


[▲ Home](#)
[◀ Contents](#)

Pedagogy of the Obsessed Shifting the Focus

by Elaine Correa

Abstract

This paper will concentrate on the current shift from teaching to entitlement learning that has become a significant part of our educational discourse and culture. With increasing emphasis on accountability and high test score), students have become active recipients in 'assessing' and 'evaluating' the effectiveness of their learning experiences. Increasingly, students appear to equate their academic expectations as 'educational purchases' in which their financial investments in higher learning should earn them profitable margins (opportunities) or estimated returns (high grades) by the end of their academic journey. This shift in thinking has created a "Pedagogy of the Obsessed".

"Pedagogy of the Obsessed?"

Shifting the Focus from Grade Entitlement to Learning

"I deserve an 'A' in this class. Why didn't you give me an 'A'?"

"What do I need to do to get an 'A' in this class?"

Within a 'consumer oriented approach to learning' the obsession with grade assessment for students, and the consequences of student performance in relation to evaluation for teachers, has created what I have come to refer to as 'pedagogy of the obsessed'. The interpretation of grades has impacted and redefined both the educational learning environment and the practice of teaching for students and faculty alike. To foster a paradigm shift from grade entitlement towards learning, both educators and students will need to challenge embedded structural practices, and deconstruct current perspectives that are associated with contemporary economic realities. However, for these changes to occur, an examination of the ways in which both students and teachers contribute to the 'pedagogy of the obsessed' must be clearly defined.

The interwoven and contentious 'consumer approach' to learning, and the 'performance/outcome based' format of teaching, has promoted through the 'commercialization' of education a service clientele mentality. Education in this framework operates as a 'product', which situates educators and students in a dynamic of 'sales representative' and 'customer'. In this corporate model, the financial currency of academic value is grades. The attention placed on grades then becomes critical for students as not only a measurement of academic success, but entitlement specifically related to 'cost values' associated with their education. Invariably, despite the emphasis on the importance of knowledge acquisition and application, the preoccupation with high grade assessment over competency or learning takes precedence, resulting in challenges that resonate with the question of "why I did not get an 'A'?"

Student and Teacher Concerns

Given today's economic realities, students acknowledge that their 'academic investment' must yield a solid education that is reflective of impressive scholastic achievement. As a consequence of this approach to learning, the priority on grade assessment surpasses concerns of competency or application. For many teachers, the scrutiny and heated debates over fulfilling course requirements associated with grade assessment, has forced the restructuring of course syllabus to serve as legally binding contractual agreements. In addition, many educators for their own protection have devised complex rubrics and grading schemes to justify grade evaluation. These responses may have initially quelled the protests of students challenging final assessments since the transparency provided with performance-outcome grids or points systems numerically justify final grades.

In an equally complicit manner, teachers also acknowledge the economic realities in which they are expected to perform and produce results. The impact of standardized tests coupled with student course evaluations reinforces the link and attention placed upon teacher accountability to student learning. For part time faculty, course evaluations may serve as official documentation for reappointment of employment. While full time faculty seeking tenure, the course evaluations may operate as 'evidence' of good teaching practices. In both cases, the reliance on student evaluations and performance may invoke a 'customer service' type mentality in the design and structure of courses. Under the 'satisfied consumer' approach, the development of pedagogy particularly in relation to assessment may be compromised. Furthermore, this model potentially positions course evaluations as complaint forms for dissatisfied 'clients' who can use this opportunity to express or vent their frustration about poor grade assessment.

For both teachers and students confronting the demands of the current educational learning environment there are a number of interrelated problems that continue to foster the 'pedagogy of the obsessed'. Within a culture of entitlement learning, some students may believe that by virtue of attendance and completion of course requirements, they are entitled to high grades. As a consequence of such expectations, teachers may resort to quantitative testing measures as reliable indicators of grade assessment in response to the demands of a competitive scholastic marketplace whereby grades hold a very high premium. For some students, these testing measures may be viewed akin to repetition and memorization exercises reminiscent of 'drill and test' or 'talk and chalk' methods associated with the traditional banking system of education (Freire, 1970). For these students, the 'banking system of education' may be temporarily accepted given the importance of achieving high grade assessment. For these students, the obsession with scholastic excellence may mean 'making the grade at any cost', -- even at the price of learning. The consequences of this type of thinking about assessment, may lead to questions regarding faculty's intellectual integrity in the

assessment process. Students may assume that what only counts as legitimate learning varies arbitrarily according to each professor. Furthermore, the implication of this way of thinking may lead to expectations of 'teaching to the test' which in turn may become the criteria that students use in defining effective teaching and learning. Within this approach to teaching and learning, faculty and students confronting the demands of the current educational environment have both contributed to and incited a 'pedagogy of, for and by the 'grade-obsessed'.

