois would insist in their 1915 discussion of "systemizing grading in Freshman Composition at the large university:" "the student is graded according as he misses the ideal of correct, well-punctuated, idiomatic, and fluent English which the staff feels it may reasonably expect" (588). The mania for marking and scoring the student's derivations from "the ideal," for covering a paper with red ink and then tabulating the errors (at the University of Illinois, an essay received a failing grade of "E" if it contained two misspelled words or one grammatical error [594]), suggests the desire

to mark student writing so as to render it easily observed, classified, and subject to correction in the manner deemed most appropriate. This methodology was indeed "objective," as Tiejé et al. maintain, but only in a starkly disciplinary fashion. Susan Miller has argued that "the practice of attending to mechanical errors allowed written texts to become instruments for examining the 'body' of a student, not just *the* student body. This attention allows a teacher (an 'auditor' in both aural and accounting senses) to examine the student's language with the same attitude that controls a clinical medical examination" (57).

And with the medical examiner at hand, the penal warden could not be far behind. In numerous explanations and justifications of grading and the enforcement of grading standards in student writing, the tropes of legal punishment and penal incarceration were employed with considerable fervor. Tiejé et al. describe, for example, "principles which may be violated in a theme" (those principles being chiefly of the sentence level variety) and how students are "charged" with these "sins"⁵ against their academic records (588). Should students persist in such errors as "the comma fault, or the half-sentence fault," Tiejé and his co-authors recommend that "the teacher is at liberty to inflict as severe a penalty as to him seems desirable. First offenses usually receive notice in the comment on the outside of the theme. Later ones are met with firm and increasing reductions of grades until the error disappears. Upon reoccurrence the offence is again punished by a failing-grade" (591).

This turn to the language and methods of the prison system was common in the composition literature of the day, but perhaps nowhere in more extreme form than in a 1916 University of California attempt to institutionalize the criminalization of certain kinds of student writing. In that year, the University of California Academic Senate adopted the following guidelines for the grading and policing of essays written for various departments in the university. I will quote these guidelines at length and with little comment, for in the context of this discussion, they would seem to provide sufficient commentary in and of themselves. The university faculty were informed that:

In correcting papers instructors commonly find that the English expression of certain students is, without a doubt, unsatisfactory. Papers of such students shall be stamped in some way that will warn each student that his expression is unsatisfactory. A list of students so warned shall be kept by the instructor. If at any time after such a warning has been given a student, the instructor finds the written work of that student again unsatisfactory, the instructor shall report the student for delinquency in English. . . . The instructor shall report delinquencies to a central committee to be known as the Committee on Students' English. . . . This Com-

mittee shall pass upon all reports of delinquency. After examining the papers of students who have been reported, it shall decide whether or not the English of such students is below the proper standard. Every student whose English is unsatisfactory shall then be required to present himself to the Secretary of this Committee for instruction in English Composition. (343–44) ⁶

While the University of California's experiment with such methods of (re)education may seem rather extraordinary eighty years after the fact, the nexus between grades and the disciplinary project of colleges should not appear all that remarkable. After all, the contemporary practice of academic probation, with all its suggestion of deviant student behavior, continues to be driven almost exclusively by the offender's GPA. And the history of the deployment of these tropes of punishment and incarceration is certainly worth considering for those of us in the contemporary university. Yet, I believe that one can also detect within the grading systems of the current-traditional era of writing instruction a less obvious, and perhaps less recognizable, imperative driving the institutionalized desire to bestow marks on student writing. The "social history" of grading in fact runs deeper and is more complex than the relatively simple story I have so far told.

I therefore return briefly to that 1916 University of California document because it offers as the ultimate justification for the plan the prospect that "the students themselves will come to respect good English more than they have hitherto" (345). By foregrounding the problem of "respect," University of California faculty revealed something of their own concerns over the stability of those hierarchies of difference that would make any language practice an object of "respect." This move, of course, returns us to grades which derive, at least etymologically, from the Latin word *gradus*, meaning "rank, distinction, discrimination, hierarchy, *difference*" (Girard 161). Thus, as the cultural theorist Rene Girard points out, grades have always had a social meaning far beyond the confines of the classroom walls because the capacity to mark conclusively and thus differentiate clearly the most fundamental distinctions (e.g., just vs. unjust, truth vs. falsehood, inside vs. outside) defines the very possibility of the cultural order in human society (161–62).⁷ To establish grades, to teach "respect" for the "ideal of correct . . . English" (Tieje 588) and a desire to shun the "irregular" (Copeland 76), is to seek to re-establish fixed boundaries and restore the order inherent in stable cultural hierarchies. And in an era of labor unrest, class conflict, and the hope of many in a new meritocracy led by college educated professionals, these were not inconsiderable, nor easily attained, ends (Ehrenreich 241–44).

