

Do Grades Matter? A Case Study of the Effects of Grade Neutrality on Adult Learners



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Abstract

Graduate students have been conditioned by 16 years of formal schooling to expect a grade for their work. What happens to student learning when the threat or reward of earning a grade is removed? The theory and practice of adult education is situated to emancipate learners from external rewards so that lifelong learning can become a habit. One goal of the study was to reinforce this lesson in a dramatic and concrete way by creating a condition of grade neutrality (awarding all students an A grade regardless of future behavior) in a graduate-level adult education course at a Midwestern land-grant university. Students benefited from the experience by becoming aware of the role grades have played in shaping their learning behaviors. However, the majority of the students adopted surface learning strategies (Marton and Säljö, 1976) as they completed from 11% to 64% of the recommended assignments. Three of eleven students adopted deep learning strategies by maximizing opportunities for self-directed learning. Traditional courses should continue the practice of awarding grades as more than one grade-neutral course experience is required to change the well-established habits of extrinsically motivated students and instructors should provide a variety of grade-based feedback to students.

Introduction

Every teacher has asked the question: what impact do grades have on learning? Value laden and tied to emotion, the grading of students is never a neutral event. Grade point averages (GPA) are used almost monolithically to determine the course of a child's educational life. A child learns early in his or her schooling experiences that grades are important; thus, (s)he develops strategies to earn high marks at the cost of authentic learning (Crooks, 1988).

In an ideal world, adult educators separate themselves from pedagogical practitioners by using unique educational approaches to drive student-centered learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Thus, adult students are coached into lifelong learning habits, including self-regulation for deep learning (Boekaerts et al., 2000). Research has documented; however, that rewarding intrinsically motivated behavior with a letter grade will convert that behavior to the less desirable extrinsically rewarded type (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In practice,

tertiary educators are required at the end of each term to assign their students a letter grade, serving to undermine much of what educational scholars have learned in regard to creating a learning environment that is conducive to deep learning. Therein lays the tension that inspired this case study.

Set in the context of a Midwestern land-grant university, the researcher adopted a qualitative case study approach to investigate what would happen to adult students' motivation, study behavior, and learning outcomes if the external reward of a letter grade was removed by guaranteeing all students an A grade on the first day of class regardless of future behavior or performance, hereafter referred to as grade neutrality. The objectives of the study were to document students' 1) attendance and participation in class discussions, 2) motivation for completing course assignments, and 3) learning outcomes.

Kohn (1999, p. 3) discussed three consistent effects of using grades on student learning. Grades can reduce students' interest in learning, preference for challenging tasks, and the quality of student's thinking. Kohn reported that grades sully the learning environment and "are not valid, reliable, or objective" measures of learning. Kohn's solution to grading is authentic assessment that provides feedback to students for improvement.

Vickers (2000, p. 142) reported that GPAs "fail to distinguish easy from difficult courses," causing students to avoid difficult courses to maximize their GPA. Also, GPAs fail to distinguish between rigor, course load, and skills learned by students. Vickers concluded that "our current (grade averaging) practices yield neither justice nor truth" in regard to student performance (p. 161). Therefore, "educators should cease to use and calculate GPAs" (p. 160), for the weight society places on students' GPA is unjustified.

In synthesizing the literature on the effects of grading on lifelong learning behaviors, Ramsey, et al. (2002) reported that in some instances the use of grades contributed to student avoidance of learning by cheating, attending classes only when grades were at stake, taking easy courses, engaging in projects that had a low risk of failure (i.e. unchallenging), and ignoring feedback on assignments when the grade was most important. The authors suggested self-assessment as part of the solution to building lifelong learning habits.

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Pioneering research by Marton and Säljö (1976) uncovered two distinctly different types of learning strategies: deep and surface. Deep learners focused on what to learn versus surface learners who focused on how much to learn. Surface learners focused on the signs (p. 7), the exact text, or correct formula, and engaged in rote memorization; whereas, deep learners focused on what was signified and directed their study time toward grasping what the author wanted to say about a problem.

