

The Materialism of Contemporary Education: Encouraging Students to Renounce Their Grades

PREP Research Grant Report

ISBN: 978-0-9687755-7-8

September 2013

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Project Description	3
II.	Context: Identifying the Question	5
III.	Methodology	6
IV.	Results	8
	Appendix 1: Draft of Peer-Reviewed Journal Article	11
	Appendix 2: Letter of Acceptance from Journal	32

I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research project examined the results of an innovative system of evaluation developed through a Humanities course entitled *Virtuous Bodies*, which focused on renunciation practices in India. To encourage students to participate actively in the material, students were asked to renounce the outcome of their actions by renouncing seeing their grades for the duration of the term. In return, since renunciation is about perfection, they were offered the opportunity to re-write the same assignments as often as needed. With each submission, they received feedback, but no grade.

This research project had three objectives: first, to study the results of this pedagogical experiment through various data accumulated (anonymous student surveys and student papers); second, to use this experiment as an opportunity to explore the question of evaluation; third, to examine the problem of plagiarism (which appeared to have been resolved with the above proposed evaluation method) and challenge the predominant worldview that plagiarism is the result of student laziness or disinterest. Among other things, this research project sought to prove that plagiarism is primarily a survival mechanism; with a greater sense of purpose and less emphasis on grades, plagiarism is likely to diminish.

This research project culminated in an academic article that was recently accepted by the peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (see Appendix 1 for the article; Appendix 2 for the letter of acceptance from the journal). As their acceptance letter attests, the journal accepts less than 10% of the submissions they receive. It is a very widely

disseminated journal with a readership of at least 10,000. Not only have they accepted the essay about this experiment (even though it falls outside of their traditional framework), but they are using it as a round-table discussion, with the entire issue dedicated to my essay and responses to it. The issue is scheduled to appear in March, 2014.

*Note: The original title for this research project was “The Materialism of Contemporary Education: Getting Students to Renounce their Grades.” After having conducted the study, I have changed the sub-title slightly to: “Encouraging Students to Renounce their Grades.” As discussed in this report and in the article, students did not in fact renounce their grades with this experiment. All they renounced was their right to *see* the grades they received. It therefore seemed more appropriate to change the title accordingly. How far into the renunciation exercise each student went was up to them. All I could do was encourage them to try.

II. CONTEXT: IDENTIFYING THE QUESTION

As explained in my article (see Appendix 1), the context at Marianopolis College is quite particular. It is an elite college that attracts extremely bright and ambitious students. The students I usually find waiting for me in the classroom are driven and hard-working.

It is a great privilege to teach such eager young minds, but the privilege does not come without a price. Marianopolis students have a tendency to aim far and high; as a consequence, they crave the grade they believe they need to make it to the next step on their ambitious journeys. Although I am quite certain that this is a reality for students in most contexts and colleges, it remains disheartening to encounter so many bright students for whom education has little value in and of itself. Students tend to come for the grade, and when they do not feel they have the tools to receive the grades they seek, cheating becomes an appealing alternative.

It is therefore for these reasons that I chose to try something different. If students are shielded from seeing their grades for the duration of the semester, but are offered an open invitation to re-write as often as they feel the need to, would this serve to release some of the pressure they feel? Would this encourage a passion for education rather than a materialistic desire for an abstract grade? And how would this system affect the otherwise ongoing reality of plagiarism and cheating?

III. METHODOLOGY

III.1 Pedagogical Methodology

The pedagogy was simple: students were offered unlimited re-writes in exchange for giving up seeing their grades for the duration of the semester. It was highlighted, however, that they were not really renouncing their grades since they were still in fact being graded. All they were giving up was *seeing* their grades, but the grades continued to be generated. What they were therefore really doing was taking a leap of faith: normally, when students see their grades, they can examine the details, make an appeal if they believe the grade is not appropriate, and they can suggest a correction if they believe a mistake has been made. When they give up seeing the grade, students are in fact relinquishing whatever control they otherwise have, and are trusting me with the outcome. This was the real nature of their renunciation, if they chose to participate.

Students were not required to renounce all of this. They had the option to take the course in the traditional manner, receiving grades and not being afforded re-writes. At the beginning of the term, students were provided with a legal contract prepared by the college administration. If they signed the contract, it was irrevocable and they renounced. If they chose not to, they could take the course as an ordinary student.

At the end of the semester, all grades compiled over the term were submitted into the electronic college system. The grade of the last version of each assignment was entered, and in the comment box the grade for each of the previous versions was provided. Students therefore received at the end of term all of the information they had been missing from the beginning.

