

A Review of Protocols in Higher Education; How My Experience Made Me Question the Process

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion and critical review of grading practices at a large flagship public university. In this paper, I examine the rights a student has when calling into question the authority and decision-making abilities of teachers in a classroom setting. Following my recent experience with a professor (noted at the beginning of this paper), I began to question the legitimacy of interactions between students and teachers. The paper examines the way in which the system of Higher Education lacks due process for students who wish to appeal to their teachers about their grades. Ultimately my goal is to help facilitate conversations about academic review, including how professors can use syllabi and grading matrixs to protect themselves and their students, and well as ensure that conflicts can be avoided.

Keywords: grading, classroom conflict, evaluation, curriculum, syllabus, grading matrix (rubic), teacher-student relationships

1. Academic Qualifications as a Heuristic of Expertise

The process of earning a Ph.D. includes taking hours of classes and writing, then defending, a dissertation on a certain topic over many years. In America, it is hard to quantify the amount of time to earn a Ph.D. because the qualifications are not universal. Instead, some programs require as little as 36 credit hours, while some other programs may be close to double. Members of the academic community will argue that earning a Ph.D. requires intense duration which serves as a key anchor in the argument of expertise. Unfortunately, intense duration alone has never been found to be an attribute of expertise (Ericsson, 2008). The idea that duration alone leads to expertise is a heuristic; if long duration of practice alone equal expertise then my dad would be an expert in golf. He has played thousands of rounds over a half-century, yet no one mistakes him for an expert. Instead, we think it is nice that he has a passion in which he invests time and effort. Likewise, we should understand that earning a Ph.D. requires tremendous focus and determination, but does not necessarily mean the person is an expert.

2. The Case for Checks and Balances

Part of the issue is a lack of governance by the institution. Proper governance would and should mirror our legal system which assures all legal proceedings shall not be unreasonable, arbitrary, or capricious. Proper governance includes a clear and concise set of rules, an established burden of proof and rules of procedure which include impartially. Universities should ensure all professors have clear syllabi with a proper grading matrix, as well as a fair review process of students work and professors feedback. The review should include members of faculty from outside the department and who have no relationship with the professor overseeing the class.

After reviewing the syllabus and grading matrix with the professor, if the student still feels there is an issue, the burden of proof should not fall on the student. Instead, the burden of proof should fall on the instructor to justify the grading based on the constructs of the syllabus and grading matrix. To ensure fairness and impartiality, there should be an appeal process in which the matter maybe referred outside of the department for review by other members of staff or other students.

The contract with the student and the professor is the syllabus. This document should clearly outline the objectives of the course, the grading matrix, important tests and due dates, as well as any other nuances important to the instructor. The case for using a grading matrix is based in not only in common sense but also several academic studies that have found that people are prone to mistakes through combinations of fatigue, judgment and bias (Sprietsma, 2012; Malouff, 2008). A grading matrix provides a specific breakdown of how

each assignment is evaluated. If the student questions a grade, the teacher can then demonstrate how the grade was derived based on some objective measures. A grading matrix increases the integrity of the process, as well as provides useful feedback to the student.

When creating a review, administrators should focus on creating a process which creates “per fas et nefas”; the latin for “through right and wrong”. The goal of the process should not be to declare a winner, but to focus on how the problem can be solved and incorporated to create a better learning environment for future students.

3. The Importance of the Syllabus and Use of Grading Matrix

A review of the literature on grading matrixs (sometimes called rubrics) demonstrates they are an effective tool for teacher and student that clarify learning objectives and provide concise feedback. According to Stevens and Levi, the matrix should “divide an assignment into parts and provide a detailed description of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable levels of performance for each of those parts (Stevens, & Levi, A., 2013).” Stevens and Levi also demonstrate how grading matrix effectively serve both student and professor. For the professor, a grading matrix can in part reduce the amount of marking, as well as orient them toward goals of the class by correlating the most assignment points to the most important topics. This creates an incentive for the student to do the most work in the areas the professor deem most important. For students, grading matrixes allow them to clearly understand the expectations of the work, including how the professor will evaluate their work. Research has shown that feedback can improve learning, especially when it gives students specific information about the strengths and weaknesses of their work (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Research by Shepard suggests that using matrixs encourage the student to see the assignment as a “source of insight and help instead of its being the occasion for meting out rewards and punishments”.

A proper grading matrix must be aligned with a consistent standard which is grounded in the student connecting, absorbing and applying the curriculum being taught in order to be valid. By adhering to this standard, it passes a test of reliability, allowing anyone in its application to come to comparable results. Issues with matrixs only arise when, where the professor suffers from what Payne deems “the consistency and accuracy of the judgments we make about students and their work” (Payne, 2003). In this case, the student and professor have a clear guide of expectations in which the assignment can be reviewed by a unbiased third party, easing the review process.

4. Why This Problem Is Important

Academic fairness is not only an issue on campus but has broader applications in society. When students are taught that the key to winning a debate is not through thoughtful discourse based on facts/data, we must take heed of the potential consequences on society. Education’s job is to help produce an engaged citizen who has the tools to contribute to society. One of the key skills is the critical review of ideas. The form of education must take the primary role in the development of these skills; without an educated and engaged citizenship, we open the door to a melee of problems.

Matthew 7:3 of the King James Bible says “Why beholdes the mote that is in thy brother’s eye but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” An important first step in achieving the goal of due process for students is the acknowledgment that bias is real and impacts all of our judgment; we often end up convince ourselves that our conclusions are, of course, the right ones. Having the wisdom to admit these shortcomings present an important alternative to the current model; where students and teachers fight to prove their points.

Education’s value should never be a narrow exchange of time for knowledge. Instead it must be an investment in the person; education helps cultivate the person, providing exposure to not only knowledge but allowing the individual to cultivate skills which enrich personal development. A great education cannot happen in a cave, nor an ivory tower; it lives in our dynamic world. Education means not only exposing students to the Nash Equilibrium or Christopher Hitchens, but also helping understand and practice decision making, leadership, and conflict resolution. Education’s value, therefore is beyond simply exposing people to the knowledge of Logos; it is also the introducing the tools of citizenship which will impact how they critically examine all aspects of their life.

5. Conclusion

At the foundation of this country is both education and a system of checks and balances. It would then seem simple that they could flourish in each of our academic institutions, providing students with issues an introduction to due process. The catalyst for this paper is the fear that our systems are not characterized by due process but instead by ignorance. This ignorance must be address; students deserve learning environments with a well thought out curriculum grounded in strong syllabi and grading matrix. They also deserve a right to appeal their grades and for the proceedings to be conducted in a way that exemplifies “per fas et nefas” with a goal of creating better learning environments rather than winners and losers.

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