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# Practicing What We Preach: Risk-Taking and Failure as a Joint Endeavor

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**Abstract:** Faculty and administrators often present risk-taking as something honors students must do, but rarely do they take risks themselves. In an ideal situation, communal risk-taking would subvert institutional power dynamics, free students from grade-associated anxiety, and enable them to build dynamic partnerships with faculty. This paper discusses how one honors college piloted self-grading in the second semester of its first-year seminar as a mechanism of liberatory learning for both faculty and students. While self-grading was originally intended to provide increased freedom for risk-taking, in truth it led to increased anxiety in students and high levels of frustration for faculty. This pilot program demonstrated the underlying flaws in the concept of risk-taking and ultimately failed. Although faculty may have good intentions, simply removing grades does not remove internalized, perceived judgment. Real risk-taking requires all parties to participate with enthusiasm and to adapt when necessary in order to be successful. While self-grading did not accomplish its original aims, the process demonstrated previously underappreciated underlying cultural tensions that fundamentally affect student and faculty freedom and risk-taking, displaying how deeply entrenched the social mores are for honors faculty and students, as well as how much work is left to encourage risk-taking by both groups.

**Keywords:** honors education; self-grading; liberatory learning; anxiety; Westminster College (Salt Lake City, UT)

When academics engage in conversations about risk, we tend exclusively to enjoin our students to leap into the unknown. We decry the system that makes them risk-averse, that leaves them status-conscious and grade-driven, and we make judgments about the necessity of risk-taking and the need for students to accept the process as we define it. This one-sided

risk-taking perpetuates preexisting norms of top-down pedagogy by portraying the faculty member as driver and the students as hard-working passengers who, through commitment to reaching goals we have set, will be transformed. While Cognard-Black mentions the honors course wherein everyone begins with an A and can maintain it through rigorous attention to structures, this arrangement still puts the onus of risk-taking solely on the student. The faculty risk nothing simply by reframing their grading as a maintenance strategy rather than an earning framework. The issue, then, is to devise a means whereby we alter the student-teacher relationship in the honors classroom so that both parties have a shared role in the risk-taking enterprise. Only then will the honors classroom be a truly shared learning environment.

bell hooks's discussion of the need for liberatory learning and Adrienne Rich's discussion of claiming your own education exhort students to be bigger than status, to move beyond the confines of our constructed systems and to build worlds that are bolder and fully their own. Impeding that project, though, is the reality that our students are socially constructed beings for whom metrics are previously inscribed and for whom risk-taking is culturally bound. The same holds true for honors faculty and administrators. As Vicki A. Reitenauer notes, faculty wield institutional power via grading and thus can subconsciously maintain the status quo (61). This power differential led to Reitenauer's move to self-grading as a mechanism that "requires each of us individually to assume a different set of responsibilities and a set of strategies for becoming accountable to ourselves and each other" (61). Within this framework, faculty and students are risk-takers together, attempting to deconstruct the external power structures and join in bold collaborative ways to move out of our individual snug cocoons.

## THE SELF-GRADING PILOT

In order to engage in the risk-taking advocated by hooks, Rich, and Reitenauer, the Westminster Honors College piloted a self-grading scheme in the spring 2018 first-year seminar, in which all sections were team-taught. The pilot was designed not only to help honors students achieve greater self-awareness regarding the quality of their work and to improve their assessment skills but also to reduce anxiety around grades by subverting traditional faculty and student roles, disrupting the institutional power differential. We hoped that by providing an environment in which students were arbiters of their own success rather than dependent on outside evaluation, they would feel freer to take risks in their writing, in the classroom, and even as

members of the broader Westminster community. Likewise, we believed that by removing the punitive aspect of grades from the faculty-student relationship, stronger bonds would be forged between first-year students and faculty potentially leading to future advising and mentorship opportunities. As a team, we hoped that taking risks in these ways would produce myriad other benefits inside and outside the classroom for all parties involved.