III.2 Data Compilation

Two types of data were compiled for this experiment:

1. An anonymous survey was made available to the students each term the course was taught. The more significant results are discussed in the following section.
2. With their permission, copies of the student papers (in which they discussed their experience of pedagogical renunciation) were made. With the help of a research assistant, these papers were carefully examined and patterns were sought. Conclusions will be presented in the following section and are outlined in greater detail in the article (see Appendix 1).

IV. RESULTS

The results of this experiment were astounding. First and foremost, it bears noting that for the three times this course was taught during the research project, 100% of the students chose to renounce their grades. As explained in the article (Appendix 1), students were given a few weeks to decide whether or not they wanted to sign the contract. The project was explained on the first day and the renunciation of grades was not mentioned again until the deadline for them to decide arrived. Since students submitted their signed documents at different times over the weeks, peer-pressure cannot be much of a factor (since they did not know who had or had not signed). It is therefore a striking reality that all the students in this course over three semesters chose to take this challenge on. A few suggestions to explain this 100% outcome are discussed in the article below.

The survey was a relatively simple one, focusing on their education and their relationship to this course. The two most interesting and revealing answers received, as discussed in the article attached, has to do with teacher-comments on the one hand, and plagiarism/cheating on the other.

When asked if students paid more attention to teacher-comments because they had renounced their grades, out of 57 respondents, 43 answered “strongly agree” or “agree.” This seems like an important outcome. As most teachers know, great time and energy goes into providing students with detailed comments on their work. Most of the time, students look at the grade scrawled at the top and toss the assignment away. The work teachers pour into each corrected assignment, which is meant to ideally help students improve, is therefore often wasted. This inevitably leads to an uncomfortable question: how often do students really improve once they reach the

institutions of higher education? Although no clear answer presents itself to this terrible question, it became clear that with the elimination of immediate access to grades, students were forced to examine teacher-comments scrupulously if they hoped to gain a sense of how they fared. If, moreover, they hoped to improve on the next re-write, the teacher-comments became much more significant to their educational experience.

A second notable result to emerge from the survey has to do with plagiarism. Students were asked if they had cheated or plagiarized to some extent since their arrival at Marianopolis College. 30 out of 57 respondents answered “yes” to this question. This is a clear indication that more than half of the student body believes it is permissible to cheat – or at least felt driven to cheat, despite potentially nagging scruples.

It is not a surprising result. Many students experience Marianopolis College as a competitive environment, and wherever competition lurks, cheating is bound to arise. If students believe that they must compete, and more importantly that they must win, if they are ever going to succeed in life, cheating is an obvious temptation. When students are provided with unlimited re-writes, however, there is no reason to risk crossing the line. The point behind cheating has been eliminated. They no longer need to stress about the kinds of questions they will be asked on a test because they have the opportunity to try it all over again a week later. Students have the space to try and fail and try again. This is an extraordinary relief for many students, and they articulate this clearly in their papers at the end of term. Since they no longer fear failure, they become free to enjoy their education as an end in itself – sometimes for the very first time.

There are many other results from this experiment. Students consistently express feeling liberated from the anxiety produced by the grade, despite knowing that grades continue to be part

of the course. They express passion for education – some of them claiming to be enjoying learning for the very first time. The results are many and almost unanimously positive. The challenge has to do with the logistical feasibility of the project: it is ultimately impossible for students to produce unlimited re-writes in all of their classes. It would be too much work for them. Moreover, it would represent an equally impossible workload for teachers if all classes were run this way. The flavor of uniqueness and specialness would likewise be lost if this pedagogy became an institutional norm. There is therefore something slightly utopian about the exercise and thus not entirely realistic. As discussed in the conclusion of the article (see Appendix 1), however, some of the lessons learned from this exercise can be incorporated into our institutional thinking – if there is a will for it.

APPENDIX 1: DRAFT OF PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLE

RENUNCIATION AS PEDAGOGY

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I have been teaching at an elite, private, Canadian college¹ for twelve years. I watch students walk into my classroom for the first time over and over again. They are eager, competitive, and often even aggressive about their learning. They take classes because they have to for their program requirements, and they go to school because they have to for their life requirements. They tend to equate learning with grades and tend to believe that their future potential can be measured by the floating numbers we provide. My competitive young students have few illusions about why they are sitting in my classroom on hard plastic chairs. Unfortunately, they have few expectations too.

