

WONDERING AND GRADING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – A TENSION RATIO?

Marilen Schönert

Technische Universität Dortmund (Germany)

Abstract

The topic of this paper is the possible tension between wondering and grading in Higher Education. By systematically discussing essential arguments, this question will be answered. Wondering means critical content questioning and a sharpened view. Things are seen differently and detached from their actual structures, which makes it elementary in Higher Education. However, there are structural elements, such as grading, that frame the learning process. On the one hand, this can contribute to a perception that students' ability to make their own judgments is low, but on the other hand, it can also lead to a focus on mere results and the usability of knowledge. Consequently, tension is created, and the effects of To-the-grade-learning and Learnification arise, which makes wondering secondary. There are examples of universities where gradeless assessment works and contributes to trying out new learning content, with less pressure to perform and focus on acquiring knowledge for its own sake. Noticing this positive development, de-grading might be a reasonable step to provide meaningful Education – and promote Wonder instead of emphasizing measurables.

Keywords: Wondering, grading, higher education, to-the-grade-learning, learnification.

1. Introduction

In Higher Education, numerous structural elements exist that organize learning. There is a great degree of standardization due to teaching hours, grading scales, division into distinct subjects, and admission procedures. This paper claims to focus on grading. However, what can also be mentioned as a crucial element of learning at the university is wondering. Through Wonder, the essential is to be grasped, which comes with questioning, curiosity, and assimilating—in short, capturing things that matter profoundly. As there is a great priority on grades, the case can occur that wondering is being pushed into the background. The question arises whether there is a tension between Wonder and grading in Education.

After Habermas (1967), especially within the 1968 movement, universities became a tool for social change and are fundamentally connected to social, political, and economic changes. Therefore, they have an impact but also interest. At the same time, many things changed progressively, such as the creation of the group of lecturers to partially reduce the power of professors, new bodies in academic self-administration, and basically a reduction of the elitist self-image. Nevertheless, problems like access, quality assurance of contents, and genuine possibility for involvement of the students remain partly unaddressed. Habermas (1967) emphasizes that critical questioning, self-reflection, and upheaval of internal structures are needed to ensure quality. For Higher Education to fit meaningfully into society, democratization is also essential. The principle of publicity is a mandatory requirement, which means every individual should have the potential possibility to participate in scientific progress and discussions. However, I would take the view that with grading it is restricted, as it excludes social backgrounds and rates different approaches to learning. Only when power relations become continuously more egalitarian can an equivalence of opinions and interests lead to a scientific discourse on an equal basis and a free-flowing accumulation of knowledge without the debatable classification into categories such as grades.

2. The role of wonder in education

Schinkel (2020) argues that there is a fundamental connection between good Education and Wonder. It is a crucial prerequisite that students should have a self-existing curiosity about the knowledge to be acquired. However, this alone is not enough. Educators must further support and enrich for a

successful continuation. Only in this way, relevant development can occur within the education context. Simultaneously, it is the task of the educators to make aware of potentially interesting things in the surrounding, but what makes it only successful is when "the penny drops" and when the to-be-educated see independently and experience an "opening up" (p. 103). Therefore, Education includes introducing new components of the world, which needs to be followed by the own processing of the learners. In this sense, "seeing and seeing are two: a lot of time, we see things without really seeing them" (p. 105). So meaningful Education includes initiating new perspectives on the world, questioning, processing, and not taking things for granted – which can be named as wondering. It implies having an intrinsic interest in something for its own sake and a genuine engagement, which lead to deeper understanding. The question arises whether grading can enable this described learning process or creates limits and will be examined in the following.

3. Grading in higher education

In most European universities, numerical grades or letter grades are used to assess student performance and, with their gradations, classify different areas of achievement. However, written feedback, using other scales, or destandardized forms of assessment are also reasonable. It should be considered that grades could serve the purpose of providing students with performance feedback and classifying their learning success. After Amaral & Magalhães (2007), due to the embedding of universities and schools in society and the fact that universities are also companies with economic interests, this original purpose can be pushed into the background. There have been numerous attempts to detach Higher Education from state regulation, creating a more neutral learning environment. This, in turn, has created market-like conditions with competition between universities and similar influences. It results that what can be seen as good from the evaluator's perspective, from society or in a competitive relationship, is often treated as good. There are undoubtedly well-thought-out rating scales that cannot be completely free of such influences, which appear more in understanding and interpreting humanities than in descriptive and explanatory natural science.