Student Voices and Teacher Expectations

For education to be a liberating experience, (Gandhi, 1960) students' voices should not only be part of the learning process but should also be integrated into the classroom in meaningful ways (Mirochnik & Sherman, 2000). In a culture of entitlement learning, the importance of assessment is integral to how learning is identified. Equally important, is the way non-traditional approaches are critiqued to ensure that learning does not become minimized to a marketplace commodity. Educators who present the evaluation criteria without discussion with learners, automatically reduce students to the role of passive recipients within their own learning experience, as defined in the 'banking tradition' (Freire, 1970). Within the discourse of participatory education, student voices must be accompanied with the acceptance of responsibility for their own learning. Likewise, educators must be willing to be challenged about grade assessment and course material as well as be prepared to negotiate alternatives. Rather than respond to questions of "Why didn't I get an 'A'?" or "Why didn't you give me an 'A'?", faculty must inculcate in students how to identify and define what constitutes quality work, as well as pursue the importance of learning for knowledge acquisition rather than solely for a grade.

Students should feel empowered to speak in class and raise important questions about grading to the teacher. In the same vein, teachers should be expected to challenge student responses, and anticipate student responsibility and ownership for their learning. The opportunity to negotiate course expectations or grading requirements must materialize in a respectful manner with an understanding of good will on the part of all participants. Thus the empowerment of students through challenges to the curriculum should be germane to the content of the course, and not an opportunity for students to reduce the workload or diminish the requirements. It is important to recognize the structure of a business type model of education where the 'customer' (a student) can exercise his/her right but must not infringe upon the rights of the other 'customers' or 'representatives/agents' (educators) of the corporation. The rights of all parties must be recognized and respected.

The design and acceptance of a student authorization form in relation to the course requirements may assist in creating a space of mutual respect and good will within the classroom. Students can actively define and identify their expectations while creating and establishing 'rules' of merit for their own success. The anticipation of high grade evaluation within this framework shifts learning and grade

association from one of entitlement towards earned assessment. The power to exercise some control over the process as well as unmask the 'hidden agenda' associated with the power differential between teacher and students, may assist in demystifying the grading process. Furthermore, the opportunity to identify distinctions for students between their submissions of required work compared to the degree and differentiation of excellence in the assessment of scholarship may assist students in reflecting critically about their grade expectations.

Educators must also be vigilant in avoiding the seduction of operating as a 'customer service' department (Correa & Centrie, 2006) in order to construct positive feedback from students in their course evaluations. Although the consumer saturated marketplace may foster a 'competitive' servicing department throughout the university, curricular demands should not be sacrificed. The modeling of appropriate academic conduct begins with the educator. Hence reverting to a 'pedagogy of the grade obsessed' may initially offer less anxiety in dealing with student demands, however, the standard and implications of such an approach may eventually dilute the process of learning to one of economic exchange. Despite the evident problems that arise with the contemporary corporate type model, the merit and value of knowledge remains as valuable currency in relation to grade assessment. Thus, the emphasis on grade assessment should focus primarily upon the integration and practical application of knowledge rather than the 'consumption of information' as related to the acquisition of a product. In this way, the shift from grade entitlement to learning can emerge through the use of critical thinking skills and problem solving exercises which demonstrate comprehension and understanding. Student's who can reflect on what they have learned by means of application, can also acknowledge the differences between deep integrated learning compared to general levels of information retention. For this shift in teaching and learning to occur, both students and teachers must be prepared to think differently about the process of teaching and learning as well as the related outcomes.

Deconstructing Power Relations

Issues of empowerment are often cited by students as one of the most beneficial aspects in discussion about assessment criteria. Students can take responsibility for their own success and/or failure when their role shifts from a 'passive recipient' to an 'active participant' in their own learning. Although some students may embrace the opportunity to articulate their feelings when negotiating evaluation requirements, there are other students who may feel uneasy with the instant sense of power and responsibility that such class exercises may invoke within the classroom. The safety of the traditional classroom structure may provide a haven for those students who are timid or shy, and thus reluctant to actively voice their concerns in a large classroom setting. Working in small groups may provide comfort and thereby facilitate the needs of quiet students who may be struggling or less inclined to speak. The benefits of small group exercises with a designated speaker, or a written group response, may alleviate the anxiety of speaking aloud in class for

those students who are uncomfortable with challenging the traditional classroom structure.

Co-operative exercises of documenting assessment criteria and creating a subsequent rating scale is another avenue which can help to lead students to experience a sense of accountability for their own scholarship whilst simultaneously challenging power differentials within the classroom. The level of superior academic achievement that would merit high grade assessment should be articulated by students in discussion groups which would culminate in identifying a transparent tool for achieving academic success. All class members would be expected to self-reflect upon their own accomplishments in meeting the standards devised by the class. Under this approach, students would be able to recognize whether they reached the levels of high grade assessment as determined by their own criteria. In this collaborative activity, students are able to define expectations and assert some power in the assessment process.

There are many ways in which educators and students can challenge the contemporary 'consumer-oriented' model of academic exchange. Active dialogue and accountability are among the few alternatives that will force advocates of change to move beyond the current paradigm of education as commercialized 'product'. The impact of redefining classroom practices and expectations can assist in the transformative process of knowledge acquisition (hooks, 1994) over grade assessment. The contradictory messages embedded in a consumer-oriented culture that promote and enforces a culture of entitlement, can be deconstructed in the classroom to reflect the possibilities of change. However, educators must be prepared to critically reflect on their own contributions (Shor, 1992) in fostering 'a pedagogy of the obsessed', and actively work towards promoting critical thinking through intellectual integrity in the practice of teaching.

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◀ Contents

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