DESIGNING SEMINARY EXPECTATIONS

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While teaching at a liberal-arts college as an adjunct instructor, students would occasionally request an explanation of my expectations, which meant that they wanted to know, before they took a test or handed in an assignment, the standard to which their work would be compared. On becoming a seminary professor and recalling the experience of trying to communicate to students my assumptions about the nature of academic quality at the collegiate level, it occurred to me that this question was undoubtedly going to be asked by seminary students, as well. This realization was the impetus that caused me to ponder grading standards at the seminary level and set me to the task of designing a grading rubric for my seminary courses.

This article recounts my experience as I invented, implemented, and evaluated my grading rubric, identifies the theories, observations, and conversations that inform my current perspective on grading standards, and shares the insights into teaching seminary students that I derived as an outcome of undertaking this design challenge.

Invention

The first step in the design process was reflection on my previous grading practices. I referred to the characteristic that I valued the most in college students' work as "evidence of thinking." Now I had to think for myself and discern what I expected this characteristic to look like in students preparing for ministry.

In reflecting on my past grading tendencies, one college student's paper stood out as an example of thought-full writing. After summarizing the reading assignments for that week, the student described setting aside the readings and thinking about them, mentally searching for a common theme between the three essays, identifying her own reactions to the authors' arguments, and then guessing at the instructor's motive for selecting these particular readings. This mental rumination on the readings, her opinions, and her perception of me yielded an insight that I had not anticipated. She succeeded in surprising me with an argument that set out a novel connection between the essays.

A thought process, signs of mental engagement with the course material—that was my expectation. Once I understood this I also recognized that I would have to provide students with directions that would plainly communicate this expectation and guide them in such a process. If I wanted them to think, then some pointers for their minds to follow would have to be developed.

Identifying a realistic level of thoughtfulness for seminary students was the next step in fashioning these reflection guidelines. I began my deliberations by trying to clarify my minimum expectation and concluded that it was basic comprehension. At the seminary level this meant that once they had been introduced to the experts in the field and had learned to follow an unfamiliar line of argument, students should then be able to accurately read the primary texts related to the course.

Drawing inferences from primary texts seemed to be the next logical step in a Seminarian's thought process. Students instructed in disciplines related to Christian ministry should be able to think through the implications of those lessons in the context of their particular ministry. Therefore, I expected class work to show signs that the student was considering the course subject in relation to a vocational context.

Finally, I concluded that the articulation of a ministerial identity that reflected an understanding of their role as leaders was the highest expectation I could justly insist on from seminary students. The ability to conceptualize how they would facilitate the implementation of an appropriate use of the course material would become the final standard I would use in grading student assignments.

Challenging students to contemplate the relevance of the course for their practice of ministry would, I predicted, cause students to produce work that showed evidence of thinking. I was convinced that a stream-of-consciousness narrative of mental effort, such as the one written by my exemplary college student, would not be necessary to determine which students had thought through the ramifications of the course topic and which had not. I assumed that signs of a mind formed by an on-going, semester-long conversation with a new discipline would be readily apparent in student presentations and writings.

To be forthcoming about my expectations, my first syllabus included a grading rubric that outlined the thought process that I considered to be reasonable and appropriate for seminarians (see Appendix). The grade of C was identified as a passing grade and my minimum expectation for student learning. C-Level thinking was characterized by a fair and accurate recounting of the scholarship on the course subject, whereas mediocre work failed this standard of basic comprehension. Next, B-Level thinking should build upon this foundation and explore the relationship between the material covered in class and the students' ministries. Finally, students who could describe the implications of the course for not only their setting for ministry but also for their responsibilities as Christian leaders were thinking at the A-Level. My motto for this rubric was Scholarship, Relationship, Leadership.

Implementation

On the first day of class I explained to the students that this would be the rubric used on all assignments including the one used to evaluate class discussions. Through lectures, guest speakers, and small group exercises, I would introduce the expert interpretations (biblical, theological, and/or historical) of the course topic with the goal of giving students a basic familiarity with the scholarly opinions in that discipline. Based on that introduction, the students would then need to be in conversation with these professional viewpoints at the places where academic arguments intersected with and diverged from seminarian vocations.