I am not sure I had many more expectations of higher education when I was their age. To be honest, I wasn't paying that much attention. Like them, I was there because I had to be, perhaps because I lacked the imagination to envision myself elsewhere. It was only in graduate school that learning finally became an end in itself, a realm of discovery in which humility and personal elevation poetically intertwined. So maybe I am hoping for too much, but as a faculty member, a pedagogue, and a passionate human being, it has become increasingly difficult to

¹ The college system in Québec, called C.E.G.E.P. (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel), is unlike any other in North America. High school in Québec ends at Grade 11; students then spend two years in college and three years in a Bachelor program. They therefore do the American equivalent of their last year of high school and first year of university in college. Marianopolis is one of the leading colleges in Québec, and students are as fiercely competitive about getting into it as they are about getting the grades they seek in order to qualify for the programs they hope to get accepted to thereafter. It is a very particular interim experience.

accept the mediocre level of curiosity I often see in my students' faces. I want them to be excited about learning, to see its astonishing potential, and more than anything else, I want them to appreciate the privilege it is for them to have learning as their primary occupation. They need not make a career out of every course they take. Not every subject suits every mind. Indeed, academia itself is not the right course of action for every individual and some of our students would do better travelling, exploring the performing arts, or choosing a manual profession. This is just one road of many and we do our youths a terrible disservice by imprisoning them with a narrative of academic supremacy.

But while they are with us, while they are in my classroom, even if it is not the perfect fit, for that brief period of their lives I want them to try to explore, to think, and most of all to appreciate the privilege their lives have made available to them. Perhaps this is a marker of my getting older (I sound like my mother telling me to finish my plate because there are starving children in Africa!), but I cannot help it. This privilege is not available to everyone. It is randomly distributed on this planet with little rhyme or reason. Whether academia is right for them or not, while they are in it, I want them to give it their full attention. They can switch programs or drop out later.

The Experiment

It begins with a course on renunciation practices in Asian traditions. I entitled it *Virtuous Bodies*, plagiarizing (with her full permission) Susanne Mrozik's book title.² Given how counter-cultural the material promised to be for the students, my challenge with this course was to get them to

² Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

relate it to. As Cathy Davidson argues in her recent book *Now You See It*,³ one of the most important ingredients in any teaching environment involves relating. Students need to relate if they are going to learn. Relating creates interest. If they cannot see the connection to their own lives, they are not likely to engage with the material.

The *Bhagavad Gita* was my Newtonian apple. According to the Gita, renunciation is not about giving up material comfort; it is not about starvation or self-mutilation. Renunciation is, rather, a mental experience. More specifically, it is about releasing oneself of the outcome of one's actions. In the words of the Gita, "just as the unwise ones act while clinging to action, so the wise should act without clinging..."⁴ To get students to relate to the material, they were going to become renunciants themselves. In other words, they were going to have to release themselves of the outcomes of their actions. In a pedagogical setting, that meant only one thing: they were going to have to let go of their grades.

My idea was this: students would produce work in this course just as they do in their other courses. I would mark their material and provide feedback, but the mark itself would not be revealed to them until after the course was over. In return, and because renunciation is about perfection, they would be granted the opportunity to write the same exact papers and the same exact tests as many times as they wanted. They could perfect their knowledge by writing and re-writing, never knowing the outcome of their efforts. When the course was over, I would release all of their grades to them at the same time that final grades were submitted into the system. Students would have to sign a legal document, produced by the college's administration, if they agreed to the experiment. Without the contract, I was sure to face an eventual cacophony of frustrated students who changed their minds.

³ Cathy N. Davidson, *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn* (New York: Viking, 2011), 76.

⁴ *Bhagavad Gita* 3:25. The translation is from Laurie L. Patton, *Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin, 2008).

When the next batch of students walked into the *Virtuous Bodies* course, they were met with a most unusual proposal. They were handed a contract that they could choose to sign or not (they were given the option to take the course the ordinary way, with grades delivered and no re-writes). If they signed, however, it was a legally binding decision. They would sign away their right to see their grades for the duration of the semester. The only exception would be if they failed a submission, in which case I would tell them. Otherwise, they would not see their grades until the semester was over.

The ritual power of the legal contract is not to be underestimated. They each held the paper in their hands as though it would speak to them like the burning bush. If they signed it, there was no turning back. Students have described waves of nausea, anxiety, and distress wash over them upon hearing what this course might entail for them. Many seem at once excited by the prospect and terrified. One student broke down in tears moments after hearing what I was suggesting. The idea of losing control over seeing their grades has some of them in knots. I remind them that the only thing that will change is that they are relinquishing being able to *see* their grades, but for many that alone is debilitating.

At the end of the term, students are asked to write about their experience in this course in a reflection paper, and of all the comments they make, one of the most common is their admitting to having thought I was crazy on that first day. One student claimed that every one of her friends, upon hearing about the course, also thought the idea was madness, and her parents begged her to switch out. Another described me as an “academic heretic” spouting off insanity

in public. The idea baffles many students, defies their imagination, and sends many reeling with panic despite the fact that the odds are hugely in their favor. By just giving up *seeing* their grades, they are granted the opportunity to virtually perfect their unseen scores. And yet, this simple difference has a tremendous impact on their lives and their self-understanding. It is only when the suggestion is made that they let go of their grades that they suddenly realize how deeply attached they have become to them. Grades are academic currency. Students identify with them and believe their futures are determined by them.