Ryan and Deci (2000) reframed and updated the intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation construct by explaining that extrinsic motivational forces can be used by educators to help students learn tasks that are not interesting, but necessary. Ryan and Deci discussed extrinsic motivational forces as active and volitional (identification and integration) versus passive and controlling (external regulation and introjection). Extrinsic motivation was presented as having four sub-variables on a continuum from external regulation (the behavior only exists in the presence of rewards or punishments) to integration (the behavior is consistent with personal goals). They advised educators to facilitate self-determined learning that allows students to “feel connected, effective, and agentic as one is exposed to new ideas and exercises new skills” (p. 65). In order to stimulate intrinsic motivation, educators should provide feedback that optimally challenges students and increases their sense of self-efficacy. Helping students to become competent and autonomous are critical for life-long learning habits.

In summary, the literature advises educators to avoid grading students, and in its place, to support student learning through feedback that encourages self-determined learning. In formal classrooms, student motivation to learn was strongly related to how students were evaluated. Recall of content was also related to strategies students used for study. Based on the observed student behaviors of the subjects of the current case study (grounded-theory approach to theory selection and fit) the author chose Marton and Säljö’s (1976) deep versus surface learning theory and Ryan and Deci (2000) concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as the explanatory function for understanding the findings and drawing conclusion for the study.

Methods

A qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998) was used to collect and analyze the data. Case study is appropriate for situational and exploratory research because this method allows researchers to seek meaning in addition to description. The case was nested in a graduate level course in adult education. Thirteen students were enrolled in the course; 11 agreed to participate in the study after permission was granted for the study from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB# AG059). The two

students whose data were not included in the study were treated exactly the same as the 11 participants, the only difference being that they failed to appear for the interview at the conclusion of the semester.

The course was delivered in the same manner as a graded course would have been. Students were given a syllabus including a variety of assignments to complete and suggested due dates. The instructor coached the students on what was expected for each assignment and the level of quality expected. If students handed in an assignment non grade-based feedback was provided but the assignment was not graded. Time was set aside during the course for students’ presentations to reinforce the notion that students were expected to complete course requirements even if they were not graded.

Data were collected between August 23 and December 13, 2004 and consisted of 1) observations during class (immediately after class the instructor wrote detailed notes of each student’s behavior and comments made during class); 2) document analysis of all written student work (written assignments were photocopied and archived by the instructor to assess deep versus surface learning [Marton and Säljö, 1976]); and 3) long interviews at the conclusion of the semester. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and were tape recorded for verbatim accuracy. Probing questions were used to collect rich, thick descriptions of the participants’ motivation and learning experiences. The interviews specifically focused on students’ motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) to complete course assignments and participate in class (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The interview protocol asked for students’ demographic profile, questioned students on their motivation for attending and participating in class and completing course assignments, their perceived learning outcomes, and summary statements such as “what impact did grade neutrality have on your overall attitude toward this class? If you had it to do over again, would you prefer a traditional approach to grading or would you like future classes to be grade neutral? What would you tell your best friend about this course?”

The interview transcripts were emailed back to participants for cleaning and verification of statements. Participants were invited to edit their transcripts to more accurately reflect their opinions and perceptions. The transcripts were then loaded into a software program, ATLAS/ti® (Scientific Software Development, 1997) for analysis.

The data were organized, categorized (a process known as coding and memoing), and synthesized to surface themes and patterns for drawing conclusions. Qualitative research is interpretative and naturalistic and requires the analyst to code the interview transcripts by organizing like statements together and then draw a conclusion based on the clusters of like statements. The goal of qualitative analysis is not to generalize to the greater population but rather to

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draw a portrait of participant's experiences and to develop a composite individual (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998).

To protect participants' identity, pseudonyms were used. Direct quotes were included in the text to authenticate researcher claims and are referenced by numbers in parenthesis, for example (102:122) that reflect the location of the quote in the original transcript for audit purposes.

Results and Discussion

The average age of the students was 26 years. There were five women and six men. Three of the students were married, but only one had children. The students worked an average of 35 hours per week. The students were enrolled in an average of five credit hours during the semester, including this course. Students were currently working as, or aspired to become, high school agricultural education teachers, Cooperative Extension Service employees, National Resource Conservation Service employees, or a college administrator.

Students were asked if any of the demographic variables interfered with their ability to learn in this course. Seven students said no and four reported that job demands took priority over course assignments, especially under the condition of grade neutrality.