Demonstrating the level of collaborative risk-taking necessary, all faculty pairs for the course agreed to participate and set the parameters for the pilot as a collective. The structure of the course and its assignments would not change; students would still write eight short and two long essays (also known as Short Form and Long Form Prompts), participate in a comprehensive conversation (the final face-to-face assessment exercise), and receive a participation grade. They would also still submit a midterm short form prompt portfolio and a participation self-assessment that would produce non-binding grades that later would be replaced by the end-of-semester final portfolio and final participation assessment. The faculty then proceeded to develop a list of shared agreements that would serve as the methodology for self-grading.

The faculty teams agreed to the following terms at the outset:

1. Faculty would have shared rubrics for all assignments.
2. Students would be the lone arbiters of their grades; faculty would not change any grades.
3. Students would submit their self-grades with their work.
4. Faculty pairs would meet to give “shadow” grades to students on assignments. Halfway through the semester faculty pairs would meet with each student to talk through each “shadow” grade and how they aligned or did not align with the student’s self-assessment.
5. Faculty would keep track of both student-assigned and faculty-assigned grades.

However, the actual practice of self-grading varied quite a bit across sections as faculty pairs altered the proposed structure to fit their own teaching preferences, so the practical methodology shifted substantially from the original agreements. For example, when students turned in their first long essay, they also submitted their self-evaluation/grade. However, faculty noticed hurried self-grading in the classroom right before submission, thereby undermining the goal of self-assessment as self-reflection. Students also voiced concern

that the way they felt about their writing at submission was not an accurate reflection of their actual product but rather a reflection of their feelings about their process. In other words, immediately upon completion it was difficult to move some students off the position that hard work should be rewarded with an A no matter the quality of the final product. However, upon rereading their prompt the following week, students were able to more objectively evaluate their work as an independent product and expressed the desire to change their self-assigned grades. Therefore, having observed this issue with the first Long Form Prompt, one faculty pair shifted self-assessment submission to one week after the second long essay submission, with daily reminders to students not to complete the self-assessment until the night before the week was up. The goal was to help students take the time to gain emotional distance, reread their work, and acquire a more objective view of their final product. Another faculty pair went even further in changing the agreed-upon methodology. Based on studies showing that lower-achieving students over-estimate their skill and thus may grade themselves more generously while higher-achieving students underestimate their skill and may grade themselves more harshly (Boud and Falchikov 541), the instructors decided that they would maintain the model of student self-assessment and faculty “shadow” grades; but to offset students’ tendency to underestimate their own work, these faculty reserved the right to assign their own higher grades in lieu of lower grades assigned by the students. They did not lower any student’s grade, but they also did not track “shadow grades” and so the “shadow grades” could not be used for quantitative comparison.

## PRELIMINARY PILOT RESULTS

Three sets of data were evaluated at the end of the semester (student self-assessed grades, “shadow” grades, and a qualitative survey). The first indicated relative consistency across sections within each gender group’s self-grading. The thirteen male-identifying students viewed themselves and their work as sitting somewhere in the B to B+ range while the thirty-two female-identifying students saw their work uniformly at an A- level. However, when the student-assigned grades and faculty “shadow” grades were compared for the second metric, the sections saw significantly more variability. On average across sections, male-identifying students graded themselves higher than faculty by 5.9% while female-identifying students graded themselves above faculty by 6.3%. The data would appear to contradict findings about female and male self-valuation (see Haynes and Heilman 956–69). However, within

the data set the difference between faculty and self-grading among male-identifying students per section sits between 5.2 and 6.3% while there is substantively more variability among the female-identifying students, ranging from 1.7% to 11.4%. This difference may indicate that other factors were at work in the sections that influenced the female students' self-assessment. In addition, one faculty pair—in the section that moved self-assessment to a week after Long Form Prompt submission—noted that after frank midterm conversations with students, in keeping with the original project's methodology, both male- and female-identifying students' self-assessed grades shifted and came more in line with faculty grades. This shift was particularly evident for female-identifying students, whose self-grades and faculty grades were only 1.7% apart.