To some extent, they are not wrong. College scores play an important part in the futures they are trying to carve out for themselves and one should not underestimate the impact grading has on their lives. But futures are the product of many diverging forces and interconnecting realities; a student's future does not rest on grades alone. The power grades have been granted in student consciousness deserves to be challenged, reconsidered, and possibly even reconfigured. When grades are eliminated from their immediate purview, students are forced to contend with their education in a very different way. They may ask themselves, perhaps for the first time, what their education means to them without numbers attached. What is an education free of any outcome? Is it possible to teach and to learn in a system stripped of its reward system? One student compared grading to ranking livestock in his paper. If that is what we are doing to them, the question certainly warrants some reflection.

Grading

Grading has undergone a continual metamorphosis since its inception about three hundred years ago. History demonstrates that every institution has had to wrestle with the question of

evaluation, easy answers rarely presenting themselves. A number of historians have attempted to chart the complicated web of historical realities that have converged to create the grading context we find ourselves in today.⁵ These studies demonstrate how often universities have oscillated in their conclusions as to what constitutes best practice. The oscillation generated particular momentum as student numbers expanded and fields of study grew increasingly specialized – logistical realities that continue to challenge institutions today. In the 18th century, these new realities gave rise to the written examination process that remains one of the staples of the contemporary educational system. Before that, the classical *viva voce* (oral examination) of Oxford and Cambridge Universities was the primary method in use; instructors spent quality time with each of their students, challenging them with material that suited each one best, but this was eventually rendered obsolete in favor of the written exam.

Logistical concerns were not the only driving forces behind this change: new cultural norms emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries that rendered the development inevitable, such as the idea that all students must be evaluated equally. No longer would nobility be treated separately from the ordinary undergraduate, but all students would have to pass through the same process to gain and maintain their privileged seats in the university classroom.⁶ The rise of the individual as a concept had as much to do with the transformation of grading over the centuries as did logistics. Raising the issue today may therefore be a way of paying homage to what has clearly become an age-old academic tradition.

⁵ See for example, Robert J. Montgomery, *Examinations: An Account of their Evolution as Administrative Devices in England* (London: Longmans, 1965); & Christopher Stray, "From Oral to Written Examinations: Cambridge, Oxford and Dublin 1700-1914," *History of Universities* 20.2 (2005), 77-130. For a concise and brief survey of some of the more important changes, see Mark W. Durm, "An A is Not an A is not an A: A History of Grading," *The Educational Forum*, 57.3 (1993), 294-97.

⁶ For further discussion on this, see Christopher Stray, "From Oral to Written Examinations," 96; Keith Hoskin, "The Examination, Disciplinary Power and Rational Schooling," *History of Education* 8.2 (1979), 135-46.

No voice is more provocative on this subject than Michel Foucault's who argued for the direct correlation between knowledge and power, drawing a parallel between the development of the prison system and the development of the classroom as we know them both today. He considers the 18th century model of punishment as one of spectacle and performance, citing in his opening pages the example of Damians who was brutally and publically tortured for attempted regicide. He sees in Western history a move from the spectacle to surveillance, a technical mutation that individualizes and normalizes every citizen, rendering them a subject of intense scrutiny in which every act is observed and controlled. The classroom is, for Foucault, an extension of the same mores that gave rise to the prison – a realm in which an authority figure exercises control over a large group of individuals, perpetually screening, evaluating, and examining them, normalizing them as they internalize the power structure they are subservient to.

Foucault uses the expression “the punitive city”⁷ to describe the world we find ourselves in today in where an unyielding list of possible infractions threaten. As I read his work, I cannot help but picture my list of classroom policies that ceremoniously seal every syllabus I distribute. I think of the college requirements we face as we are asked to ensure a regular litany of performative submissions punctuating the semester. Foucault's words have me wonder if the classroom really has developed into a normalizing prison with me as its taskmaster.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 113.

Perhaps it is. I am quite certain that a number of our students experience education in this way, as a punishing city in which they feel perpetually cornered. Grading certainly has an element of punishment to it, and as enrollments continue to surpass those of previous generations, the factory-feeling of educational institutions is bound to grow. But Foucault did not see the development of surveillance as exclusively negative. He saw in it the seeds of creativity as well. As he says,

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.⁸

The history of grading demonstrates that we are not married to our methods for eternity. Methods are in a perpetual state of transformation. As we supervise our students and rigorously evaluate them, we are not merely exercising control over them. We are also exploring possible venues of creativity, helping them grow into their respective individualities, and attempting to negotiate the challenging terrain of increasing student enrollment. What we do now, we need not do tomorrow; our evaluative methods thus beg their own regular evaluation.