Student Attendance and Participation in Class Discussion

None of the students had perfect attendance. The class met 13 times. Frank, Paul, and Will attended nine sessions. John attended ten sessions. Beth, Eric, and Sarah attended 11 sessions. Emma, Heather, Karen, and Larry attended 12 of the 13 sessions. Class discussion and participation were rated by the instructor as very engaged (2), engaged (1), not engaged (0), or absent (A) depending on the level of interaction of student participation. Very engaged indicated that the student appeared to have read most of the text and was actively participating in class discussions and activities. Engaged indicated that the student had read some of the material but was

participating at a lower level than those who were considered very engaged. Not engaged indicated those students who did not participate in the class discussions or appeared to have read materials or prepared assignments. A indicates the student was absent. For calculating the mean, absences were recorded as zero (Table 1).

Larry was the most engaged student, followed by Karen, Beth, and Eric. They consistently attended class, were the most prepared with relevant discussion questions, and completed more assignments than their peers. The least-engaged students were Paul and Will.

During the interviews, students were asked what impact grade neutrality had on their attendance. For 10 of the 11 students, grade neutrality had no impact on their decision to attend class. They enjoyed the class discussions and the comfortable learning environment. Beth admitted she missed two classes because "I knew I could slack off." Eric, Heather, John, Karen, and Paul came to class because they paid for it, and to learn as much as possible. Frank, John, Paul, and Will missed three to four sessions due to work conflicts and illness, but said the absences could not have been avoided even in a graded course. Larry missed one class due to car trouble. He said class was "an opportunity to relax and develop my mind...I always felt like I had something important to say that would actually be heard by my peers, heard by the professor, and then I would take away some knowledge from here...and that was just very important so that motivated me."

For the majority of students, grade neutrality had little impact on their desire to participate in class discussion and many students followed preexisting patterns of classroom behavior (Beth, Emma, Frank, Heather, John, Karen, Larry, Sarah, Paul, and Will). In two cases, grade neutrality encouraged more discussion as Eric and Will were not afraid of having their grades effected by vengeful instructors. However, preparation for discussion was often wanting. Most students reported they read the assigned text, but did not prepare a discussion question or complete the vocabulary and praxis assignments after the

fourth week of class. Much of the discussion was opinion-based and did not make reference to the assigned readings.

Beth said "I'm an outspoken person...I just like to speak my opinion" (121:127). But she knew she could slack in this class because the grade was already given (137:143). Eric enjoyed participating in discussion because he felt free

Table 1. Student Participation in Course Meetings and Engagement Scores

Date and Name	8-30	9-13	9-20	9-27	10-4	10-11	10-18	11-1	11-8	11-15	11-22	11-29	12-6	Total	Mean Engagement Score
Beth	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	A	A	2	1	2	20	1.54
Emma	1	1	1	2	A	2	2	0	0	1	1	1	2	14	1.08
Eric	1	2	2	0	1	A	2	2	1	2	2	A	2	17	1.31
Frank	2	A	2	A	0	2	0	2	A	2	2	1	A	13	1.00
Heather	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	A	1	1	0	2	15	1.15
John	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	A	1	A	2	A	2	9	0.69
Karen	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	A	2	2	1	2	21	1.62
Larry	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	A	2	2	1	2	2	23	1.77
Sarah	0	2	2	2	0	A	2	2	1	2	1	0	A	14	1.08
Paul	0	1	1	A	1	A	2	A	0	0	1	A	2	8	0.62
Will	2	2	0	A	0	1	0	2	A	A	1	0	A	8	0.62

^aClass discussion and participation were rated as *very engaged* (2), *engaged* (1), *not engaged* (0), or *absent* (A) depending on the level of interaction of student participation. Absent was scored as zero for calculating the mean engagement score.

to express his opinions in a grade neutral situation (124:146). Frank enjoyed the topics and liked to debate. "I would just say something to stir things up a little bit" (94:106). John participated when he "had a strong opinion about the topic" (86:100). Sarah participated because "that is part of being a student" (119:126).

Perhaps Will summed up the experience best by stating "with grade neutrality it was definitely a laid back atmosphere where you wouldn't have to worry if you were right or if you were wrong. You just say what your opinion was and if there was something to add or a correction that could be made you didn't have to worry about anybody looking down on you or grading you down for what you said. You could just learn from that experience and not have to worry about the grading process" (135:154).

Student Performance on Course Assignments

The assignments were discussed the first day of class and referred to during the semester. Expectations for each assignment were delineated in a handout and given to the students. The point values for each assignment were given as a measure of the relative importance of each assignment. Due dates for each assignment were recommended. When students handed in written work, it was acknowledged and recorded as having been submitted, but no grade-based feedback was provided as part of the experiment. Table 2 details each assignment's point value and the points earned by the students as determined by the instructor after the course was over.

