

**DIRECTIONS:** writing, grading discussion papers and other "irrelevants"

**DEFINITIONS:** The first thing necessary is to define the terms:

1. relevant/irrelevant(s): the only relevant goal of any course of instruction is a student's learning; the only relevant method by which any student learns is that the student understands the subject matter/method.

2. grades(ing): grades are teachers' approximate measurements of the student's internal learning and understanding of subject matter/method; essentially then, every grade is subjective, whatever the standard of measure whether of the student's skills to learn (since each student is unique) or of the student's skills to imitate. That external approximation is then quantified, so the measurement is not just subjective but arbitrary because neither learning nor understanding, as spiritual activities of the human mind and will, can be quantified. Therefore, grades/grading are conveniences for the administration of the educational system, but have little or no direct relevance to the student's life of learning, unless to score the student's ability to imitate, by, for instance, a "scantron".

3. discussion paper(s): the discussion paper has a dual purpose: first, to stimulate the student to "objectify" in writing his/her internal thinking about a specific question and then to externalize out-loud that "objectification" to peers and the instructor during classroom readings.

This instructor uses discussion papers for the same reason an artist uses some medium through which to express an idea. Take, for instance, the potter and an idea of a beautiful pot, vase, whatever. The potter must throw clay in order to "make" the idea of the pot "real". Only when we humans **do** something do we learn the extent of our knowledge, skill and understanding. (This fact applies equally to students and teachers.) Writing our thoughts parallels the potter's throwing of clay. As the potter molds and works the clay, the clay molds and works the potter's idea; so too, as we mold and work our words, language molds and works our idea(s).

Once thoughts are written, then, we speak what we have written. This speaking of our thoughts closes the circle of our communication with ourselves. Literally, our internally expressed idea returns to us through our speaking its written expression and we hear what we thought. We reflect upon our thinking and this reflection leads us to clarify our own thoughts. What we thought silently, we wrote; what we wrote, we speak; then we rethink again silently what we thought as we listen to what we speak.

In addition, this speaking of our written words to the class benefits us in two other ways: first, we gain confidence through sharing our thoughts and through the appreciation others show of our thought(s). Secondly, we generate new thoughts because we share in others' ideas, sparked by our spoken thoughts through discussion and dialogue. Again, this completes the circle of our communication with ourselves, but this time as human beings who share and reflect upon our thinking. What we began in the silence of our private minds, we verbally share socially; through this sharing we contact our shared, human nature, providing a social perspective to our individual, private thoughts. So our private, internal thoughts are reinforced, reevaluated, reformed, but most of all enriched, deepened, broadened and heightened.

The question now becomes: how are the discussion papers and/or any tests graded? The answer is simple: they are graded subjectively and arbitrarily, as are all grades(ing) - of course, this statement is true only if the instructor and/or administrator is honest. The question should be: how does this instructor seek to achieve a balance or justice within this subjective, arbitrarily "objective" bureaucratic requirement? This instructor seeks first to "level the playing field" by providing the same set-questions for all students to answer and a common set of primary sources from which all students approach the question. Maria Montessori would call this "freedom

within limits". Secondly, this instructor seeks to measure the student's increase in learning and understanding within the context of the class' learning and understanding as expressed in two discussion papers.

This means simply that each paper is graded for two elements: first, the form through which the thoughts appear, including proper use of grammar, punctuation, spelling and other formal mechanics; in short, this means that the instructor seeks to access the student's skills in the use of language, both as to content and structure, as the material through which the student's ideas take shape. But, just as the idea of the most artistic ceramic clay pot is dependent upon the potter's successful work with the ceramic clay, so the most brilliant philosophic idea depends upon the student's work with his or her language materials. Thus, if the potter has not kneaded the clay so every bubble is removed, the most beautiful, artistic ceramic clay pot will explode within the kiln. If a student has not worked his or her language materials so the mechanics' bubbles are removed, the most beautiful, artistic philosophic idea will explode within this instructor's critical kiln.

The second element graded is the student's thought process and development. This element uses the standard of the question asked and the philosopher who expressed and developed a similar thought, for the purposes of the "Intro" course, people such as Confucius, Lao-tzu, Socrates, Ivan Ilych, and so forth. This instructor frequently requests students to re-write an original paper. Such an opportunity, however, merely requests re-expression and inevitably leads the student to a deeper and broader understanding of the subject-question, sometimes to a better grade. Nevertheless, students should know that some former, successful students have re-written discussion papers more than once, twice, even more, in one case ten, yes (10) times.

Finally, the student's second discussion paper becomes more important than the first because the student is graded upon his or her own increase in understanding and learning of the course materials. Thus, a better effort in the second discussion paper can lead to a better grade, and vice versa. The grade which any student receives lies within the control of a student's attitude and motivation. Any person's attitude determines that person's ability, but one's ability may well exceed one's attitude. The instructional purpose is single, namely, that the material be presented in a manner such that the student may learn and understand. This instructor is not interested in providing students with information or knowledge, so students who seek such limited learning should seek it elsewhere. The student's purpose, therefore, in writing and discussing papers is to communicate that student's learning and understanding. Grades seek to represent the progress of each student in his or her journey on the road of learning toward understanding the problems philosophers discuss. You, therefore, grade yourselves and I, as instructor, am merely an instrument who assigns that grade for administrative, that is, bureaucratic purposes. 7/97;1/98;12/99;4/00;02/05rgb