Student Renunciants

When students encounter my proposal, most look at me like deer caught in headlights. What kind of a teacher suggests such a thing? By proposing that I shield their grades from them, I am trampling on the sacred ground of their personal trajectory. Without grades, the very reason for their education is potentially jeopardized by existential discomfort.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 194.

Not all students react this strongly. In every class of 25 students, there are always two or three who encounter my proposal with exuberance. They are the ones who have already pulled back the curtain in Oz and no longer believe in the sovereignty of grades. The majority, however, remains so absorbed by the process that they rarely reflect on what it might actually mean to them without an outcome attached. For these students, the proposal is an assault on their motivation.

Students are not required to sign the contract at all or even immediately. They are given until the first assignment is due to sign it, if they choose to. This gives them time to think about the proposal, to get to know me as a teacher and to decide in their own time whether they are willing to take part in this most unorthodox of experiments. I have taught the course three times and amazingly, every student in each of those classes has chosen to sign. I have yet to teach the course in such a way that I have some students renouncing and others not. 100% of students who have taken the class have renounced their grades. Some sign the contract within minutes of hearing the proposal, while others deliberate much more carefully over the ensuing weeks. The contracts trickle in slowly, but I consistently wind up with 100% participation before the deadline closes its door. The most interesting piece of this puzzle is that the students don't know that everyone else in the room has signed. I don't mention the contract again after the first day; I don't want to pressure the students, so I tell them about it and then get on with the course, watching with curiosity as student dynamics take shape. It is only on the day of the deadline that I look at the collection of contracts I have received and discover to my perpetual surprise that every single student chose to sign.

Statistically, 100% is suspicious. This result warrants its own set of questions. Since the students don't all know each other, and since I don't even know how many have signed until I count the contracts I have received on the day of the deadline, no one is aware of how many students have agreed to participate before the deadline seals the deal. I finally asked my class why they chose to sign. Their answers included a range of explanations. For some, I apparently made a convincing case on the first day. I can be quite persuasive and a number of them simply bought the pitch. Some admitted that, although they didn't know me, they couldn't help but wonder at the fact that a seemingly intelligent person was suggesting something so radical. They signed out of sheer curiosity. One articulated that, from his perspective, of the 28 classes he had taken at Marianopolis, "27 were the same and one was different." The variation alone was reason enough. The one explanation that shocked me, however, makes the case for this course more than any other: according to one brave student, she signed because she was afraid that I would mark her more harshly if she didn't. My jaw dropped at this explanation. I never even thought of that as one of their potential concerns, but there it was. Even more alarming, a number of students nodded in agreement as she spoke. They jumped to comfort me, my despair having become immediately obvious at this news, promising that they now understood what I was up to and were so relieved to have taken part, but before they knew me or understood what I was trying to achieve, their primary concern was for their marks and they were quietly calculating how best to protect them. If signing a contract for a crazy experiment is what was required of them, then they would. Over and over again, students revealed their fear of grading along with their conviction that the currency we were bartering was not to be trifled with.

A number of students over the years have noticed, perhaps for the first time as a result of this course, that they rarely discuss their education outside of class, but belabor issues concerning their grades continually. This is obviously not the case for all students. I have often witnessed students arguing passionately in the hallways about poetry or politics; I smile contentedly every time I hear them jamming or reciting a Shakespearean sonnet in the stairwell. Those moments are the hallmarks of the idealized college experience and we all enjoy them with nostalgia and pride. Our students are not unilaterally blind to the beauty of the education they are receiving. But the power of the grade remains and often manages to overtake the privilege. As the papers pile up and the work overwhelms, the magic of education is too easily lost and all students seem to worry about is how to survive with their scores (and hopefully some of their sanity) intact. This is when education becomes a drudgery rather than a privilege. This is what I am trying to avoid.

Liberation from Grades

It is therefore heartening to discover that the most recurring adjective in students' end-of-term papers is "liberating." Indeed, virtually 50% of the papers submitted thus far include the word "liberation" somewhere along the way. Students are fully aware that their renunciation is incomplete because they are still being graded; the only difference is that they don't *see* the grades they are receiving. Nevertheless, students repeatedly express that they find the simple fact of their not being able to see their grades transformative. Opening up the college computer gateway and not receiving a notice that a grade has been entered in their portfolio is apparently a tremendous relief. They can see all their other grades, but not seeing the ones from this course is one less number to worry about. When they leave class with their papers or tests in hand, they

cannot compare it with those of their peers because all they have are comments. There are no numbers or letters to show anyone else. The age-old question, “what did you get?” can neither be asked nor answered.