Girard argues that "degree" (his word for culturally sanctioned scales

of grading and gradation)⁸ is in reality a most fragile social construct, "highly vulnerable" to collapse and the ravages of human conflict. "It [degree] has no other reality than the respect it inspires. If this respect turns to disrespect, . . . contagion is sure to follow and Degree will quickly dissolve in the undifferentiation of mimetic rivalry" and social chaos (164). Interestingly enough, R. E. Tiejé and his co-authors at the University of Illinois invoke just such a picture of paralyzing chaos at the opening of their proposal "to secure uniformity in grading" (586). They present their readers with the specter of the "chaos [which] would result if each instructor graded themes entirely according to his own notion" (586), that is to say, as if there were no universally respected grading system. Such a situation would give rise, the authors claim, to "[o]ldious comparisons" among instructors, leading to generalized "strife, not only without, but within—*esprit de corps* would be impossible," social unity destroyed: "There would be no health in us" (586).

These images of violent upheaval and the collapse of all order function to impress the reader that a non-standardized method of grading can only issue in the "complication of diseases" which threaten all (586). To forestall such a grim future, Tiejé et al. propose a "fixed standard" of grading that can restore transcendence to an otherwise fragile order.⁹ They define their new system chiefly by its capacity to withstand the vagaries of whim or disrespect. It is, first and foremost, a "definite and fair system" (587). Its aim is "to afford grounds on which a firm stand may [be] taken against illiteracy, and a means by which the standard of the course may be raised as high as possible" (587), as if "illiteracy" were some sort of invasive, alien entity whose defeat no reasonable person could question. The system is worthy of respect in the modern and practical world of professionalism because it has been *proven* to work and has been fully accepted by all the instructors at the University of Illinois. It is, in essence, the re-appearance of the transcendent and imperishable in a world of grading that had seemed only moments earlier perched on the brink of "chaos."

For the purposes of this essay, the precise outlines of this proposed grading schema are less important than what the new system promised to bring to beleaguered writing instructors everywhere. The success of the University of Illinois's system is evident, so its authors report, in the renewed capacity of instructors to clearly and confidently mark student performance. Grades can, in this system, measure absolutely and they can conclusively differentiate among students, especially at that crucial line between failure and passing, or what the authors term the "exceptionally bad" and the "positive" (591–92). Tiejé et al. characterize the grade of "C–" as "the strip between the desert and the sown ground" (592), a trope implying an almost biblical division between the lost and the saved,¹⁰ yet one perfectly in keeping with the essay's representation of restored boundaries

and unchallenged markers of difference. The “chaos” of the opening page has been conclusively vanquished.

But that victory is not easily earned, as the violence in the texts makes plainly evident. The punitive language of “sanctions” and “penalty” against students “afflicted” with error, of teachers “at liberty to inflict as severe a penalty as . . . seems desirable” suggests an anxious and violent effort to suppress and “eradicate” disorder as it appears under the form of sentence level error and other resistance to the grading standards (591). Tropes of condemnation and violent expulsion abound in the essay, sometimes in rather whimsical references to assigning certain perhaps “excusable violations” in stylistics to an “*index expurgatorius*,” but more often and more powerfully in such bold declarations as “the aim of the first semester’s work in composition, then, must be to remove such traces of illiteracy as still remain” (588, 590), as if the student were a carrier of disease who might infect all. Of course, that is precisely the student’s situation in this world of systematized grading, which at least partially explains why the University of Illinois would adopt and recommend the policy of failing a student paper, “[r]egardless of merit in thought and style,” if that essay contained “one grammatical error” (594). No hint of these signs of disorder could be allowed to remain, for they have the power to blur distinctions and erase boundaries and thus to undermine the entire grading system. If an “A” paper contained a comma splice and so did one receiving an “E,” what would happen to those “fixed standard[s]” and clear degrees of difference? The University of Illinois apparently decided it did not want to find out, and thus chose to suppress these “errors” through rather draconian methods and secure its systemized grading by means of distinctly violent measures.

I believe the “crisis of degree” (Girard 160) evident in Tiejé et al.’s evocation of pedagogical “chaos” helps to explain not only the severity of their disciplinary project against “error,” but also that of the University of California and so many other institutions and classrooms of the current-traditional era. Much more was at stake in grading than the simple ranking of students or even the attempt to secure a particular kind of performance in student writing. Grades made concrete a renewed world of order and difference, of what Tiejé and his co-authors called a “unified and coherent” (590) site of student writing (and thus, by implication, student behaviors and lives) that had as much to do with sociocultural exigencies as it did with rhetorical elements in an essay. A fixed—and respected—method of grading could mark the return of the transcendent to a troubled universe beset by the “complication of diseases” (Tiejé et al. 586), but only if its own violence were concealed and its disciplinary project unchallenged. Thus, the fixation on both the legitimacy of grades and the sternness of their administration. And just as grades in the colonial college had once measured character and

the degree to which a student's "whole conduct" could be found to be "acceptable and approved by the President and the Masters," a very similar kind of "social history" of grades weighed equally heavy upon their particular incarnations in current-traditional classrooms.