For the third factor evaluated, in addition to tracking grades faculty pairs were asked to provide students with the usual forms for qualitative feedback on the entire course with an added question specifically devoted to self-grading. Unlike the quantitative data, the feedback forms were anonymous, so differentiation by stated gender was not feasible. However, like the quantitative data, this data set was also not complete. Two sections did not keep these forms, so their responses could not be evaluated; nonetheless, those sections that did retain them demonstrated some consistent themes. First, the responses were bimodal in nature: students responded that they loved or hated the exercise with roughly equal numbers on each side. Second, the students who enjoyed the project stated routinely that they felt it removed the pressure associated with grades, in keeping with Reitenauer's claims (61), and forced them to take greater ownership of their work product. Those who disliked the experiment stated overwhelmingly that it increased their focus on their grades and raised their anxiety about grading as they felt they "had to hit a magic number" that the professors had in mind. In addition, numerous students expressed feelings of guilt and anxiety that they would be viewed negatively by faculty if they did not give themselves the faculty's chosen grade, and in two sections faculty reported negative associations with students they felt had "over-graded" themselves, one going so far as no longer desiring to write letters of reference for certain students who had not lived up to the imagined responsibilities of the experiment.

## CONCLUSIONS

Genuine risk-taking at its heart poses the possibility of failure, and in this case the risks taken by students and faculty with self-grading led to a failed

endeavor. While the intent of self-grading was to liberate students from a focus on grades as an arbiter of worth and to encourage risk-taking and owning their work product, the results were mixed. Many students remained overly concerned with their grades and still saw faculty as the ultimate arbiter of their work's value, demonstrating that the self-grading pilot ultimately failed to achieve the desired goals. The perceptual differences between students and faculty led to two issues raised by both groups. First, both felt that second-semester first-year students are incapable of accurately assessing their work product—even when using a detailed and prescriptive rubric—due to their limited experience and ability in writing at a level expected of college/university students. Second, students and faculty recognized that significant differences between student self-assessed grades and faculty-given grades caused interpersonal conflict. Because in all but one section the faculty stuck to the decision not to alter student grades, both students and faculty were frustrated as there was no way to balance the scales. Students wound up essentially penalized for under-grading and rewarded for over-grading themselves on their transcripts, which led to tension between faculty and certain students or, in one case, a faculty pair and an entire class.

Finally, there seemed to be a direct correlation between the initial enthusiasm of the faculty pair for the project and reported student satisfaction at the end of the pilot. In the section that had the highest faculty enthusiasm, though the least reported data, faculty and students anecdotally remained extremely positive toward self-grading at its conclusion although this section also chose to raise the grades of students as faculty thought necessary and did not track student and faculty scoring. In this section, students and faculty may have appreciated the appearance of taking risks but without risking much, if anything. The two sections in which at least one faculty member was extremely ambivalent about the project had the highest difference between student self-grades and faculty-given grades as well as the strongest sentiment against the experiment in qualitative responses. The section in which faculty were relatively neutral to the project at the outset and willing to make minor adjustments at midterm, had the highest student-stated satisfaction and the narrowest difference between faculty and student grades even though faculty remained neutral at the end; this pair wanted to make structural changes should they agree to undertake self-grading again, perhaps reiterating the desire to take small, incremental risks rather than make bold sweeping changes. These differences across sections seem to indicate that faculty perception of the self-grading pilot may have influenced messaging in the

classroom, discussion in student meetings, and willingness to adapt, thereby influencing the results.

The failure of the honors college's self-grading pilot project demonstrates that risk-taking is a multi-party process that is deeply connected to the psychology and socialization of both students and faculty. Whether through ambivalence/antipathy by individual faculty toward loss of control or fear of a poor grade from students planning to attend medical school, risk-taking demands that we all leap into the unknown together with a willingness to adapt. The sections that saw relative success with self-grading were those that embraced the process as a joint endeavor where risk-taking and world-building exist in a collaborative space where all parties "go through a necessarily painful period of self-analyzing, of reexamining values, of questioning the safe and easy" (Robertson 64), where the onus is not solely on students but where failure is a potential outcome for both faculty and students. Risk exists when we as educators see our best-laid plans explode and/or blossom, when our students take ownership of their education, or not, and when we all accept the consequences of our actions, even if that means a collective sigh of frustration.

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