This relief was not only connected to their renunciation of grades; many obviously also felt relief at being granted unlimited chances to excel. They were allowed to make mistakes, to fail, and even to take intellectual risks with their assignments as a result of the open rewrite option. The tightly screwed pressure valve was released and students could walk into their tests or submit their papers with significantly less performance anxiety. As one student wrote, “100% is 100%, no matter how long it took you to get there.” He, and many others, felt that space was finally being granted to really learn, to try and fail and try again until the knowledge had firmly taken root. As another expressed, “I felt like the professor was not looking at how I did at the moment, but rather, at what I am capable of doing when given the space and time. It was an absolutely liberating feeling.”

Plagiarism

Providing students with the option for unlimited re-writes also had the effect of rendering plagiarism largely irrelevant. Plagiarism is not a new problem, nor is it an unusual one.

Academic syllabi have been transformed into legal documents that dictate intellectual boundaries and the penalties students can expect should they get caught cheating in any way. Professional paper-writers can apparently earn a very good living writing student papers. Some profess to have even written entire graduate dissertations! *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article in 2010 in which a ghostwriter revealed his income and the quantity of work he claims to receive from students on a regular basis. The article, “The Shadow Scholar: The Man Who

Writes Your Students' Papers Tells his Story,"⁹ received more hits and blogposts than any other article in the Chronicle's history, ranging from general outrage to knowing acknowledgment and everything in between.

I have surveyed my students on a variety of issues pertaining to this course, including a question about plagiarism. The question is simple. It reads: "Since my arrival at Marianopolis, I have cheated or committed plagiarism to some degree." They can choose either YES and NO and are then provided with a few lines to add comments. Of the 57 surveys I have collected, 29 circled YES to this question. In other words, 50.87% of students surveyed have anonymously admitted to some form of cheating since they began at our college. One student, who circled NO, explained in the comment section that he would plagiarize if he could, but "my classmates are too stupid. I wouldn't trust their work over mine." Clearly, the numbers themselves cannot tell the whole story.

One of the most surprising admissions concerning plagiarism came to me unsolicited a few years ago. A student revealed to me that he had paid for his tuition by providing fellow students with his services as a paper-writer. In exchange for immunity, he revealed his "paper-writing menu" in which prices were listed for the different kinds of papers he could produce. Cheating and plagiarism are probably as old as time, but in competitive environments with factory-style evaluations and an increasing population fighting for their seats in the system, it is inevitable that the issue itself grows accordingly. By providing students with open rewrites, however, the dynamic shifts: there is simply no reason to risk cheating when second chances are offered on a silver platter.

⁹ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 12, 2010.

Learning beyond the Requirements

Liberation manifests in another way for the pedagogue: liberation from having to repeat myself in class. Although this evaluation method requires an unrelenting pile of corrections (as the reader may have quickly deduced), and thus extraordinary repetition by way of marking, in class I can lecture with complete confidence that every single student is up to speed at all times. I can make reference to readings and use Sanskrit terminology without ever having to double check that they are following. As a result of the re-writes, the students know the material inside out. They are intimate with the course, with the terminology, and with the readings. They remember the details in ways I don't encounter in other classes.

But my enthusiasm is a result of more than that. Students go the extra mile in this course time and time again. In their test re-writes, for example, I have found information in their answers that I am certain was not provided in the course. This has happened so often that I finally asked where it was coming from. Students explained that knowing the questions ahead of time and having attempted to write out their answers once already, they develop an appreciation for the material and suddenly want to know more, understand the issue with more depth. My tests consist primarily of essay questions, so the potential to elaborate and develop is endless. There are no right or wrong answers, strictly speaking (although there is information that needs to be properly assessed); the range is vast and there is no predicting where students can go with the information itself. They realize this and their answers develop with every rewrite they produce. They do research between each rewrite, studying beyond the coursepack and class notes, exploring the material for themselves as independent thinkers. They become masters of

the material well beyond what I require. They become, in other words, what every one of us wants to see in our classrooms: intrigued.

It may be suggested that students are doing the extra work simply because they can, because it is in their best interest. They realize that the more rewrites they participate in, the better their grades will likely be, which is something students at this college are keenly interested in achieving. This may be the case, but the amount of work these students put into this one course is unusual; students rarely go the extra mile unless they need to. Indeed, I would suggest that in most cases, the primary objective in the classroom is to figure out how to score the highest grades with the least amount of effort – particularly in the humanities. In this course, however, students dedicate a tremendous amount of time and effort. Not only do they spend more time reading and learning beyond that which is required, but they dedicate many additional hours to re-writing the same material despite heavy workloads that would have them using their time otherwise. By the end of the semester, these students have spent an inordinate amount of time on this course *of their own free will*. They choose how many times they want to rewrite and retest, and repeatedly I discover that they choose to do so more often than I could have anticipated.

