Exam grading—a worthwhile exercise

Exams remain legitimate as a way to assess students despite emphasis on holistic education

By Tan Seow Hon

There is a Peanuts comic strip in which one of the youngest characters, Peppermint Patty, tries to make Snoopy play ball with him. He runs through the instructions but Snoopy tells him that he can do so a thousand times and Snoopy will still not play his game. Peppermint Patty muses that perhaps it is just a matter of explaining but Snoopy retorts that even if Peppermint Patty explains a thousand times, Snoopy will not do it, Peppermint Patty gives up, concluding that Snoopy is a “flying dog.”

Frivolous as it seems, it is an apt picture of the reciprocal nature of education. Even the limits of the boundlessly enthusiastic teacher (if she exists) are reached in the humility, willingness to learn, diligence and ability of the student.

In a society obsessed with grades, we seem to have suddenly realised the importance of a balanced and holistic education. But we must be careful not to swing to the extreme of altogether discarding standards of academic excellence in our revulsion against those teachers and institutions which we perceive as having cabbed our abilities through their harsh criticisms and one-sided emphases in the past. In our enlightened desire to encourage young ones to excel in the different manner they are gifted, we must not altogether forsake a legitimate assessment of their school work.

It is true that “examinations are not everything” and we have rightly been moving away from the state of things where the esteem and identity of our young people are inextricably bound up with their grades. Such a state hinders the development as persons of those who do not excel academically, and even of those who are late bloomers.

But in our emphasis on holistic development, we must be careful not to discount the relevance of examinations and grading and regard them as arbitrary or a meaningless indicator of competence of students.

In an oft-cited article on legal education, Harvard don Duncan Kennedy thought: “Students generally experience...grades as almost arbitrary...unrelated to how much you worked, how much you like the subject, how much you thought you understood going into the exam, and what you thought about the class and the teacher.”

If Mr Kennedy’s words are a critique of the unavailability of detailed feedback in grading for major examinations, they are understandable. If they are a commentary of a deeper subjectivity in the grading process, such a view in fact hampers a drive to improve, because if all standards of grading (as least of essay-type examinations) are arbitrary, the student has little incentive to work harder.

Apart from hampering effort, Mr Kennedy’s words are also inaccurate as the relative standing of students in terms of their grasp of materials at that point in time is often well-indicated in the examination scripts. The key in conveying this without demoralising the students lies in helping them understand their potential is not always fully realised and exhausted by the time of the examinations, although assessment must take place at some point in time.

Sometimes the students themselves know this. They know that they were having a bad day during the examination, or that they had not put in any effort or as much effort as their classmates, or that they failed to understand the key points. Or sometimes they know they are simply indifferent about their work, or that some past discouragement is hindering them.

Taking pains to bring students through their work and correcting them can in fact help them dissociate their esteem from their grades, because they will hopefully see where they can improve. Correction makes for a meaningful, not destructive, education process. In this sense, there is nothing “final” about the final examination.

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Much as I find that students these days seem relatively more talented in different areas than their counterparts a decade ago, one wonders if they have truly come to a stage where their esteem is not tied to their academic achievements. Or else they sway to the extreme of caring too little.

Several factors of the grading process are worth mentioning, to show that the deficiencies and pains of the process are not necessary. Instead, there are many benefits to be reaped by the concerted efforts of educators and students.

When offered feedback about their performance in continual assessment, not all students take such comments seriously or view them as opportunities to realise how they could improve. Only a few take up offers of consultation with the teacher, though perhaps this might be the fault of some teachers who have been unapproachable and critical. Even the most approachable teachers have unproductive students, however, who see the examination as the end-all and are not interested in learning.

While intuitively it seems sensible to borrow the better scripts of their classmates to see how a good script looks, sadly, not everyone does this, perhaps because of the “face” factor or because they do not want to see where they are lacking.

In the end, what might betray what remains an undue concern with grades is the tendency to speak openly of how much one likes a subject or to consider further pursuits in the area only when one does well in exams for that subject.

So is one’s performance in exams a persistent spectre that hangs over the esteem of the Singaporean student? Are exams to remain a necessary evil?

Perhaps a holistic emphasis in education only goes so far. As long as assessment and competition in any field remain a good motivating factor for us to acquire a level of competence, perhaps the benefits are reaped only through the joint effort of the teacher and the student. The former in emphasising the importance of feedback and helping the student improve — or he does not merely prepare the student for an examination; the latter through a changed perspective that examinations are not the end-all or final indicator of ability, but a partial guidepost to facilitate a larger, ongoing learning process, which requires her own passion and effort.

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