

KICKING THE HABIT con't

which a student can go out there and say how much competence he has, in the best judgement of those qualified to determine that type of competence. Grades only serve to communicate on his behalf - even if they do not do this too well.

So I grant that grades are not precise or perfect reflectors of one's competence. Nor can one say that 80% means twice as much competence as 40% or that 70% means 10% more than 60%. But we all know that. They are only an approximate guide to the profile of a student's abilities. (and even here there are exceptions). It is difficult to deny that such self-knowledge is an extremely important step in the learning process.

Furthermore, to knock down the assumption that grades reflect learning (not uniquely Cregierian) is to knock down a straw man. Grades do not reflect learning - they cannot. They reflect performance and there are performance changes over both short and long periods of time. Memory, comprehension and intelligence are reflected in performance on exams. But given all these necessary ingredients, performance is to a great extent influenced by motivational factors. Grades reflect how well an individual performs (or exercises his competence) not how much learning is inside him. Is it any wonder then that prospective employers (especially in business organizations) do pay some attention to grades? They are and have every right to be, interested in how one performs, i.e. how well, and also how motivated he is to put his learning to some use.

Again it is a truism to say that grades are not related to intellectual ability - or creativity (and neither are these two very close relatives). Grades in history only reflect ability in history not overall intellectual ability. Again we are dealing more with attitudes towards grades which can and should be changed.

Memory and facts - food for thought. Others have known it before, but experimental psychologists have known it more definitely since 1885 that forgetting is a decreasing (and negatively accelerated) function of time, which simply means you forget a negative amount more quickly and then you forget less and less of the remainder. It has also been known for a fairly long time that facts fade away faster than ideas or concepts. So here the evidence is fine and strong - and would you believe it, for

the first and the last time - the author has done it!

However, let us face these facts. Thinking does not take place in a vacuum. So without facts to think about, one would not possibly develop any kind of thinking - leave alone critical thinking. Facts are like ladders on which one climbs to higher planes except that in this case one may dispose of these ladders because since in the pursuit of learning there is only one way and that's up. But one keeps running into new and different facts no matter how "up" one is, while the facts one has left behind (if they are still in one's vision which is also expanding) assume a different perspective.

Also important to keep in mind is the difference between storage and retrieval. It is the latter which suffers with the passage of time. Once facts have been rehearsed (as they are for exams which stress facts) for any length of time - even extending beyond a few minutes, believe me, they enter what psychologists call the long-term memory system. Even though they may not be retrieved so easily - ease of relearning shows that they had been in 'cold storage' all the time.

The learning of facts is not as useless or hopeless (because one forgets them anyway) as it is sometimes made out to be. Facts once learned do change the person, mostly for the better, even if only indirectly by way of permitting thinking to feed upon them. But probably the most important function served by factual learning is the respect it promotes for factual evidence as against empty opinions. Facts will not down so easily.

So to say that because so much of factual learning is forgotten in any case soon after the exams, and hence useless, is an argument that will not hold too much water. The very exercise that went into retaining the facts until exams and presenting them in some organized form is worth every bit of effort and minor sacrifice of time that has gone into it. For even if it has done nothing for his critical thinking, it would have provided the student with self-knowledge, i.e. the degree of confidence he could place on future occasions (and there will be many) when he is called upon to make an organized presentation of facts under the constraints of time. In other words, the student learns that - to forget

is human - but to remember (and have a good memory for facts) can be devine!! Watch out for those low correlations - they are sometimes far below or above the belt. The author is now at the end of his tether. This last portion of the brass tacks is too slippery. He does not realize this and hence needs a warning. There is overwhelming data, he claims, which shows that grades are poor predictors of adult accomplishment and are

not correlated to income. Here one has to watch out simply because such spuriously low correlations could result from restricting the range of values of the variables. This restriction of range (known as truncated range) is fairly common in behavioural research conducted in Universities and colleges where the subjects have been pre-selected for intellectual abilities and other variables. Consequently, attempts to demonstrate the relationship between grades and other variables like income or accomplishment, in such homogenous groups, could result in low correlations because of this restricted range of values of the variables. Let me elaborate. Even if there were a high positive correlation between grades and income (or accomplishment) when you take the whole range of values that grades can take from 0-100 this would still go down to a near zero (or very low) correlation if you considered values, say only in the upper range between 70 and 90. Certainly all those medical students must have been in the fairly high range to begin with. Like the case of the cup and the lip, there's many a slip between a 70 & a 90!!

Aye, there's the rub - old chap! According to the Goodman-Cregier view, students who conceive of learning as meaningful and legitimate need no competition to motivate them. This is where the rub lies, for such a conception is not inborn but the very product of higher learning. It takes at least a few years of University education to reach such an enlightened state of the mind. Seeing learning as meaningful in itself is, therefore; an end-product not a pre-requisite of University education.

Moreover, the issue is further confused by Goodman and Cregier. The purpose of competition (artificial or natural) is not to motivate a student to see learning as meaningful and