

Why grades are oppressive

Students need to take responsibility for their own education

By Judy Wise and Wendy Bone

We, as a class, had the opportunity to choose our grades last semester, and our decision-making process included an extensive discussion of the power of grades in our lives and in society. The process of deciding made us realize that grading is much more complex than we had thought. As students some of us have "succeeded" and some have "failed," but one thing that unites us is our feeling that the grading system has had a violent and powerfully destructive effect on our lives. We decided to establish our own rigorous system of evaluating ourselves as individuals and as a group. Independent of this process, we decided to assign official grades in order to receive academic credit for the class. And we decided to assign everyone in the class the same grade.

Grading focuses our attention on class requirements that we have no say in determining. Those of us who subordinate our own educational goals succeed in the system and are encouraged and complemented. Those of us who can't perform or won't conform are considered less intelligent or "problem" students.

Many of us equate our self-worth with the grades we receive. Our self-esteem is based on external reinforcement, which means we are dependent on outside approval in order to feel good about what we do and who we are.

Because we have no say in the educational system, we have to be coerced to participate. We are taught to internalize a system of false motivation: grading. Defenders of the grad-

ing system say that we need grades because we're lazy, but we don't need coercion to learn the things we need and want to learn. It's true that sometimes we try to get away with doing as little as possible, especially since we always have too much to do and never have enough time for our personal needs. Our own interests and needs do not disappear even when they are subordinated to an institutionalized academic agenda. If we had a say in set-

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ting that agenda, then maybe we would be more involved in school.

Grades are intimately connected with a larger system of control in our society. Grading trains us to obey the existing system passively and not to question or challenge it or to consider other more healthy and satisfying ways of learning. The system is doing exactly what it was created to do when it produces a docile populace who can accept the "realities" of life in a stratified, hierarchical oppressive society.

We are taught not to learn for ourselves but for somebody else who has more knowledge and who will judge us. It's assumed from the start that we students know nothing important and the teacher is "educated"; the teacher is the expert at learning. Our experiences and feelings are not considered an acceptable part of the learning

process. It is assumed that we have nothing to teach each other or the teacher, and our experience in deferring to his or her authority becomes a model for our submission to the other authorities in our lives. In addition to knowing how to control a class, the teacher holds the information that we must later prove we've learned and determines the process by which we must learn it. We are graded according to how well we regurgitate what the teacher, the school board or the national qualifying exam committees decide we must know.

We should take responsibility for evaluating our own learning process. The continuation of the system is not based on a conspiracy of evil educators; we also perpetuate the process by our participation in it. While still in school, we can help to change it by thinking independently and talking with each other about grading. We need a whole new approach to education, because we think education is a process of becoming more fully human. It involves the integration of our many experiences into a coherent, meaningful whole. It requires intense interaction with others. We need professors who are honest about the fact that they are still learning. They should help us by offering their experiences and insights when we feel we need them. We need to democratize the educational system if we want to create a truly participatory democratic society. Otherwise, how can we hope to effect the kinds of changes this society so desperately needs? When we stop thinking of learning as a passive, finite, quantifiable process, we wonder what place grades have. We suggest they have none at all.

This article was written by 16 members of the class.