I anticipated that the explanation of the course syllabus and grading rubric would encourage everyone to come to each session prepared to share the correlations they had drawn between the weekly reading assignments and their practice of ministry. However, by the third class session I realized that I had overestimated my students' ability to instantly meet my expectations.

Merely writing out my grading standards and explaining them in class was not sufficient. The class discussions revealed that students were caught up in their initial reactions to the religious ideas posed by others and were not setting aside the introductory material and envisioning the shape of a unique ministry informed by such a viewpoint. If I expect my students to think along these lines, then they would have to be given the chance to practice this skill in class.

Selecting expert sources that easily translated into ministry ideas was one strategy I adopted to try to help students develop as thinkers. Creating discussion questions that required students to talk about their role as ministers in connection with these expert opinions was another technique utilized. Small groups and work in pairs was an additional method tried in an attempt to spark imaginative thinking. Describing historical and hypothetical ministry scenarios was a further means of prompting students to search for answers beyond the pages of the text.

The weekly grades for class discussion reflected that even this multi-pronged approach was not prompting every student to think about Scholarship, Relationship, and Leadership. However, mediocre grades did provoke one student to stop by my office and complain that my expectations were unclear. I showed him the grading rubric in the syllabus and offered examples to illustrate each grading level. From then on he came to class prepared to share how something he had read in the textbooks had been put into use in the church he served.

This immediate implementation of the course material exceeded my expectations. This student demonstrated not only a thought process but also the ability to transition from thinking to doing. After this student started reporting on his textbook-inspired church initiatives, a few more students, not many but several, began to tentatively think out loud in class about the relationship they saw between seminary course work and local church work.

The next semester I retained my grading rubric but made some changes to my basic course design. I increased the point value for class discussion of the weekly reading assignments in order to communicate my conviction that this ability was crucial to the overall learning process. (For less vocal students, extra credit assignments posted on the electronic course discussion board were offered as an alternative to speaking up in class.)

I also changed my management of class discussion by asking more follow-up questions and prodding students for more detailed explanations of both their critiques of the readings and their judgments of the ministry possibilities suggested by these scholarly perspectives.

Additional changes included keeping a weekly log of classroom participation as a written record of the quality of thinking evidenced in students' verbal contributions; and requiring that students do a presentation that synthesized a week's worth of reading assignments, pointed out their relevance for ministry, and posed discussion questions to the other students.

That semester three students visited me during office hours to complain about my unclear expectations. Once again, I showed them the grading rubric in the syllabus and offered illustrations of each thinking level. After these conversations one of the students began to make superficial connections between the course material and her church setting. Another student

would occasionally comment on the responsibilities of clergy in general but never about himself in particular.

The third student struggled to organize her thoughts into a coherent argument. She was convinced the course material was relevant for her church, but her ideas were disjointed and undeveloped. Her breakthrough finally came near the end of the semester when I asked her to describe her final project. As she talked I wrote on the classroom white board and diagramed her descriptions in a flowchart. Seeing her thoughts in relation to each other in that format was the catalyst that helped her to eventually clarify the objective of her project, the best way to proceed towards that ministry goal, and the means she could use to communicate it to others.

Some of the students were beginning to think through the course material, think about it in relation to the needs of their congregations, and think about how they could lead others in addressing those needs. I was pleased with the quality of thinking evident in a few of the final papers. A couple of students had clearly been mulling over the relationship between the course topic and their ministries.

The stand-out paper that semester included a narrative of a student's thought process as he learned something in class, studied and accurately summarized the related scholarship, and then was inspired to call a denominational official and inquire if the regional church body had any programs compatible with this new insight for ministry. (The representative told the student that there were none at this time but agreed that one was necessary.)

By the end of the semester, some of the student assignments finally satisfied my preference for writing that reflected thinking. These few positive learning outcomes were not evident in the majority of the final papers, however. Many of the papers failed to meet my basic reading comprehension requirements and were assessed in accordance with the grading rubric. Word was spreading that the grades in my classes were neither inflated nor curved.

Most of the students were not grateful to have this unequivocal assessment of the quality of their thinking. The students' evaluations expressed the stress they had felt having their class participation graded, and the anxiety they had experienced as they sat through class and tried to guess what my opinion was of them. They just could not tell whether or not I liked them.

