

Socialist Grading

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Author's Reflexive Statement

I write this chapter at a familiar moment in institutionalized schooling: the end of the year, when grades are due. This moment brings with it a combination of joy and disgust. Joy in seeing my students' new understanding and the onset of summer; overwhelming disgust at the need to assign number and/or letter grades to student work. No matter how many rubrics I use to give the appearance of objectivity, no matter how many tests or projects with clear directions and expectations I include, and no matter how many times I have been compelled to assign simple quantities to complex educational qualities as the final class culmination, I cannot avoid the revulsion this moment inspires.

As an educator, I feel most complicit with our exploitative economy in the moment when I assign my students a grade. In the educational sector, grades are positioned at the frontlines of commodification. Grades subject student activity—the embodied forms of their educational labor—to a general equivalent, which—once assigned, like a price—places out of sight the most enriching and meaningful aspects of our time together. Then, the grade—a calculable quantity—is looked at by all manner of institutions, subjecting students to miseducative extrinsic motivators, meaningless competition, and an unhealthy individualism. My nauseous sense of complicity, this disgust, which began when I received my first grades as a young child, continued anew when I first assigned grades as a high school teacher. I still feel discomfort as a university instructor. The nausea has compelled me, though, to find ways of complicating the social power of grading in a capitalist economy.

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This chapter tells the story of those techniques. I present two socialist grading practices that attempt, through the form of teaching, to reduce the commodifying qualities of grading and work against the commodification of education. They could be used independently of course content, whether one teaches the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, or arts.

I was a high school teacher in South America trying to understand capitalism when I experimented with the pedagogical tactics described below. Since honing them, I have used them with students across class and race positions, from privileged white fourth graders to middle class undergraduates to working class graduate students. The first technique is for grading classroom discussion, the second for final grades.

Socialist Discussion Grading

Two key influences led me to experiment with socialist grading techniques for classroom discussion participation: Marxism and Harkness pedagogy. I was teaching wealthy Ecuadorian juniors and seniors at the American School of Quito, Ecuador. When some of my students didn't respond positively to Socratic seminar, a colleague introduced me to student-centered discussion through the Harkness method (see Backer 2015). Harkness pedagogy requires teachers to act like ethnographer-facilitators. They have to relinquish control over the product of discussion and instead focus on listening, tracking, and guiding the process of discussion, speaking infrequently and encouraging students to talk to one another.

After about a year of experiments with Harkness pedagogy I faced a problem unaddressed by the manuals I had read: how does one grade discussion? How could/should I assign a number value to students' participation?

Meanwhile, I was reading Karl Marx's *Capital, Vol. 1* for the first time and the ideas of exchange, inequality, and distribution were on my mind. I was also reading Polanyi's (1957) *Great Transformation*, along with Freire's (1973) *Education as Critical Consciousness* as part of a master's degree in education I was completing. These latter influences got me thinking about classrooms as societies: that my students and I produced something (education), and my teaching practices and policies set up rules that set prices for that production and distributed value accordingly in the form of quantitative evaluation. There was power and prejudice and freedom and equality and many other social values forming in my classroom society, and the way I taught—the relations of educational production emerging from the economic system of my classroom—could create the conditions for liberation or domination.

While education is productive, it is also reproductive, in the sense that the skills and knowledge students develop in classrooms link to the skills and knowledge they pursue and use in family life, the economy and politics. The ideology that relations of educational production promoted in my classroom could either match or resist dominant ideologies in society. Education is relatively autonomous:

teachers can teach in ways that do not correspond to existing ideologies and promote relations of production that resonate with other political economic arrangements. Grading is a key part of educational production and reproduction, and, due to schools' relative autonomy, can either promote capitalist relations of production, or promote other relations, such as socialist relations of production. After reflecting on all of this, I ultimately modified Harkness pedagogy to generate socialist relations of educational production.

Harkness discussions require students to read something, generate their own questions about the material, and then participate in a discussion using those questions. I listened and tracked the discussion by drawing discussion circles, a form of conversation analysis that counts the number and kinds of comments students make. I focused mainly on turns taken, but also kept notes on the discussion's content. After the discussion, I debriefed with students by showing them my analysis of the discussion. We looked at who talked about what and how many times, and used formulae to calculate number grades. These formulae were the economic policy of my classroom economy.

