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"A Practice Of Freedom": Self-Grading For Liberatory Learning

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by Vicki Reitenauer



ADRIENNE RICH AND AUDRE LORDE

From my earliest days as a university instructor, I have been troubled by the grading system and its demands on both students as producers of knowledge and instructors as arbiters of the value of that production. It is a personal, professional, and pedagogical necessity for me as an instructor in gender studies to be preoccupied with issues of power, and a great part of my distress as a person interested in serving as a catalyst for students' breakthroughs in thinking, feeling, and acting in the interest of social justice stemmed from my discomfort wielding the institutional power that has been vested in me through my assigning of grades to their work.

If ever there was a time when we need mechanisms through which students may be activated to "claim an education" (Rich) and to operationalize "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire; hooks), that time is now, given the social, political, and economic injustice and instability that shape our students' lives. I work to catalyze this claiming through a comprehensive self-grading model. With this strategy, I mean to disrupt the ways that students "get" a grade and, instead, to inspire them to claim every aspect of their learning -- their thinking, their feeling, their doing, and their reflecting on doing -- through grading themselves for their efforts and the results of their efforts within our learning community.

What follows is an articulation of the current form of this self-grading process. I make no claim here as to "best practices" but, rather, offer this snapshot as a jumping-off point for the reader's reflection on their own "best practices" in grading.

In the earliest days of a course, we begin with introductory activities highlighting the philosophical, political, and pedagogical foundation for the class: that this is a co-created space in which all of us will be actively learning from and teaching each other. This includes sharing power over the choosing of course content (with students directly bringing content into the course in a variety of ways) and the facilitation of class time (with students individually and/or collectively leading sessions). I then introduce students to the concept of self-grading. We talk about how most, if not all, of us in the room have been thoroughly socialized to appeal to the purported expert in the room to prove the worth of our academic output. Dislocating that dynamic requires each of us individually to assume a different set of responsibilities and a strategy for becoming accountable to ourselves and each other. Far from being an "easy" way to complete a class, self-grading and the processes associated with it will challenge them to assume an active role in their learning that they may have experienced rarely, if ever, before. What's exciting about self-grading is also what is terrifying about it: to truly engage in it with integrity, we've each got to reflect deeply and honestly on who and how we are, what we've brought to bear on our learning, and what the meaning and value of that effort has been for us.

My role, I say, will be to provide in-depth learner-centered feedback on every aspect of their work in the

course. Self-grading does not mean that I take a vacation from the effort of building and holding the space within which we will engage, nor that I remove myself from the responsibility to respond to their work. Rather, it means I, as their instructor, will experience the freedom to respond authentically and directly to the efforts they put forward precisely because I am not reducing that response to a letter grade. Self-grading means that I can and will focus my efforts where I believe I may bring the most value to them: in getting to know each of them individually, so that I might illuminate what I see going on in their work and identify possibilities for taking it further.

Through my writing about self-grading in the syllabus and our talking about it in class, I outline the processes we'll engage in throughout the term to support their final determination of their grade. Students begin the term by reading Adrienne Rich's essay "Claiming an Education" and Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and completing an introductory reflective essay that requires them to name, among other things, their personal learning goals, linked to the course learning objectives; the grade they intend to earn in the course; the criteria through which they will determine what grade they have earned; the actions they will take to meet their goals; how others in the class, including me, can best support their learning; and how they will actively support the learning of others. I respond to these assignments with what I think of as a "noticing" feedback, in which I reflect back to students what I perceive through this reflective essay, their perceiving of themselves.

Throughout the term, I offer more of the "noticing" feedback on student work products. This feedback follows the direction they offer in a note to me as their reader, in which they identify what I should focus on to assist them in moving their work forward. My feedback reflects my critical engagement with their work, viewed through my understanding of the field, and framed to address their genuine questions about the impact of their work on a reader/viewer.

A required 1:1 meeting happens at the midpoint of the term. For many of my students, who have come to expect that their instructor's interest in them is predicated solely upon telling them what they're doing wrong, this meeting can be a revelation, as it serves to build genuine relationship between each student and me, through and beyond our course. I call these *no-agenda* meetings, meaning that we can talk about anything at all, including but not limited to their coursework. To signal the importance of these meetings (and to make meetings accessible for students who are unable to come to campus early or stay late), I preserve a week's worth of class time for this activity, with students cycling through 10-minute meetings with me during individual or group work time. I schedule additional appointment slots outside of class, beyond office hours, for students who would like a longer meeting.

These 1:1s are enormously valuable for me. There is a decided shift after these meetings occur, on both the

interpersonal and group level. The ways we can engage in the second half of our term on the basis of the student-instructor relationships that have been built -- and the fact that these relationships have been enhanced throughout the course at essentially the same moment in the term -- deepen profoundly the quality of our interactions and the integrity of the work students continue to make.

A rigorous reflective self-evaluation is students' final assignment, in which they respond to a judgment-free report-out of their efforts and a set of prompts requiring them to consider the work they produced, the impacts they made (or failed to make) in our learning community, what they learned through both their individual and their collaborative work, and how they will take and apply that learning in new settings. Within this essay, students claim their grade for the course within the context of the aspirational writing from their orienting reflection. The one caveat to this self-grading practice -- the way that I may choose to exert the power with which I've been vested by the institution, made repeatedly transparent to them from our first class forward -- is that I may require students to discuss their grade with me if I find that their determination doesn't align with my own experiences of them in the course and, more importantly, with their own self-reporting in this reflection about their engagement throughout the term. I will not demand that students change their self-determined grade, I tell them, but I may choose to require a conversation with them about the disconnects I perceive between their activity within the course, their reflective writing in this final assignment, and the grade they have claimed.

Having come to the very end of our time together, I again share with students the foundation for self-grading and how I understand this foundation to be connected both to course content and to the dynamic processes we've engaged in together throughout the term. I tell students that I don't care at all about their grades (and I mean this wholeheartedly), but that I do care deeply about the integrity with which they reflect on their work and determine their grade. I suggest that this process is not about guessing what grade I think they have earned and then writing a reflection to make the case for it. I encourage them, in fact, not to start with the grade at all, but to write their way into the reflection first. In another reversal of the advice they usually receive about completing assignments, I urge them to sit with the prompts for a good long while, waiting as long as they possibly can before writing. I suggest that they start with the work of deep reflection, with the prompts echoing in their heads and hearts and bodies -- and only then, after the words have formed themselves around their experience, the meaning of that experience, and where it's pointing them next, to settle down into their claiming of a grade.

This conversation brings us full circle to the start of the term, when we first discussed self-grading. We revisit our term-long conversation about power, and I again expose the

fact (and the paradox) that, while this self-grading process does require them to empower themselves to name their own grade, I retain access to power that they do not have simply by virtue of my position relative to theirs within this institution. What I *can* and do choose to do with that power, however, is to use it to negotiate this terrain with them in ways that are fundamentally relational, rather than bureaucratic and transactional. Because we've been talking, directly and indirectly, formally and informally, about power all term long, this conversation often serves to tether our considerations of the uses and abuses of power to this micro-act of grading, reminding us that in most situations (save, perhaps, the most oppressive ones), we all have access to some form of power, and we can choose intentionally to operate from an agency that grounds our use of it.

The responsibility I bear in our classroom has not diminished through this practice. Rather, it has shifted away from my using power to issue a summative statement of value to situating myself as mentor, guide, and sharer of my particular knowledges in a learning community that expects students to share theirs, too. Self-grading allows me to experience "education as the practice of freedom" from the position of instructor, as it allows students to claim their educations and to shoulder the responsibilities to self and others that the exercising of such a right demands.

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