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To Speak or Not to Speak: That is the Question

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In the best of all academic worlds, the phrase "grading in honors" is an oxymoron. According to many and various sources, the gifted college student is more of a perfectionist with higher educational aspirations than non-honors students. She tends to be more autonomous, self-aware, and willing to engage in discourse than non-honors students. We know that she comes to us with higher academic credentials than non-honors students and that she is, therefore, more poised for success. How, then, do we assess the creative, energetic, enthusiastic, impassioned work we expect from such students? Should we be required to do so?

In the best of all academic worlds, students sit at the feet of wise and experienced professors and gather knowledge until they feel they have achieved the measure of education to which they aspire. Such students determine the parameters of their own learning and, thus, their saturation point. They maintain their own quality control so that their efforts reflect their personal best. In an age of big-business education and rising credentialism, however, this model is impractical and unmanageable. More's the pity.

Legislators, academic officers, registrars, department chairs, parents, and students create a formidable parade of constituents clamoring for grades, evaluations, and hard assessment data. How do we know if teaching is successful if we cannot provide the evidence of high marks for our most excellent students? With some apprehension, more of us may find ourselves, like Harvard, reviewing grade inflation and adjusting our sights.

As Larry Andrews postulates, undergraduate honors programs, not unlike many other social institutions, are forced to play the numbers game. Obviously, a number of games are involved: assessing the program itself, assessing the classroom instructor and content, and assessing student learning and outcomes. The assessment of student learning is the focus of this discussion, with guidance from the second of Andrews' two major values: "the noble honors pedagogical advising tradition of investing in the individual student." Numbers games have an obvious impact on retention and program development but are more far reaching in terms of personal student outcomes,

a product we market as characteristic of honors programs. Andrews delivers one solution in the form of creative assessment of honors students' work.

With interest in this creativity and a desire to be true to our honors tradition and institutional philosophy, I surveyed our honors students. I asked them to share their ideas about the necessity of assessing their work, the best method for assessment, and their preferred method of assessment. Roughly a third of our students (n=36) responded to my request for information. Of these, twenty-four were in their second semester of their first college year, ten were second-year students, and two were third-year. Perhaps because this group was composed mostly of first-year students, there was a clearly expressed desire for evaluation. When asked to comment on "how important you feel an assessment of your work is to your education and intellectual progress," representative comments were:

- The assessment of my work is often as important as actually doing the work. It's essential.
- I believe that assessment from instructors helps me, as a student, to hone my work. Advice from a professional helps me make wise choices.
- I believe evaluation and constructive criticism provide opportunities for growth and mastery in most of my courses.

A third-year student affirmed Andrews' understanding of assessment as a motivator for student learning and growth:

- I do think it is important because assessment is the motivation to do it well. If you always studied and did work but no one assessed it, there wouldn't be as much satisfaction or motivation.

I am an eternal seeker for an answer to the proverbial question "What is an honors course?" I was interested, therefore, in specific student preferences with regard to assessing their honors work. When asked what method *best assesses* the quality of their honors work, 57% of students responded that class discussion is the best method, followed by a distant 20% with written research papers, and 17% with tests and quizzes. Only 6% reported that oral projects and presentations provide the best assessment of honors work. When asked what method they *prefer* for assessing their honors work, 60% answered class discussion, 14% tests and quizzes, 12% each written research papers and oral projects and/or presentations, and 2% (one lonely student) online threaded discussion. An overwhelming 86% preferred that the instructor evaluate their work as opposed to self (8%) or peers (6%), and 94% felt that the evaluation of their honors work was reflective of their

effort and study. This last number was very affirming but problematic when coupled with their preference for class discussion as a method of evaluation. The students seemed to think that our class discussion was the best focus of assessment.

What determines an honors course in the eyes of students, then, is our reliance on class discussion as a pedagogical and assessment tool. When breaking down the data, the first-year students felt most strongly about class discussion, perhaps because stimulating conversation is what they imagined when they contemplated honors work at the college level; fewer tests and papers than they produced in high school and more extensive reliance on their ability to express and share their ideas seemed prominent in their view of the college honors experience. I suspect, however, that few instructors are adept at conducting academic discussion and fewer are adept at using these discussions to assess student work and study.

Since numbers matter, the appropriate evaluation of students is a critical element of honors education. The comments of these students validate their expectation of excellence from us in assessing their work. I propose that we look toward establishing a community for dialogue within our classes that reflects the Yeshiva tradition or Socratic method, where students not only share their own ideas but back them up with those of important scholars and thinkers. Because these traditions are based in one-on-one dialogue, they would require adjustment to a classroom context but could serve as models for intellectual discussion.

In evaluating such discussions, professors remain responsible for keeping them focused and intellectually substantive. It is necessary to generate critical thinking with probing questions and periodically to summarize the discussion, eliciting further comment. In 1998, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory released four criteria that may be helpful in establishing assessment tools for class discussion (http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/pdfRubrics/groupassess.pdf). Their first criterion is verbal effectiveness or the use of language and expression in developing and presenting ideas. The second criterion is nonverbal effectiveness or the ability of the student to convey and support his or her message with nonverbal cues. The third criterion is appropriateness of both the language and message of the speaker. Are his or her ideas organized for the setting and audience, and is he or she respectful of other participants? The fourth criterion is responsiveness or the ability of the student to demonstrate active listening and modify his or her responses based on verbal and nonverbal cues. These criteria are not unlike those used for written assessment but require attention and astute skill when applied to verbal exchanges. I would add a fifth criterion: providing valid

external sources in intellectual exchange. Too often, class discussions devolve into "I think" or "I feel" types of exchanges, with little academic or intellectual stretching and even less integration of the ideas of others into the conversation.

While assessing student work is an ongoing challenge for honors programs and instructors, honing numerical measures for evaluation is critical for honest exchange between students and professors with regard to expectations and outcomes. Relying on evidence such as tests, written papers, and oral projects is relatively easy for a number of assessment tasks, but incorporating quantitative evaluation of class discussion is much more intricate than simply allowing a portion of grading for participation. Because we advertise enlightened discussion as part of an honors experience, it is incumbent on us to further our ability to incorporate objective assessment of discussion as an integral part of the honors classroom.

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