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ABSTRACT

Pass-fail grading is discussed from the standpoints of its ineffectiveness as well as its potential. It is believed that pass-fail students are experiencing the same things that they do in their graded courses, and that pass-fail experiments must be based on a model that constitutes a departure from traditional learning and teaching. A programmed learning model is described with which pass-fail grading could be replaced by a pass-incomplete system of evaluation. (DB)

METHODS OF GRADING AND MODELS OF TEACHING

by

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For decades, the traditional grading system has been under fire from teachers and students who feel that it is an inaccurate measure of ability, that it develops a reliance on external incentives on the part of both teacher and learner, that it deadens the intrinsic motivation to learn, and so on. With admittance departments doing all they can to filter into the University a group of students who are somewhat homogeneous in ability, the use of the grading curve is paradoxical.

Unlike many other polemical topics, the critics in this case have not been content to assume a passive role. They have instead suggested a host of alternatives, most of which fall under the title of "pass-fail". "Pass-fail", as Stuart Miller (1967) illustrates very neatly in his study, has almost as many variations as it has adherents. Some schools, for example, offer a percentage of their courses on a pass-fail basis; more liberal institutions allow the pass-fail option in all courses. In some schools students can exercise the option only for courses outside their major area of study; in others,

students have the privilege only during their first two years; still others reserve the option for upperclassmen. Only a few schools use the pass-fail grading system in all four years for all courses.

Miller summarized the general effect of these types of grading "innovations" by saying that "though such a very cautious answer to the grading problem offers an opportunity not now available, it does not relieve the student of the burdent of competition, anxiety, and the rest, nor does it change the teaching situation in general. It does not go very far in response to the faults of the grading system."

In short, pass-fail grading is not to be viewed as the salvation of ineffective teaching. In fact, most of the pass-fail projects have nothing to do with the behavior of the teacher. The change is usually an administrative one (the registrar takes A's, B's, and C's and turns them into 'Pass') and, while students appreciate change for its own sake, they are at best learning the same (Pascal, 1967), at worst learning less (Feldmesser, 1969 & Wharton, 1969). In any event, as Miller points out, pass-fail students are experiencing the same thing they do in their graded courses: uncertainty about what's expected of them, incongruence about what is intended to be taught, what is taught, and what is tested, and anxiety about grades.

For example, in a study at Michigan, many high achieving students found it difficult to attain the minimum criterion for success: a grade of C which qualifies many students in pass-fail experiments for a "Pass".

The incongruence between the philosophical and practical implications of this type of pass-fail project is best illustrated by a representative statement from one pass-fail student:

> I'm trying hard not to work and I still make a B+ on the midterm. I find myself trying to do the minimum amount of work to get a C. Otherwise I am frustrated that I am wasting time in the course that I could be spending on the other courses. (Pascal, 1967, Appendix)

PROGRAMMED LEARNING AND PASS-INCOMPLETE

The process of education has traditionally placed the burden of being "successful" on the learner. Philosophically, some educators feel that pass-fail has the potential of allowing the success of a learning experience to be mutually shared by learner and teacher. But before this potential is realized, pass-fail experiments must be based on a model that departs from the "old-fashioned" idea of learning. I believe that the programmed learning model will provide such a foundation, even though adopting this model may mean eliminating "fail" from the grading scheme.

Most of the concepts used in writing programmed instruction are naturally applicable to the more general processes of teaching. An instructor, according to this model, first decides what skills, knowledge, or other behaviors his students should "take with them" when the course (programme) terminates. That is, he formulates the objectives of his course in observable and measurable terms. The course exists to facilitate the achievement of these objectives. The instructor then arranges a series of academic experiences (lectures, discussions, papers, tests, simulation, etc.) the purpose of which are to achieve the course's objectives.

A teacher adopting the practical as well as the philosophical implications of the Programmed Learning Model would not be able to use traditional grades, "pass-fail", or any other device designed to place the "burden" of learning solely on the students. He would be guided by the premise that the word "evaluation" has a double meaning and that his course is being "tested" as well. The instructor would, therefore, administer frequent diagnostic tests to determine students' progress towards and accomplishment of the course's objectives. The data from the tests would provide feedback to both the instructor and his students. If the students' behaviors change in the predicted manner, then the instructor has done a good job. If students become confused, frustrated and are unable to produce the desired

outcomes, then it's "back to the drawing board" and the instructor hopefully has gathered the appropriate information for his revisions.

In addition, the instructor adopting the model would be quite precise about the skills and knowledge necessary for incoming students (entering behaviors) transforming vacuous "course descriptions" into a statement of terminal objectives and functional prerequisites.

With this type of teaching, the relatively inconsequential "pass-fail" grading could be replaced by a "pass-incomplete" system of evaluation and one would have a real innovation. If the students achieve all of the course objectives then he receives a "pass"; if he achieves only some of the goals, then he and the teacher examine the problem together. The fault may be with the course or with the student (e.g., lack of motivation or incorrect entering behavior). If many students fall short of the objectives, the course is most likely at fault. In any event, if the objectives are not achieved then remedial exercises should be performed by either the teacher (revision of course) and/or by the students (going through part of course which will facilitate learning of remaining objectives).

As Bloom (1968) and Carroll (1963) have pointed out, the critical factor in achieving any objective is time. The efficiency of learning depends on both the quality of instruction

and aptitude of the learner. As Bloom points out, "aptitude" in this instance "is the amount of time required by the learner to attain mastery of a learning task. Implicit in this formulation is the assumption that, given enough time, all students can conceivably attain mastery of a learning task." (Bloom, 1968)

CONCLUSION

In summary, the pass-fail projects have done little to alter the teaching-learning process. They have, in many instances, "taken the heat off" the real problem: how to develop and implement an effective technology of teaching. Even if most of the pass-fail projects represented a real change in evaluation procedures, evaluation should follow from and be consistent with other aspects of a model of teaching, if we are to have a truly innovative and effective departure from traditional learning and teaching.

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