I first came up with a relatively traditional formula, which reflects capitalist values. Whoever does the "best" earns the "best" grade, and the "best" is whoever talks the most number of times. The formula I used was:

$$grade = (85 + / - d)$$

The 'd' here represents distance from the average. I calculated 'd' by finding the median number of comments offered that day. So, if the median number of comments in a discussion was five and a student said ten things, then she was above the mean by five. Thus, she earned a 90 because:

$$(85 + 5) = 90$$

I used 85 because the class had agreed that, in humanities classes at our school, students expected to get an 85/100 for doing the minimum. So, if a student says nothing but listens attentively she earned 85/100.

When I explained this to my classes, one of my students, J.P. Edgerton, argued, "the person that talks the most shouldn't get the most points." I agreed, politically speaking. Certainly, capitalists would believe that if each person pursues their own self-interest, then the social whole benefits. But I wanted to make a formula based on a socialist imperative and not a capitalist one. I didn't want my students to talk too much and I didn't want them to talk too little. I wanted their abilities and needs to be met in an equal way, mediated through a distribution system that takes the social whole into account. I wanted them to benefit equally from the resource of the discussion space they created together. This discussive energy is a precious resource, like air or water, and I did not want it exploited, wasted, or commodified. I wanted them to pay attention to one another, listen carefully, and share their opinions in a balanced way, and for the educational and quantitative gains to reflect

this togetherness. I wanted them to collectively own the means of discussive production rather than competing individually.

In the previous formula one could only get 100/100 if she earned 15 points above the average. This encouraged a kind of race to the top where every student was encouraged to beat every other student to talk the most. I wanted a balanced community, though. How could I encourage students to have the well-being of the group as their goal, while still giving them a number grade?

Along with the socialist texts, I was also reading Mitchell's (1988) translation of the *Tao-te-ching*. A poem in that book inspired the solution. The last line of the fifth poem in Mitchell's translation is "hold on to the center." I realized that, in grading, the apposition of certain qualities of an assignment on the bell curve—like discussion with percentages—is somewhat arbitrary. In principle, depending on what I valued, I could make any point along the distribution worth 100%. If I valued people saying the most number of things, I could give them 100%. If I value people saying nothing, I could give the silent students 100%. So I thought like a socialist: the *average* number of turns taken during the discussion should be worth 100%. Instead of encouraging a race to the top, I'd encourage a race to the center, towards the social whole. If a student said the exact number of things that every other student said, if their number of productive comments was identical to the average number of comments, then that student would be the "best" student, though what "best" means in this calculation is quite different than what a capitalist might think. The "best" student in this case is one who acts with the collective, not out of their own self-interest. If a student says the average number of things during discussion, that would mean they didn't talk too much, or too little. Depending on their distance from the average, I would take off points. I thought of a new formula called the Edgerton formula:

$$grade = 100 - d$$

The student that said ten things, where the median number of comments was five, would get 95.

$$100 - (5) = 95$$

Whoever fits with the average is rewarded and whoever strays from that average, either by talking too much, too little, or disrupting is compensated accordingly. This system is still pretty individualistic, in the sense that distinct individuals get a grade for their own participation. In later years, I modified the approach to give the entire group the same grade by associating certain standard deviations with points out of 100. If there was a standard deviation of zero then everyone got 100, for instance. (I presented these ideas to a group of Harkness teachers, and one replied "this is some kind of wonky communism!" I've wondered whether the formula could inspire a democratic socialist tax code.)

Applying this formula can teach distribution, community, and cooperation, but it has its limits. It is coercive, though the coercion is socialist. It imposes a quantity on something qualitative, particularly by prioritizing turn-taking as the measured phenomenon rather than content of comments: what matters is your awareness of yourself in relation to others as much as (or perhaps more than) what you are saying. Therefore, I like to use it as a classroom exercise to present different kinds of economic ideas. Using the competitive “whoever speaks most” formula, and contrasting that with the Edgerton formula, I can show students the difference between competitive-unequal forms of distribution and cooperative-equal forms of distribution, presuming that the discussion space is a resource and education is a kind of production. The Edgerton formula is a socialist relation of educational production where the best possible outcome is that everyone produces and receives the same amount of value, since everyone gets 100 if they take the same number of turns. While the formula doesn’t fully capture Marx’s imperative “to each according to need, from each according to ability” (as my second example of grade negotiation below does) it incentivizes shared production and distribution of limited resources, thereby communicating pedagogically what it is like to live in a socialist economic system.

Socialist Grade Negotiation

I first thought to ask students to propose and negotiate their own grades recently, in my first full-time faculty position at a College of Education in Cleveland, Ohio. I was tired of commodifying my students’ labor, feeding their addictions to quantitative evaluation, which previous waves of adults had inculcated in them. I could not stand the interpellation of quantitative grading as a student, then as a high school teacher, and as I studied economics and political philosophy further this disdain grew more unbearable.