What should be considered is that there are different forms of measurement, and they cannot be classified as good or bad in principle. But as there are, referring to Curren (1995), "morally relevant differences between adults and children" (p. 426), assessment, in general, seems needed to help students receive higher forms of knowledge. Grades are therefore regarded as a "substituted judgment" (p. 430), for the time, people are seen as too young to interpret complex descriptions correctly and make reasonable decisions for themselves and society. Among other assessment forms, Curren argues that it is more feasible to make significant long-term decisions when the information is based on grades. For students to have an even more comprehensive range of suitable options after their educational training, this temporary restriction on the freedom to assess one's abilities is seen as beneficial. However, what is slightly more logical for school students, is questionable in Higher Education. Students' autonomy can be seen as neglected when they receive only substituted judgment instead of real feedback, which weakens the formation of decision-making and critical thinking. It is fair to assess to prevent decisions detrimental to personal development. Yet, it can cause "unwarranted interference" (p. 435) when the capability for own judgment is formed. This leads to the result that, especially in Higher Education, formulated performance appraisal and feedback are more useful and valuable.

While most people agree that in Education and society wondering is an essential prerequisite for sufficient learning and critical thinking, there is tension between wondering and grading. In what sense? Universities are designed to be places where knowledge is condensed, and the foundations of personal and societal future are laid. For this, free expression and exploration are indispensable. This can be at odds with grading from the point of view that students are less likely to take risks with trying new subjects, defending opinions, or adhering to individual forms of knowledge reflection, when poor grades might diminish chances for future jobs (McMorran et al. 2017). It cannot be said that standardized assessment patterns are not helpful per se. Comparability and measurability are valuable goods in Education, for example, when it comes to educational justice and the prevention of arbitrariness. However, it can still lead to a situation in which Education focuses mainly on the results at the end of the learning process instead of a deep learning process.

4. To-the-grade-learning and Learnification

Stolz (2017) argues that many standard testing and grading types "fail to capture human understanding of deeper learning" (p. 380). This includes primarily standardized tests and exams, as written proficiency leaves more room to present deep understanding. Still, the danger arises that a focus on grades is created and knowledge is shown in the desired sense. Davis (1998) uses the term "understood

knowledge" (p. 38), which is characterized as systemic, and interconnected. Therefore one-dimensional assessment as grades limitedly represents the complexity of knowledge.

With putting high importance on grades, after Stolz (2017), the effect of "teaching-to-the-test" (p. 380) occurs. From a student's perspective, finding out where one's interests lie and cultivating them in depth is neglected. At the same time, while it would be desirable to attach significance to the fundamental understanding of topics of interest, the focus shifts. In a system where paramount importance is attached to grades, it is a logical consequence that by focusing on these, other aspects are less prioritized. Next to this, "global competitiveness education" (p. 380) comes to the fore, as grading enables tangibility of successful Education and further comparability. Therefore the controversies of grading are not only to be seen on a personal basis, with individuals getting results, it is of a broader, even political context. Since universities are, in most cases, also companies in a society, whether students' achievements are highly valued depends on exploitability (p. 381). When it comes to the content of term papers or theses, and in which form knowledge is presented in exams, subjects must somehow fulfill the educational institution's purpose.

Here, Stolz (2017) argues that in Education - consciously or not - a difference between knowledge is made, as some get supported and are honored more than others. The risk is that "rational forms of knowledge" (p. 383) get less importance, as they can hardly be measured through grades. But "what can be tested are low-level skills and not student understanding and deep learning" (p. 387). This can be treated as curiosity and Wonder of more significant coherences, which have little justification of existence or revelation in scales. A tentative assumption can therefore be drawn on whether things that matter can be measured by grading. Grades can capture skills and learned facts. The more profound knowledge, however, is less suitable for standardized numerical assessment but needs individual and differentiated consideration.

Another perspective on Education is opened by Biesta (2010), who shapes the term "learnification" (p. 14), which is essential when unscrambling the tension ratio between wondering and grading. He argues that the focus in Education is being shifted more towards effective learning and measuring outcomes. Though it is necessary to cherish knowledge, the question comes up whether we are "valuing what we measure or measuring what we value" (p. 12). Accordingly, if only what fits into the measured scope is treated as good creates an entirely different learning process than a more open attitude to different results. To strengthen the exploratory part of Education, the fundamental question of what good Education needs to be answered first before letting scale numbers be interpreted to take over this decision and shape Education accordingly.

5. Elaboration of de-graded higher education

So far, the duality of learning and assessment often boils down to one thing: a grade. However, the fact that there are other ways besides this, which do not necessarily diminish learning progress, after McMorrnan et al. (2017), is often neglected. There are alternatives to standardized grading that achieve the same goals and do not suffer from the same problems as standardized testing and grading. Higher Education assessment without grading scales is the reality in some universities, as explained in the following. One way, besides regular grades, in Higher Education is that students receive pass/fail, credit/no credit, or purely qualitative assessment instead of grades (p. 362). By not having general categorization, students are not sorted into externally imposed assessment patterns which they can influence only up to a limited extent.