Living at the conclusion of the second millennium, it might seem that writing instructors and the composition programs in which they teach have moved a considerable distance from this earlier era's version of the current-traditional rhetoric, and that the motives driving our grading practices are vastly different from those obtaining a century or so ago. True enough, for the rigid and overtly disciplinary tactics employed by the Universities of California and Illinois have largely been abandoned by a profession that has lately struggled to deal honestly with issues of authority and power in the writing classroom. We are now witness to distinctly different visions of the grading process, and we listen closely when people like Richard Bullock urge that instructors surrender "complete autonomy over their students' grades" and instead grade collaboratively as a way to "lessen—or, indeed, eliminate—the tensions between our beliefs about writing, its teaching and evaluation, and the demands our culture places upon us" (191, 190). Robert Schwegler has even traced a notable current among recent composition theorists who attack the old "formalist strategies of reading and response" to student writing and instead urge the acknowledgement of grading's ideological and political contexts (207–11).¹¹ One might even argue that the door has been opened to a radically new vision of grading student writing, one that would resist the old models and in their place offer a more democratic process that included space for "difference, struggle, and student criticism" (Schwegler 222).¹²

Yet, as the prior pages of this essay have tried to document, grading has long been an intensely ideological activity that has worked consistently to promote socially conservative values. The legacy of one's institutional history is perhaps not all that easily overcome. The cultural power of grades has certainly *not* disappeared from contemporary university life; if anything, today's students are more "grade conscious" than their turn of the century predecessors. So, at least, the potential to use grades in a normative and punitive fashion lives on, even if the current-traditional rhetoric's obsession with hunting down "errors" has been superseded by an emphasis on process and revision. But even more to the point, can not one hear something of that earlier era's "crisis of degree" in today's rhetoric about "grade inflation" and the "loss of standards" that emerges as much—if not more—from perceived sociocultural imperatives as from institutional and pedagogical concerns?¹³ The practice of grading always has had, and always will have, a "social history," and it inevitably inserts the writing instructor into the very real world of conflict and cultural praxis, where the teacher's role as a cultural worker is very much on display. The contempo-

rary instructor would be well advised to consider seriously the cultural legacy of his or her professional life as an evaluator of student writing. The marking of that student essay with a grade is not an insignificant, nor apolitical, gesture.

Notes

1. This is not to say that the oral examination had disappeared completely from the collegiate scene. Harvard, for example, would maintain the option of an oral examination until 1870 (Smallwood 16).

2. For two interesting perspectives on these kinds of dynamics within the professional class of this era, see Erenberg and Ehrenreich.

3. Of course, Michel Foucault is the essential theorist in respect to this “technology of discipline.” In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, “educationalists” play a primary role in the new “army of technicians” mustered to defend the state against the “criminal” (11).

4. Indeed, Copeland offers a number of sentence level “faults” (e.g., poor spelling and punctuation, an inappropriate use of words) as among the “chief” defects in student writing that would warrant a failing grade (11). The best overview of the “current-traditional” rhetoric’s obsession with mechanical correctness can be found in Connors.

5. Of course, such a trope also evokes the realm of religion and the sacred and implies a moral failing on the part of the student and a need for his conversion.

6. This University of California policy was roughly contemporaneous with Harvard’s “Committee on the Use of English” which also employed a “Secretary” to supervise those students reported by their teachers as delinquent in their writing. However, in Harvard’s case, these students were said to be only dealt a dose of “fatherly advice” (Grandgent 70).

7. Girard’s theory is more subtle than this rather bold statement would indicate, and it is particularly important not to read a necessary endorsement of these cultural behaviors within Girard’s—or my—analysis.

8. The link between “degree” in this sense and an academic “degree” is one that Girard himself makes available, since both depend on difference and, in fact, serve as markers of difference (162).

9. Tiejie, et al. actually use the term “fixed standard” to describe a system of grading “almost absolutely” (588), that is to say, with no allowance for the student’s improvement over the course of the term. However, in the context of the author’s obvious anxiety about a collapsing “uniformity” and stability in grading (586), it seems fair to assume that an adjective like “fixed” carried more than a purely technical function.

10. Metaphors of salvation and "sin" (588) are, in fact, frequent in the essay.

11. Schwegler has, in fact, criticized these thinkers for not going far enough in adopting "social, interactive perspectives" on grading, and he thus offers his own proposals for responding to make evident "the extent to which the process is grounded in personal, social, and cultural ideology and experience" (211, 212).

12. Schwegler points out, however, that these new proposals (including his own) are not necessarily ideal and "may in turn prove to contain [their] own repressions, though in ways different from [their] predecessors" (223).

13. For a most interesting historical overview of this sense of crisis as it has pertained to the state of student writing in general, see Trimbur.