Grades alienate. I frequently ask my students what they remember most vividly about their classes, the knowledge or the grades they received. It is a rhetorical question meant to communicate that number grades, like a wage, separate you from the embodied form of your labor. They put out of sight the complex, particular, and concrete results of an educational activity by translating them into a discourse of equivalence ultimately boxing individual production into easily tradeable labels, which permit the movement of bodies into hierarchies. The exchange-value of grades represses education’s use-value. Now with the power of a full-time faculty position, I could do something about this.

In Ranciere’s (1991) re-telling of Jacob Jacotot’s pedagogy, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacotot bids his students to take measure of their own learning. In my first classes in Cleveland, teaching Jacotot, I thought, “Why not try it?” I remembered the way I settled prices while living in Ecuador, specifically by haggling taxi rides: I proposed my fare to the driver who either agreed or disagreed. If grades reflect the scholastic commodity price, then I would tell my students to haggle with

me. I would ask them to take the measure of their own learning at midterm and at final through an online survey, which included questions about the strengths of the course, weaknesses of the course, things they learned, their goals for themselves, and then leaves space at the bottom for a quantitative proposal. I would read their responses and proposals and write back, agreeing or disagreeing. The exact protocol for this grading tactic is:

- (1) Tell the students at the outset about this grading procedure, making sure they understand it.
- (2) Create an online survey. In the survey, ask qualitative questions about the course, students' measurement of their own learning, and a quantitative proposal for a grade. (I like to ask about specific things students remember—one anecdote, activity, or idea—they think about a lot now, or something they understand).
- (3) Ask for responses with whatever frequency is appropriate (I do midterm and final since these are the traditional grading times in undergraduate programs, though I have thought to do it more frequently).
- (4) Read responses online, then respond with agreement or disagreement giving reasons for either. If you disagree, make a counter-offer and ask the student if they accept this.

I would later realize that, while this is a negotiating tactic, and markets are negotiation structures, this negotiation fulfills Marx's ethical imperative "to each according to need and from each according to ability". In this case, I use negotiations and self-evaluation to determine with students what they need in terms of compensation and what they deserve based on what they are able to contribute. They take the measure of their own learning and determine the quantity they think best represents that learning, and I tell them what I think about their evaluation. This method also takes into account students' particular contexts: what grades they might need to maintain scholarship status; their achievement given certain social, economic, or political circumstances; and any other context for their needs and abilities. Rather than grade commodification, this negotiation method draws from what you might call a labor theory of grading value where the general equivalent of grades as an exchange value is abolished, at least in the classroom context.

Among the interesting outcomes of this technique is the decoupling of assignments' worth from the final grade. Since the students proposed their grades at midterm and final as reflections on their learning through the assignments, I did not have to grade those assignments with any numbers. The assignments were vehicles for an experience that the students themselves evaluated in its entirety, rather than vehicles for me to calculate a number through a one-way fragmented process. Each assignment became just an assignment with its own specific educational integrity rather than worth a certain percentage of the final grade. This particular integrity prioritizes the use-value of education over the exchange-value of education, without getting rid of the latter since I could still enter a grade for student transcripts.

Conclusion

Much of the anti-capitalist literature on education, beginning perhaps with Bowles and Gintis's (2011) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, makes an important inversion in sociological thinking about teaching and learning. Put simply, the idea that better schools will make a better society is a distinctly liberal-capitalist promise. From Horace Mann, to Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society legislation, to the repetitive calls that a college degree will guarantee young people good jobs, these discourses and programs presume that society will improve as citizens achieve more and better schooling. Anti-capitalist educational thinkers like Bowles and Gintis demonstrate that this presumption is false. Observing the data on inequality and educational attainment in the United States also leads us to broach this question: why has educational attainment increased exponentially, both in secondary and tertiary graduation rates, yet income inequality has also increased exponentially? The amount of money people make has not increased proportionally with educational attainment and unemployment has fluctuated violently. Good schools do not guarantee a good society. Rather, a good society guarantees a good society. Economic crises happen whether or not much of the populace has attended certain schooling institutions. Schools reproduce and alter the character of society in a relatively autonomous way, but they cannot make society more just if structural injustices persist. It is with this in mind that I use the above grading procedures to teach students to think differently about capitalism and then seek to change capitalism. Socialist grading techniques in a capitalist economy, therefore, may inspire big structural changes in small ways.

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