

“Pedagogy”, Lionel Trilling once wrote, “is a depressing subject to all persons of sensibility.” So much the worse for sensibility. Grading, the enemy of discernment, is an issue amenable to the collective control of professors yet the one issue on which they have managed the least co-ordinated success. What is the function of grading? Why are grades so inflated?

Stuart Rojstaczer, a retired Duke University professor and founder of GradeInflation.com, published the most recent large body of data in the spring. “If current trends hold,” he writes, “Grade ‘A’ will be the average in the coming decade at most of the highly selective private colleges and universities in the United States.”

Rojstaczer draws his conclusions from 200 schools with combined enrolment of more than 2 million. But the range of opinion on the matter is wider than his conclusions. Is not the problem better called grade compression, devaluation or conflation? A group of papers from a conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2003, published last year as *Grade Inflation: Academic Standards in Higher Education*, captures diversity of thinking so well that a conscientious reader may come away more

With students taught too well and too little, true learning withers

Academics can't agree on the function of grades or stop their rise – perhaps we'd all be better off without them, says John Summers

confused than before. Some of the participants deny that the problem exists.

Are students getting smarter? We have no way to compare grades across disciplines and professional schools. The question, moreover, implies the ability to track smartness across time, a method discouraged by the radical historicism predominant in the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s. The postmodern academy refers the disappearing distinction between potential and performance to the endlessness of interpretation.

Citing untapped potential is the most common gesture in the bid to raise grades – as if learning to tap one's potential is not the aim of education, or the meaning of achievement does not lie in limits. To be judged not on what one has done, but on what one might have done if only the context had been different!

Abolishing grades might expose students to greater self-knowledge.

Higher education might return to the project of moral improvement that

Trilling claimed for liberalism. “The distressing thing about our examination questions is that they are not ridiculous,” he complained, “they make perfectly good sense – such good sense that the young person who answers them can never again know the force and terror of what has been

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communicated to him by the works he is being examined on.”

We have taught today's students too well and too little. The 19th-century founders of the professions organised teaching and learning around “a vertical vision”, according to Burton J. Bledstein's *The Culture of Professionalism*. “The fear of falling gnawed away at every climber, and this fear – ubiquitous in the middle class – was often the source of a general anxiety within individuals which no amount of monetary security, public honours, or personal confidence seemed to eliminate.” When students hustle for a higher grade, they are acting as clients, treating teachers as service providers in a scheme of advancement.

“On the teaching of modern literature”, the essay by Trilling that I have been mentioning, portrays the university as a locus of such unresolved conflicts. Trilling himself seems diffident before the worldly demands visited upon the academic professional. In so far as the students obey his terms, they do so “with a happy vagueness, a delighted glibness, a joyous sense of power in the use of received or receivable generalisations, a grateful wonder at how easy it is to formulate and judge, at how little resistance language offers to their intentions”. The term papers come in. His heart sinks. “When that despair strikes us we are tempted to give up the usual and accredited ways of evaluating education.”

Trilling navigated the rival demands of teaching and criticism with a distinction as archaic in the 1950s and 1960s as it seems irrelevant today.

The work itself imposed its own demands and standards, so he taught the work first, and the students second. His pedagogy entailed closing the gap from both ends.

The academic profession has never agreed on the function of grades. The party of sensibility has known all along that another conversation was happening at the margins of our universities. Not grading and scoring, but possession and inhabitation have been its manner of valuation. Let it serve as one measure of our reconstruction.

John Summers is the author of *Every Fury on Earth* and a visiting scholar at the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College.