Some students initially did not believe they would receive an A grade regardless of future behavior until the fourth week of the semester. Once the students were convinced of grade neutrality, there was a substantial drop in the amount of student work submitted.

There were six recommended assignments. Students were asked to 1) create a vocabulary list of unknown words from the readings and to provide definitions weekly. They were also asked to tease out praxis items from the readings, 2) write a philosophy statement of adult education the first week of class and to compose a second version the last week of class. The statements were compared and analyzed for deep learning, 3) write a three to five page paper addressing the recruitment of underrepresented citizens for adult education programs, 4) create and present a ten-minute skit that demonstrated best practices in adult education, 5) develop a learning contract that consisted of a detailed plan of action for investigating one topic in depth and a grading rubric for evaluating the work, and 6) orally present a research-based lesson on motivating adult learners.

The instructor made copies of the students' work and evaluated it after the course was over to assess learning outcomes (Table 2). The rubric for evaluat-

ing the written assignments consisted of 1) the degree that the student addressed the assignment, 2) the level of complexity of the work, 3) the degree that the work included adult education theory and practice, 4) references cited, and 5) writing quality.

Ten students attempted the vocabulary and praxis assignments early in the semester. Nine students wrote a philosophy statement during the first two weeks of the semester. Five students submitted a revised philosophy statement at the end of the semester. Three of the philosophy statements reflected deep learning of the theory of adult education and were significantly expanded and developed from the first philosophy statement. One student received full points for citing a variety of appropriate references, statistics, and theories relevant to adult education. The other two papers were opinion-based (not supported by literature) and did not introduce concepts from the course content. One student submitted the same statement twice, once on August 30, the second December 6.

Seven students submitted the recruitment paper. However, only two students addressed the core requirement: to develop a plan for recruiting underserved populations for adult education opportunities. Larry's paper was the most complete in that he cited nine sources, discussed a variety of recruitment tactics, and elaborated on the need to close the gap between the poor and middle class through adult education opportunities. Most of the papers failed to go beyond folk knowledge and did not cite any references. Only John and Larry mentioned the word recruitment in their papers.

Six students submitted a learning contract outline, but did not address the requirements of the assignment. The students who submitted contracts wanted to learn more about 1) the bible, 2) participating in course discussions, 3) the 2004 presidential election, 4) truancy in elementary schools, and 5) the needs of adult learners in technology education. Only one proposal (#5) was relevant to the course content. None of the students fulfilled the spirit of the assignment by submitting a written report documenting their learning, worth 100 points. The instructor gave the students who submitted a learning contract outline ten points each.

Eight students participated in the skit assignment. Several students presented skits that were used in other courses. Most of the skits did not address the assignment, which was to demonstrate best practices in adult education based on Bain's (2004) text. Only three of the skits were original, interesting, and reflected concepts from the course content. All but one student participated in the motivation assignment. The majority of the presentations were based on one source and lacked depth and refinement. Larry's presentation referenced several relevant sources and was professionally delivered.

In summary, if students were to receive a grade based on the quality of their written work and oral

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Table 2. Quality and Completion of Students' Submitted Assignments

Name	Vocabulary and Praxis	1st Philosophy Statement	2nd Philosophy statement	Recruitment paper	Skit	Motivation presentation	Subtotal	Learning contract	Total	Percent
Points	50	1	25	25	50	25	176	100	276	%
Beth	30	1	17	10	0	17	42%	10	85	31%
Emma	23	0	0	0	0	17	14%	0	40	14%
Eric	7	1	20	10	20	17	42%	10	85	31%
Frank	15	1	0	15	20	17	24%	0	68	24%
Heather	30	1	10	10	50	10	63%	10	120	43%
John	23	1	0	20	20	17	29%	0	81	29%
Karen	30	1	20	10	50	17	73%	10	138	50%
Larry	46	1	25	25	45	25	95%	10	177	64%
Sarah	23	1	0	0	20	10	30%	10	64	23%
Paul	30	0	0	0	0	0	11%	0	30	11%
Will	0	1	0	0	20	10	11%	0	31	11%

presentations, only one would have passed the course, and then only marginally. If the learning contract assignment is removed from the equation, three students would have passed the course. Most of the students did not submit the majority of the written assignments. The students who did submit written assignments did not address the criteria asked for in the assignment; the ideas expressed were mostly opinion and folk knowledge and most cited one or two references in compiling the work. Similarly, most of the oral presentations did not address the assignment or were recycled from other courses. Very little original thought and almost no scholarship went into the majority of the work students submitted and presented during the semester.