Their evaluations sounded similar to the insecurities expressed by candidates who must appear before ordination boards— the same fear over being questioned about their opinions and the same self-doubts about adequately responding to those questions. For the students, the class had been the equivalent of a semester-long audience with a representative of a credentialing board. Judging by their comments, the students had not appreciated the chance to do practice interviews.

It appeared that my grading rubric and teaching methods were creating a barrier to learning for many of the students. Requiring the students to engage the course material by means of a deliberate thought process was causing some of them distress. I still considered this to be a

reasonable objective for seminarians; however I was cognizant of the need to re-evaluate the methods I used in the pursuit of that learning goal.

In spite of keeping a weekly account of classroom participation, I recognized that I could not with complete confidence claim to have accurately noted the merit of each student's contribution while simultaneously trying to think of follow-up questions to prompt more focused reflection. For that reason I decided I would not grade class participation the next semester, though I did continue to encourage students to think by using the multi-pronged approach of posing discussion starters and pressing for explication, assigning small group tasks and work in pairs, and requiring that class presentations and written assignments integrate the three areas of scholarship, relationship to ministry setting, and leadership.

The scholarship of Donald A. Schön on professional education was a help at this point as I re-assessed my teaching methods. His research constructed a theoretical system that allowed me to locate my efforts within a broader context. Schön argues that professional schools (whether medical, law, business or divinity) must teach students problem setting skills and not just problem solving strategies. He defines problem setting thus:

> When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the "things" of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them (Schön 1983).

When viewed from a Schönian perspective, my teaching methods had been a way of problem setting so that the course material could be more easily grasped by seminary students. I knew that the majority of students were serving as pastors of local churches, so their contextual frame was already focused on the challenges they encountered in those settings. Now I wanted them to shift their perspective and attend to their situations with a frame of reference informed by the course readings. Therefore, I revised the presentation of course-related scholarship so as to emphasize its potential to help students name and frame ministry-related issues.

The new lecturing plan introduced the course material as different ways of naming local church issues (for example the issue of competition between various theological principles, biblical interpretations, ecumenical values, or cultural traditions). The hope was that this plan would expose students to a means of making sense of chaotic situations by drawing attention to alternate perspectives, by encouraging them to design innovative solutions, and by displaying the professional relevance of academic framing.

A recollection from the previous semester helped focus my course revision process. At the first session of my small seminar class, I had asked the students about their ministry settings and

had invited them to ask questions of me. That action had set a pleasant, conversational tone for class discussions throughout the semester, and I planned to follow that practice in future courses.

Upon further consideration I became conscious of the fact that those introductory conversations had done more than foster a congenial learning environment. Without intending to, I had drawn upon the information gleaned at that initial meeting and used it create class lectures that set problems by pointing out connections between the course and the students' ministries. That first session had given me an impression of my students' professional contexts, and because of that I had been able to help students think through the problem-setting potential of the historical data covered in my lectures.

With these results in mind, the next semester I interviewed all of my students about their ministries and asked them to name the challenges that they faced. The rest of the semester I tried to incorporate into my lectures the information they had shared in order to show how the experts under review could help them set their problems and design responses to them from the perspective of that interpretive frame. In a sense, I was performing the reflection skills I wanted them to practice each week and offering myself as an illustration of my expectation for thoughtfulness.

That semester one student contacted me outside of class to complain about my unclear expectations. I directed him to the grading rubric in the syllabus and gave him a writing task to help him clarify his thinking on the course subject matter. He never completed the task and the quality of thinking reflected in his work never improved.

At the end of the term the students took an open-book essay exam. When I graded the tests, I obscured students' names to resist any tendency towards prejudice. After assessing all of the finals and tallying the point totals, I calculated the grades and then identified which student corresponded with which exam. The student who had sought me out after class earned a C on the final and a D overall in the course. His answers frequently misrepresented the assigned readings and offered little to no insight into how the course subject related to his future role as ordained clergy.

Evaluation

In comparing the rest of the exam answers to each other and to the final grades, I became aware of a pattern. The course final was composed of essay questions that provided clues to naming and framing various hypothetical ministry situations. Each question contained three parts: Scholarship—which section of the course textbook is most relevant to the issues involved?; Relationship—what implications for ministry are raised?; and Leadership—what responsibility would the student have in the given situation? Most of the students could give a complete answer to one section of the three-part question, but many of them failed to provide full answers to every section.

