

Note on "Introduction to Philosophy as a Large Class Tutorial"

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The method of grading used in Introduction to Philosophy as a Large Class Tutorial (Teaching Philosophy, Vol. 7, No. 4, Oct. 1984, pp. 325-35), was S-U (Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory). Several readers have asked if the course would work with A-E grading. In the fall semester of 1985, I tried the course that way. At least, that is what I put in the course schedule. Since our university allows undergraduates to opt for S-U grading in any course, the total S-U hours not to exceed 18, 20 of the 50 students of the class selected the S-U option anyway, thus voting with their schedule cards for the old course. This unintended mix of students gave me an opportunity to compare the two ways of grading. The convention of the old S-U course that unsatisfactory work was to be redone had been my way of establishing a decent level of achievement. The convention held that one got an S only by getting all S's. In the mixed class the convention was continued for S-U students. A-E students were to receive what their material merited on first submission. What have I learned about the two methods?

1) The course does work with A-E grading; but each system has advantages and disadvantages.

2) In the A-E system the A student can be granted an A. Through the years the course was S-U, I was always having to restrain TA's from putting S+ on papers they found extraordinarily well-done. That problem is now gone, and good students can be helped to whatever rewards high grade averages entitle them.

3) Under the A-E system a somewhat larger number of students put higher intensity into their work. The difference was

not vast, however. The course had always attracted some students who worked out of interest rather than for a grade. The number of truly hard-working students perhaps doubled (from 3 to 6). Although it is less clear to me, I believe students in the average to good range also worked more energetically.

What did surprise me in this close comparison was how content many S-U students were with a minimal effort the first time around, counting on the rewrite opportunity. Where before I had attributed the clear difference between first and second efforts to my success in teaching something about thinking and writing, I now saw that much of the difference was due to the time-management factor to which almost all American undergraduates are sensitive, and in which a great number excel. They were waiting to see how seriously I was going to take my own rhetoric about standards of excellence. Also, since specific questions were posed on the inadequate areas of their work, they were awaiting personal guidance profiles to guide their rewrites. And, of course, if they managed to get through the first screening, they were home free without rewriting.

4) A disadvantage of the A-E option was that below average students, who handed in below average work, got D's and E's; they tried to do better on the next bit of writing, sometimes did, sometimes did not, and that was that. The absence of the rewrite option for them meant not only that their grade averages were bruised, but that a learning opportunity had been missed. They could have profited from the rewrite convention. Indeed, many of the students who chose S-U had sensed that since phi-

losophy was unfamiliar to them, the rewrite option would be helpful.

Are we to conclude, then, that this should be an A-E course with a rewrite option for those whose initial work is D or E? Not quite. If the rewrite option is restricted to those receiving D's and E's, many of the D and E students will become B and C students. Excellent! But then justice requires extending the rewrite option also to the latter. But in a class of 50, I am already awash in papers. The flood produced by so extending the rewrite option would just send me down river.

Part of the reason is that A-E papers require more time to grade than S-U papers. In both, of course, one evaluates to determine weaknesses and strengths. A-E papers also require a comparative evaluation to determine the letter grade. For me that is time-consuming. Also, my inner judging mechanism gets numbed more quickly reading A-E papers in the course of a grading day. The faculty of judgment involved in helping students see where lie

the weaknesses of their work, and suggesting how they can be removed, is just more interesting than that involved in finding the place of students in a spectrum of grades. One can go on with "real" thinking for a longer period of time.

One could, of course, restrict the size of the class. But that would defeat the purpose of the project. No problem has ever existed for small-class tutorials, unless there are problems in heaven. The problem was to learn how to conduct a large-class tutorial. Nor am I certain that beginning classes can any longer be restricted in size at our university. The principle governing the size of a beginning class seems now to be determined by the number of chairs in the room.

In the immediate future I intend to continue with the mixed option, hoping that some others may have advice on this problem which will solve it for me.

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