Student Motivation for Completing Course Assignments

Surface learners who were extrinsically motivated

During the interviews, students were asked what impact grade neutrality had on their motivation for completing the course assignments. Most of the students adopted surface learning strategies when approaching course participation and assignments. Of all the assignments that were recommended, preparation for class discussion, which consisted of reading the text, was the most important to the students as attending and participating in discussions was a public phenomenon. The students did not want to appear to be “slackers” in front of their peers (Paul and Will) or to make a bad impression on the instructor (Eric, Heather, Karen, and Larry).

Students reported they learned the most from class discussions and they attended class because 1) they paid for the course and wanted to get something out of it (Heather, John, Eric, Karen, and Paul) and 2) it required the least amount of effort for the greatest reward (social approval from peers and instructor) (Frank, Sarah, and Will).

Students reported reading before coming to class so that they could effectively participate in discussions (Beth, Emma, Heather, Karen, Larry, Sarah, Paul, and Will). Heather read what was required, but “did not go beyond that” (327). Sarah participated in class so that she “actually did some work” but was not motivated to do more (228:234). Will said “nine times out of ten I would do the reading but I would never take the time to type out

the vocabulary” (212). Frank said he debated topics just to “stir things up a little bit” (94:106), not because he wanted to clarify points from the readings. Will stressed that it wasn't important whether discussion points were right or wrong, just that he got to share his opinions with the class (135:154). It was apparent that many students did not base discussion points on the readings but rather opinion and folk knowledge (observation notes).

Because all the students were employed and most had other classes, they prioritized their time and put work for this class second to last (Beth) or last (Frank, Heather, John, Sarah, Paul, and Will). Sarah said she “didn't put as much effort into it as I should have” because of grade neutrality. “I had other tougher classes that I had to concentrate on more” (106:116). Eric, an adult educator, said he completed assignments that were related to his job to further his career. Eric picked assignments that were interesting to him and ignored those he considered busy work. However, when his job was demanding, he said “I didn't worry about whether I had my assignments done” (167:171). Frank was interested in the course content, but once his job became demanding, he did not attempt the course work, knowing it would not affect his grade. Initially, he completed the vocabulary assignment, but superficially. “I got definitions that I knew what they were anyway” (206). He said he was not motivated to do quality work, but “if my grade would have depended on it, I would have done more of the assignments” (231:240).

Emma, Heather, and Sarah picked assignments that were unchallenging and avoided those they did not understand because they did not want to put effort into assignments that required deeper learning. Knowing she had an A in the course caused Heather to not “put out the extra effort that I usually would have” (286). Sarah said “if I did not understand the assignment, I just didn't do those” (159). Along these lines John said he “did not get a lot out of writing that paper. I knew my stance on those areas

already so writing a paper really didn't help me much" (203:207). Frank said he did a writing assignment because it was easy for him to express his opinions (173:186).

In the extreme case, grade neutrality killed Sarah's motivation to complete course assignments. "It is not going to affect your grade so there was no motivation for me to push myself to get it done top notch...it didn't matter because in the end it didn't affect my grade" (180:193). Will reflected the attitude of many students when he said grade neutrality "gave me a care free feeling; there were no repercussions for not doing the assignments. It was a relief, but at the same time, my conscience was calling me a slacker and made me feel bad that I wasn't participating at the level that I should be... I feel like I didn't earn my grade" (228:253).

Deep learners who were intrinsically motivated

Eric, Karen, and Larry approached the course as deep learners who were intrinsically motivated. Eric used the course to try out new ideas for his job as an adult educator. During his drive home, he said he would "relate it back to what I was doing at the moment. Sometimes I realized there are some things I ought to be doing differently" (115:121). He said he engaged in the reading assignments to "figure out what I could learn about it," not because it was required. Eric said that grade neutrality gave him the opportunity to become a deep learner. "It enticed me for more deep learning than surface learning because I wasn't worried about rushing through the material to get an assignment done. I had time to actually look over it and analyze it" (193:199).