The students who earned Cs in the class usually provided accurate answers to the Scholarship section of the question related to the textbook, while the D-Level students were unable to

perform this minimum task. Those who earned B-Level grades typically identified the correct textbook answer and discussed it in light of the hypothetical ministry challenge (Relationship). The few students who earned As on the exam were able to provide answers that cited the textbook, discussed possible responses to the situation in question, and explained how they would implement an appropriate ministry initiative (Leadership).

The exam questions had required students to set the problem by performing mental multi-tasking. Most of the answers indicated that, while students could think through one task satisfactorily, adding a second and a third dimension to the query created difficulties for the majority. It was as if they could only read one part of the question and were oblivious to the rest of the three-part question.

The exam had successfully differentiated between D-, C-, B-, and A-Level thinkers, and the results were consistent with my grading rubric. D-Level answers incorrectly set the problem, missed the main point of the question and misappropriated information from the primary text used in the class. Conversely, answers written by C-Level students demonstrated that they were able to accurately read the text after they had been introduced to expert interpretations and were then able to use the text to set the problem. B-Level students knew the course material, gave answers that described how to use it to name and frame a ministry problem, and designed responses that fit their ministries. A-Level students understood the readings, saw the relevance the subject held for ministry, and identified in their answers the role they would play in their communities, the responsibilities they had as church leaders, and the duties they would assume in addressing a set ministry situation.

Satisfaction that my grading rubric had worked was tempered by concern that such a stark difference in the cognitive ability of the students continued to exist at the end of the semester. As future leaders of the church, all of the students needed to be able to function at the A-Level. Therefore, helping the C- and D-Level students overcome their inability to see a question in its entirety was the next challenge that had to be addressed, beginning with their inability to comprehend the course syllabus. As the end-of-semester evaluations showed, in spite of including a grading rubric in the syllabus, explaining it at the first class session, planning classes around it, and giving verbal and written feedback based on it, most of the students still complained that my expectations were unclear.[1]

While this failure to grasp the objectives of the course was worrisome, of preeminent concern was the prospect that these mental blindspots might be undermining students' ministries. As Schön has argued, a crucial component in effective leadership is the ability to become "Reflective Practitioners." Such individuals excel at the design-like tasks every leader, including those in the church, are expected to practice. Tasks such as setting the problem, attending to the most important matters, formulating a solution, evaluating the effects of implementation, re-

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[1]See Stanley Fish's criticism of increased reliance on student evaluations to determine teaching effectiveness: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/deep-in-the-heart-of-texas/?emc=eta1 and http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/student-evaluations-part-two/.

designing as new complexities emerge, and negotiating, collaborating and partnering with stakeholders require an aptitude for comprehension and mental multi-tasking that the C- and D-Level students had not exhibited in class (Schön and Rein 1994).

My own attempt to design a grading rubric had sensitized me to the professional challenges my students would face in ministry. Like me, they would have to recognize a need, draw upon past experience when inventing a response to that need, lead others in the implementation of that response, evaluate the effect of that action, and revise the design accordingly. Simultaneously, they would also have to learn to cope with the emotions evoked by designing if they were to be effective leaders.

Requiring students to design (whether the product is a research paper, a worship service, a medical treatment, an architectural drawing, or a business plan) before they have become competent designers will be an anxiety-evoking exercise. Schön identifies "the paradox of learning to design" as an inherent part of professional education and a challenge with which every student must contend. "The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand." (Schön 1987)

For a number of reasons, working the design process raises feelings of "confusion, frustration, and futility" in students (Schön 1987). First of all, trial and error is an integral part of learning to design, which means students will experience failure and make mistakes as they learn by doing. Also, the answer to a successful design can never be known beforehand, and the instructor cannot teach the solution. Therefore each assignment will feel like an attempt to grasp the unknown. Although the process is a stressful one, working with the material, applying it to a variety of set problems, and learning from mistakes as well as from instructor feedback is the only way to become a competent designer.

I recognized that I was requiring my students to engage in a design process that was unfamiliar to them. This was their first attempt to work with the scholarly material introduced in class. Given that fact, it was understandable that they were unsure how to proceed and were experiencing performance anxiety as they tried to meet the expectations of the course. Learning to cope with my own anxieties as I designed my grading rubric and seminary lesson plans made me sympathetic to the emotional challenges my students faced in my classes and would face as professionals responsible for leading ministry initiatives.