The obvious question begging at the door at this point is, why? Why would busy, competitive, and overworked students spend so much time doing so much work for a course that for most of them will be inconsequential to their grade-point average or the academic careers of their future? What motivates this result?

Education for Learning

Although I may be accused of romanticism, I cannot stop myself from hoping that these results have their source in a freshly awakened pleasure of the mind. Time and again, students have voiced their belief that higher education is a tool, not an end. It is for their futures, to land a good job, to have a role to play in society, to make others proud. One student described her experience of education in this way:

“If we study hard enough, if our grades are good enough, if we just sleep a little less, if we cram just a little more, if we just drink some more coffee, eat a little faster, have a little less fun, pay attention in class, constantly be alert...GASP, and never take a breath, then *maybe* we will get somewhere in life.”

The pressure to succeed is immense. The fear of failure is even greater. These students are burdened with the worry that if they don't fight for the top, they won't get anywhere at all. It doesn't help that the economic recession keeps threatening a jobless future. Even with the best grades, they are beginning to realize that they might not find a place for themselves in the career-venues they aspire to.

Students are not simply frightened anymore. Some are downright angry. A number of colleges in the States are currently being sued for not having adequately prepared their students for the workforce. Students face insurmountable debt due to ever-increasing tuition fees with no realistic job prospects. It is no surprise that the lawsuits are piling as a result. The education we are providing students with is laced with anxiety, and competition is sometimes its only heartbeat. The privilege of an education, for us as much as for them, cannot be appreciated when it is hijacked by such a wide range of threats.

When students let go of their grades, many of these lurking threats begin to recede. The competition is, for many of them, left at the door. Students begin to engage with their education as an opportunity for learning rather than as an early manifestation of the rat race. The very fact

that they can re-write as often as they require replaces stress with relief; the fact that so many students re-write so often is evidence that learning itself is beginning to gain value. This becomes all the more evident when one considers their traditional relationship to teacher-comments. I am sure I am not alone in feeling some frustration that students rarely pay attention to the many comments we cover their work with. We spend hours correcting despite our suspicion that students barely glance at what we return to them. They look at the mark, assess what it means for their final score, and throw it away. One colleague of mine who has become jaded with frustration has simply given up writing comments. He scrawls a grade over the top of the work and students are invited to take an appointment if they would like to hear more. Apparently, few ever do.

By contrast, in this course, students scrupulously examine every ounce of red ink covering their work. In the student surveys, one of the questions posed is if students “paid more attention to teacher-comments because of the re-write option.” Of the 57 surveys collected, 53 circled either “strongly agree” or “agree.” That translates into 92.98%. Students are forced to learn if they want to take advantage of the re-write option. They re-write and re-test and they improve. Their writing matures and their knowledge deepens. I cannot say the same for my other courses, although I wish I could.

I often wonder how many students genuinely improve in college. If education is primarily a numbers game, how different are students likely to be from one semester to the next? With this course, however, as students write and re-write, improvement is virtually tangible. Moreover, confidence develops in the process. As one student expressed, “After receiving the first test which was missing a mark at the top of the front page, I felt a strange feeling of liberation.

Instead of looking for the places where I had lost marks, I searched for the right answers to those I had gotten wrong.” They have every reason to learn.

The Mind is a Sense Organ

When education is its own end, learning can be experienced as a pleasure. Teaching this course over the past few years has proven to be intellectually satisfying for most of the students I share the classroom with, giving rise to the experience of the mind as a sense organ in the most positive sense of the term. Students improve their skills and become intellectually curious. They devote more time and energy than the course requires and they do so of their own free will. The course succeeds in giving education some of the meaning it traditionally promises. Anthony Kronman’s masterful book, *Education’s End*¹⁰, reminds us that the great universities were founded upon such a promise, that one entered the gates of the great institutions of the past in the hope of transformation. Harvard was not a collecting agency for information, but a passport to wisdom and idealism (not just a white gentleman’s club). Kimberly C. Patton wonders whether “we have reached a point where we need to remind ourselves that true education has very little to do with mindless instillation or manipulation of information; that *educare* means ‘to lead out of,’ not ‘to pour into.’”¹¹

Students yearn for meaning, but many don’t even imagine they can ask for it. This course has proven to me that students will show up if I do. They know that I am putting as much work into the course as they are, drowning as I often am in corrections that no teacher truly enjoys. That I do it for them does not escape their attention.

¹⁰ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Kimberly C. Patton, “Stumbling Along Between the Immensities’: Reflections on Teaching in the Study of Religion,” *JAAR* 65.4 (1997), 836.

Possible Applications Elsewhere

A course should be measured by whether the material and format succeed in capturing students' interests, whether these awaken in them a desire to learn and to ask questions that they might not have done otherwise. I am convinced that for these reasons, the course is a success and that it can therefore serve as a jumping off point for discussion in other contexts. This is the very purpose of this article.