Karen wanted to "get the most out of this class" and completed assignments to learn rather than for a grade (233). "When I read, I argue with the book. I write stuff out so I can talk about it in class" (205:219). She felt that grade neutrality gave her the flexibility to do a better job on her assignments as she had more time to complete them. She said she learned more because she "wanted to do it, I wanted to learn" (288). She said "I really looked inside and stepped outside the box and really tried to open up and understand and hear what other people had to say. I really enjoyed it overall" (533:545).

Larry said that grade neutrality "motivated me even more to get things done because it opened my eyes to my responsibility and made me feel like I had to step out and do better because the instructor wasn't standing over us saying 'you will do this.' The instructor was saying 'you have the option of whether you are going to do it or not and it is on you.' So it made a difference" (32:43). When asked why Larry completed the assignments he said "I did it to enlighten myself" (234:244). Larry said that the effect of grade neutrality was a powerful learning experience in itself. "I learned more because it gave me the freedom to do so... I became a very, very deep

learner and it was a catalyst for me doing well... it made me a better learner" (275:312).

In conclusion, when asked why they completed any of the assignments, students said 1) to maximize learning and to be prepared for class discussions (Beth, Emma, Eric, Heather, Karen, and Larry), 2) because the instructor made the request (Sarah), 3) because they were not sure they had a guaranteed A grade until four weeks into the semester so they did a few assignments initially (Frank, John, and Paul), 4) because the assignments were simple to complete (Emma, Frank, Heather, and Sarah), and 5) because they had time to do them initially (Frank). Students did not complete the assignments because 1) they did not have to in order to earn an A grade, 2) other demands (job and other classes) took priority, and 3) they did not understand the assignment and did not seek clarification.

Student Learning Outcomes

Learning can be measured by the extent that students shifted their mental models of reality (Gentner and Stevens, 1983). Sarah, Heather, and Frank reported that they only did the assignments that were easy and did not challenge their current mental models. Eric, Karen, and Larry proved to be the exceptions by discussing how their preconceptions of adult education shifted during the course. They learned how to become deeper learners once they adjusted to the grade-neutral paradigm. Eric said that in the past, "I didn't worry about what I was learning, I just worried about getting the assignment done. In this class, it didn't matter if I did the assignment or not. It was more what I wanted out of the class. I read to figure out what I could learn about it, not to write a two-page report on it" (173:191). "The biggest thing I have learned is to be a lot more aware of my situation and really listen to the people I am teaching so I can keep up with them instead of thinking they have to keep up with me" (449:456).

One of the more important learning experiences for students was reading and discussing the text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (1970). Students reported that being exposed to Freire's ideas was the most influential learning experience of the course (Beth, Emma, Eric, Heather, Karen, Larry, Sarah, Will). The text and discussions were coupled with two guest speakers, one who taught high school on the Mexican-American border and one from an Adult Literacy program. Students reported the impact of these experiences "opened my mind to new horizons" (Emma, 262:276). "Freire was out there and it really made me think" (Eric, 269). "I never experienced any kind of reading material like that before, but it was a good experience... it opened my eyes a lot" (Heather, 346:260). "It was good because it made me think; I don't think most people who took this class ever thought about all those things" (Karen, 486:501). "It was an eye opener... it is such a deep read. At work when things happen, I will refer

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back to something that Freire said and I see how the hierarchy is and I try to assure myself that I am not being the oppressor. It makes you look into yourself” (Larry, 73:90). When asked if the instructor should continue to require the book, Larry said “keep doing exactly what you are doing. Nothing that is revolutionary is easy; I learned that from Freire” (381:383).

Students were asked to discuss what they learned in terms of the big ideas in adult education. Eight of the 11 students mentioned the following topics: best practices for teaching adults (Eric); intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory (Beth, Karen); motivation theory (Beth, Frank, Will); pedagogy versus andragogy (Beth, Paul); sharing power with adult learners (Emma, Eric, John, Will); social structures that maintain poverty (Karen); teaching at the college level (Beth); and the scope of adult education (Karen).

Eight students discussed the comfortable and relaxed atmosphere of the class; however, the autonomy had a different impact on each student. Eric said he learned to value other students' input in discussion rather than focus on the instructor alone. John reported that the relaxed environment both helped and hurt him. He was able to “just sit and listen” but did not take notes and he did not review the course material (162:168). Sarah was not sure of how much she learned because “of the relaxed atmosphere and I really had no motivation” to engage in the recommended assignments and readings (208:220). Will said “it was a pleasant place to learn and to find out about the people in my class and their thoughts on adult education” (94:98). Karen and Larry enjoyed the flexibility and used it to spend more time on assignments.