In light of these end-of-the-year insights, I was faced with a new design quandary as I questioned how to revise my courses. Were my grading expectations as reasonable as I had originally assumed? If I could not design a course that enabled every student who put forth the effort an equal opportunity to achieve the highest marks in class, was I being unfair? Could one class serve the educational needs of students with different capacities for thinking about professional practice? What proof could I offer that evidence of thinking in course assignments correlated with a greater likelihood of ministerial effectiveness? I had not been a seminary professor long enough to know whether or not the students who earned As in my classes could seamlessly transition from logically thinking about ministry to faithfully acting in ministry.

Furthermore, if the only way students could develop design proficiency was by means of sustained practice and my classes were the only ones at the seminary that applied this design approach to professional education, was it appropriate to introduce them to a skill they would have little opportunity to practice and develop once the semester ended?

Conversations with members of denominational ordination boards convinced me that I should continue to teach seminarians to design despite these uncertainties. The church leaders I met with expect to see evidence of thinking in candidates for ordination. They were unanimous in their opinion that candidates had to be able to articulate an informed theology of ministry that was consistent with the doctrine of the denomination. Fitness for ministry was linked to proficiency in verbal and written communication as well as to familiarity with historical and contemporary theological perspectives on Christian ministry.[2]

This feedback persuaded me that grade inflation harmed students because it did not paint a realistic picture of how their work compared to the standards of ordination boards. By utilizing a grading rubric that evaluated written and oral assignments for the comprehension of scholarship, the exploration of relationship, and the instigation of leadership, these expectations led to course designs that prepared students for their ordination interviews.

After discovering the expectations to which denominational leaders would be holding seminary graduates, I knew that the next version of the grading rubric and accompanying course design would have to encourage students to practice theologically-informed thinking during class discussions and in their writing assignments. I also saw that space throughout the semester for a "design crit," a one-on-one conversation about a student's ministry design, would have to be worked into the schedule as a way to help students cope with the learning paradox. My memory of diagramming my struggling student's ideas into a flowchart and helping her overcome her blind spots is one experience I can build upon as I develop this new class feature.

Additionally, the invitation to engage in theological reflection and design review would have to be a part of every course offered at the seminary if the C- and D-Level students were going to develop these skill proficiencies before they graduated and faced ordination boards.

After teaching five seminary courses the realization dawned on me that I could not single-handedly achieve my teaching objectives. One semester-long course could not help the C- and D-Level students acquire the mental capabilities they would need to meet my expectations and to function effectively in ministry. Such achievements would require that every seminary class gave them the chance to develop and hone these talents. An entire curricular sequence that facilitated mental progression from basic to complex stages would have to be developed. Teaching students to think, I realized, requires a faculty.

Conclusion

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[2]These expectations were expressed by representatives from the Arkansas, Memphis, Mississippi, and North Alabama Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church.

"Will there be grace in grading?" a seminary student asked. I admit to being dumbfounded by the question. My response was that no, there would not be grace in grading, however there could be grace in the final exam, meaning that I would not ask trick questions and the exam would be based on topics we had covered in class.

Now I would revise that response and point to the grace of a grading rubric that resists grade inflation by identify rational distinctions between grades, one that explicates the bias of the grader and makes expectations more transparent, one that prompts the instructor to teach in such a manner that there is an increased likelihood that students will be able to meet those expectations, one that helps the professor become a reflective contributor to an educational process shared among colleagues, and one that prepares students for the challenges of designing their own ministries.

Appendix

The grading rubric was adapted for every course. In general, the rubric in the syllabus was a variation on this basic system:

Grading scale

A (4.00)--Exceptional work that demonstrates a reflective, knowledgeable synthesis of course content, ministry setting, and ministerial identity. (Scholarship-Relationship-Leadership)

B (3.00)--Good work that displays a comprehension of the course material and its relevance for the Church. (Scholarship-Relationship)

C (2.00)--Acceptable work that accurately reports the course primary texts. (Scholarship)

D (1.00)—Marginal work that frequently misrepresents the subjects introduced in the course

F (0.00)—Unacceptable work that exhibits a lack of proficiency in grammar, logic, and reading comprehension

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