Nonetheless, they significantly shape their motivation to learn and self-perception. For example, the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore offers the pass/fail option in up to four courses. Any failed course in the first year can be repeated without repercussions (p. 364). Accordingly, it is easier for students to embark on a new subject and to try things out without the immediate concern of lessening their chances of getting a bad grade. In addition, Uppsala University uses Sweden's official grading system, which includes Pass with Distinction+/ Pass with Distinction/ Pass/Conditional Pass/ Fail (p. 364). On the other hand, the Evergreen State College of Stanford University School of Medicine does not use numerical grades but only formulated assessments, which take more time but allow the students differentiated feedback (p. 364). This can be seen as particularly important in the period of Higher Education since it is determinative and formative for the further personal and professional course of life.

Often, grades are used to exert pressure to create social conformity and enforce institutional measures, as Tannock (2017) points out. Therefore, they provide a pattern that sometimes leaves little room for students' design or interpretation of an assignment. Students who do not produce the expected content are sanctioned with poor (p. 1350). Moreover, grades undermine intrinsic motivations and thus conflict with critically engaged, self-directed learners who can wonder. While grades are a way to maintain standards, they are too one-perspective to be considered a significant measurement tool for

quality educational outcomes. It becomes evident that the focus is more on learning to get a good grade than on gaining knowledge for life or a particular topic. It is therefore essential to consider new, innovative approaches in Education - and grade-free Higher Education could be an alternative.

6. De-grading as a reasonable consequence to dissolve the tension ratio?

Beutel and Pant (2019) argue that upcoming patterns of differentiation and variety in youth biographies lead to individualization in the education environment and self-responsibility (p. 18). Nevertheless, they see a need to make achievement and performance results in Education visible, which is not necessarily given sufficiently by standardized grades but would be more reasonably justified by good performance diagnostics at all levels (p. 19). For Education without grades, a well-thought-out change is needed, which cannot happen suddenly and is unadjusted to the actual teaching. If grades are to be replaced by other forms of assessment, developmental-psychological insights into comprehension and learning, as well as moral and social judgment competence, are necessary. Changing the conditions of performance representation from the number to the word neither enlightens nor de-ideologizes. It is also continuously more important that the learners are involved in the evaluation, if only because group-oriented learning and self-assessment are becoming more crucial than simply accepting the assessment of others (p. 21).

Nevertheless, change is necessary, as Beck et al. (1991) found in a sizeable psychological study that Higher Education students who are very grade-oriented often report poorer overall academic performance. Reasons for this could be that they feel more pressure to compensate or that grades may be necessary to advance academically. In addition, very grade-oriented students learn differently than those less concerned about it. For example, when the former group learns firmly about test questions to be asked in a test, the latter focuses more on the larger context of the course material.

It comes to the fore after Vasudevan (2016) that written feedback transports more "holistic and meaningful information to adolescent learners" (p. 132), which numeric or letter grades cannot provide. Even more, they seem to show a "default to societal expectations rather than an intentional means of achieving [...] educational goals" (p. 133). Accordingly, it becomes clear that in balancing personal and public interests, grades primarily serve the societal aspect. Trial and error in Education become less likely, as grades would entail a direct consequence. Hence "avoiding failure rather than seeking success" (p. 134) results. On the other hand, narrative feedback would include versatile components and is less ambiguous.

7. Conclusion

To circumvent the issues mentioned above, I propose de-grading Higher Education. Now another change to enable significant learning can be dared to make universities a place of critical questioning and wondering. Structures need to be adapted to contemporary demands, and utopias dared rather than remain in old patterns for fear of declining quality. De-grading could be the first obvious step to be followed by further changes. De-grading generates space for experimentation, free development, and Wonder, away from the curriculum and the socially desired. It becomes clear that grades in Education make sense primarily because they are a substitute for other assessment forms that are easier for many to understand. This includes, in particular, students who have not yet fully developed the ability to make meaningful decisions and assessments. Universities are increasingly becoming an instrument in favor of socially debatable developments rather than giving students a chance to find a suitable approach for themselves and the community through critical thinking and wondering.

Grading tends to focus intensely on outcomes and superficial, controversial knowledge. This can be seen as a contrast to wondering in Education. Here, learning that stimulates curiosity and considers the whole environment is intended. While grades impact self-concepts in basic Education and are related to socioeconomic backgrounds, they still can provide a decent performance assessment substitute when students are not conditionally able to self-assess and steer it in a helpful direction. This is less the case in Higher Education. There, an environment should be provided where students can develop freely, question knowledge, and work in a way that is not only oriented toward goals and social benefit. Grades don't make Wonder impossible per se, but they shift the focus on results and comparability, making wondering incidental. Therefore, thoughtful dismantling of the tension of grading and wondering in Education is vital for improving the structures of university and society in the medium term - to make visible what matters in the long term.

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