I have a few ideas of how the conclusions from this study can be applied in other contexts. First and foremost, I think it encourages us to reconsider our marking strategies; perhaps room can be made to provide more opportunities than the first try. Of course, this conclusion depends on whether educators are there to "draw out" or to weed. If our only purpose is to weed those who can perform upon demand from those who cannot, then providing second-chances is counter-productive. If, however, our purpose is to teach, then second-chances might be precisely what is missing.

The improvement I have seen in students' work has led me to a second conclusion: that perhaps simplifying our criteria for each of our classes is in order. Traditionally, faculty are encouraged to provide a few different methods of evaluation. Students may have to write a test, a research paper, and give an oral presentation all in one course. Although this has the benefit of giving each student a chance at performing the one method they are most comfortable with, the disadvantage is that they do not really have the opportunity to fine-tune any of the others. The results of this experiment suggest to me that perhaps we could each choose one or two evaluative methods and repeat those throughout the term. I doubt many faculty members will be prepared to offer unlimited re-writes because it is obviously unsustainable, but to have one type of evaluation

repeated throughout the term might achieve a similar result. So, for example, instead of requiring an oral presentation, a research paper, a test, etc., each course would request just one of these types of evaluation many times over. One course would consist of six oral presentations and nothing else; another would request a number of short research papers and nothing else, etc. This might help students improve one skill at a time, rather than distract them with too much variety. “Less is more” may apply to pedagogy as much as it does elsewhere.

I am certain that other applications can emerge from this study, but the one that strikes me as most significant is philosophical. What I learned from teaching this course is that students need to think about their education and what it means to them. In the same way that they have to relate to the material, they have to relate to the process if it is going to mean anything at all. Too often, students undergo the rigors of the system blindly, doing it because they have to and giving it little consideration beyond where it will take them next. Although that is in part a survival mechanism, it can eventually deaden the experience entirely. By challenging students to think about their education (and there is nothing like unconventional pedagogy to achieve this), students are forced to reckon with the process they have committed themselves to. They have to think about their grades, and by extension about their education. It doesn't matter *how* we challenge our students, but the conclusion I have reached is that we simply have to. We have to find ways and venues to broach the discussion of their education; it can be a terrible wrestling match, but the outcome is inevitably a thoughtful one.

Too many students imprison themselves educationally. Our job is to encourage the opposite: to help them grow, to learn how to ask good questions, to understand “the box” and what is outside it. By simply asking them *why* they choose to sit on those hard plastic chairs

before us, *why* they pay their tuition fees and compete for their grades, we are serving them as educators in the truest sense of the term.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study is the product of the many insightful and challenging discussions that took place each time *Virtuous Bodies* was taught. My profound gratitude goes to the students of those classes most of all. I am also indebted to the Marianopolis College administration for encouraging and supporting this experiment, to Ruzbeh Tamjeedi for his research assistance, and to the “Program de Recherche et d’Expérimentation Pédagogiques” (PREP) of the ACPQ for its funding.

APPENDIX 2: LETTER OF ACCEPTANCE FROM JOURNAL

(see next page)

AAR
Journal of the
AMERICAN ACADEMY
of **RELIGION**

August 26, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

Greetings and I hope that you are well. I write to you as the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Published by Oxford University Press, the *JAAR* is the flagship journal for the study of religion, going out quarterly to some 10,000 members of the AAR and 3,000 institutional subscribers. We receive some 300 article submissions each year, and in any given year publish between 28 and 32 articles. This gives us an annual acceptance rate of 9 or 10%. To put it in the negative, we reject approximately 90% of the articles that we receive.

We follow a rigorous blind peer review process. When an article is submitted, it is first read "in house" at Loyola Marymount University. If it is deemed suitable for review, it is sent out to a minimum of two reviewers. We use a double-blind review process, in that the author does not know the name of the reviewer, and the reviewer does not know the name of the author. We need a minimum of two favourable external peer reviews before an article is accepted for publication. At that point, I work with the author to make sure that the reviewers' comments are addressed in the revision, and add any of my own editorial suggestions.

Next year, we are delighted to publish a roundtable on pedagogy that begins with Prof. Vanessa Sasson's article "Renunciation as Pedagogy". Her piece will be followed by 4 responses by Tina Pippin (Agnes Scott College), Kimberly Connor (University of San Francisco), Michel Desjardins and Yasaman S. Munro (Wilfrid Laurier University), and Ken Derry (University of Toronto). Prof. Sasson will conclude the roundtable with a rejoinder to these four responses. Please be in touch with me if you need any further information about Professor Sasson's contributions.

Sincerely yours,



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