As a result of participating in the total emersion experience in adult education, students discovered more about themselves as learners. Under the condition of grade neutrality they were free to indulge in their predispositions as surface or deep learners (Marton and Säljö, 1976) and as intrinsically or extrinsically motivated learners (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The course structure provided a mirror into the learning behaviors of students; however, the treatment failed to convert eight of the eleven students into deep learners.

In spite of students' insistence that they learned as much or more from this course as in other courses, the data authenticating this claim are inconclusive. Because students submitted a minimum amount of written work for evaluation, evidence was lacking to document substantial learning outcomes thoroughly. Table 2 gives a measure of the quality (instructor rated) and quantity of student work submitted. If written work is an indicator of learning, it must be concluded that the students learned from 11-64% of the intended content.

The interviews did not expose deep sustained learning in the majority of the students as they did not articulate more than a few of the big ideas in adult

education theory and practice (with the exception of Eric, Karen, and Larry). Emma said that grade neutrality “challenged me to do as much as I could without the pressure of the grade” (269:271). In fact, Emma completed only 14% of the assignments, a far cry from doing as much as she could for a graduate-level course. In students' own words, the course was relaxing and comfortable; however, not challenging or rigorous as the external pressure to perform was removed and the self-regulation mechanisms for deep learning (Boekaerts et al., 2000) were not well developed in the majority of the students. Will captured the theme by stating “it was a very good experience, very different. I grew as a person. I was happy to do that because the whole atmosphere was comfortable and it was just an easy place to learn and take in new ideas about adult education” (536:539). Whether the ideas retained were firmly grounded in the adult education literature base is questionable. As Will reported, it didn't matter if his ideas were “right or wrong” as long as he got to share his opinions in class (135:154).

Marton and Säljö's (1976) description of deep and surface learning was portrayed by the students in the case study. Most discovered that they were extrinsically motivated strategic learners. In terms of attending class and participating in discussions, nine of the 11 students reported their conduct was consistent with past behaviors. In terms of completing course assignments, they chose to redirect their time to other courses or job-related responsibilities and to rest on the security of the promised grade. Eric, Karen, and Larry became deep learners who directed their study time toward comprehending what the author wanted to say about a problem rather than what the instructor wanted back on an exam. The remainder of the students exemplified surface learners who essentially abandoned the course content when no assignments or exams were required.

Kohn (1999) claimed that the act of grading reduced students' interest in learning, preference for challenging tasks, and quality of thinking. In the current study, the absence of grading did not mitigate these effects. Eight of the 11 students preferred unchallenging tasks and resorted to folk knowledge during class discussion. Findings indicated that self-regulation mechanisms that drive deep learning behaviors (Boekaerts et al., 2000; Ryan and Deci, 2000) were not developed enough in the majority of students to merit abandoning grading schema in traditional college courses.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Traditional, university-based courses should continue the practice of grading as more than one grade neutral experience is required to change the habits of extrinsically motivating students. However,

grades alone do not drive students toward deep learning. In formal classrooms, student motivation is related to evaluation and feedback.

Crooks (1988) concluded that “classroom evaluation has powerful direct and indirect impacts, which may be positive or negative, and thus deserves very thoughtful planning and implementation” (p. 438). Crooks listed 17 specific effects of evaluation on students including helping students to “focus attention on important aspects of the subject; encouraging active learning strategies; providing knowledge of results and corrective feedback; helping students feel a sense of accomplishment; checking that students have adequate prerequisite skills and knowledge to effectively learn the material to be covered; and influencing student motivation to study the subject and their perceptions of the capabilities in the subject” (p. 443).

In the current study, the absence of grade-based evaluation caused some students to lose their motivation to meaningfully engage in the course. In an attempt to convince students that the course was indeed free of grades, the instructor did not provide grade-based feedback to students regarding the quality of their work or ideas. In the absence of grade-based feedback, students had no framework for assessing their progress. Future studies that experiment with grade neutrality should integrate substantial feedback so that students can increase their self-efficacy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Rubrics should be developed for all assignments to guide students to higher levels of thinking and performance by delineating expectations as well.

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