



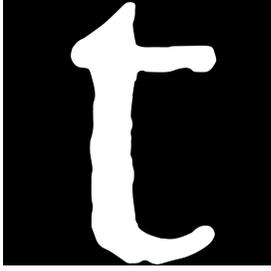
Discussions with Wolff

“Grades Are Capitalism in Action. Let’s Get Them Out of Our Schools”

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The following discussion prompts were written by Professor Wolff to create a discussion based around his piece *“Grades Are Capitalism in Action. Let’s Get Them Out of Our Schools”*. Please note, this article was written by Prof. Wolff on August 5th, 2019. Keep the date in mind as it offers relevant historical context.

1. We grade many products and commodities “A”, “B” and so on. Why does our society think its appropriate to do that to school students?
2. Education entails developing the many different aspects of a person’s abilities and capabilities. Evaluating an education’s results would need to be comparably complex covering those different aspects. A letter grade cannot and does not do that. So why is it required of teachers to assign grades?
3. Who benefits from the grading system?
4. Do grades reinforce hierarchy, ranking, etc in our society?
5. Is meritocracy a nice word for “supremacy”?
6. “An economic system that fails to provide good jobs at good incomes and the training needed to fill them to everyone in the labor force deserves blame.” Do you agree or disagree and why?
7. “Meritocracy is important to capitalism because it redirects that blame away from the capitalist system and onto the individual who has no job or earns inadequate income or lacks the appropriate training. Capitalism is a blame-the-victim system.” Do you agree or disagree and why?



Grades Are Capitalism in Action. Let's Get Them Out of Our Schools.

Richard D. Wolff

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The capitalist economic system has major failures. It generates extreme, socially divisive inequalities of wealth and income. It consistently fails to achieve full employment. Many of its jobs are boring, dangerous and/or mind-numbing. Every four to seven years, it suffers a mysterious downdraft in which millions of people lose jobs and incomes, businesses collapse, falling tax revenues undermine public services, and so on. If these failures were widely perceived as the inherent failures of the capitalist system, the desirability and thus sustainability of capitalism itself might vanish.

How, then, has capitalism survived? Its persistence can best be explained in terms of ideology. The system produces and disseminates interpretations of its failures that blame these problems not on capitalism itself, but on other altogether different "causes." Institutions have developed mechanisms to anchor such interpretations widely and deeply in the popular consciousness.

One key example is the concept of "meritocracy." Schools are a key institution that teaches and practices meritocracy via the mechanism of grading. From primary school through the completion of my doctorate, I suffered the imposition of grades (A, B, C, etc.). Since becoming a professor, I have constantly been required to assign grades to my students for matters such as papers, exams and class performance.

Grading takes up much of my time that could be better spent on teaching or otherwise directly interacting with students. Meanwhile, grading has little educational payoff for students. It disrespects them as thinking people. And finally, it chiefly serves employers — but often in ways that are not much good for them either. In short, grading remains an immensely wasteful, ineffective and largely negative aspect of education at all levels: primary education, secondary education and higher education.

Let's start from the teacher's perspective as grader. When I read a paper or exam, I can see when a student presents a reasonable version of what I intended in my lectures or what I found worthwhile in the assigned readings. But of

course, I cannot be sure whether the student is simply demonstrating their short-term memory and repeating whatever I stressed in class, or whether the student has genuinely understood — in the sense of grasping and internalizing — key points, as part of the student's own intellectual formation. Without much more time and interaction with the individual student than schools enable or allow in 99 percent of cases, I cannot know which it is when I assign a grade.

When I see that a student has not understood the concepts that were taught, the possibilities become more numerous. Did the student understand the material differently from me in ways not reducible to matters of right and wrong? After all, every piece of verbal or written material is subject to perfectly reasonable multiple interpretations. Education is not well served by insisting on one answer as right and alternatives as wrong. Such insistence is more like indoctrination than education; it undermines creative, critical thinking.

Alternately, did the student's lack of understanding reflect poor teaching more than poor learning? Education in schools is, after all, a relationship between people: a relationship to which both persons contribute. Grades reflect and represent the power of one side in that relationship over the other. Grades students get from teachers affect their intellectual development, their school and work careers, and major dimensions of their self-esteem. Most students never assign grades to their teachers. The few that can know full well how much less power their grading of teachers wields than the grades imposed on them by teachers. Moreover, teachers and students disagree over their relative responsibilities for "poor performances" by either. I was present in countless faculty meetings where teachers defensively blamed students entirely for the poor grades they "had achieved" (i.e., teachers had given them).

Should teachers have the compensated time to carefully read, listen to, or watch multiple presentations and responses by each student? Should teachers have the compensated time to explain to each student how they have approached and evaluated their work? Would not education be best achieved if students and teachers together were able to discuss, compare and debate their respective interpretations of questions, answers, issues and analyses? If all that were done — a very rare scenario in the U.S. educational system today — why also assign a grade? It would add little of substance.

Today's economic system precludes teachers engaging so carefully, repeatedly and thoroughly with students. Capitalism's enterprise organization — a small minority of employers (owners and their top executives) directing and controlling a large majority of employees — is replicated in private and public educational institutions. That organization and its financial constraints combine to preclude the interactions among teachers and students that real education requires. Beyond docile acceptance of the second-rate education they can offer, most schools shy away from efforts to hold the system responsible for fear of antagonizing university donors or officials.

While capitalism's imposed limits help explain the practice of grading, they do not excuse it. It is a very poor substitute for far superior educational practices thereby foregone.

Grading is not only a mechanism designed to save money spent on “education.” Grades also function as a major foundation and support for the meritocracy. The merit ideology functions as a crucial defense mechanism for capitalism given its failures. The U.S. idea of meritocracy asserts that one can quantitatively rank individuals’ qualitative capacities. Each individual’s work skills, production capabilities, contributions to output — as well as their intelligence, discipline, social skills, and much more — can be ranked. This framework holds that there are some individuals who best or most possess such qualities; some who possess the worst or least of them; and many who occupy positions between those two quantitative extremes.

Within the framework of meritocratic ideology, employers seek to hire the “best” employee and are willing to pay such individual workers more than they pay workers with “less” merit (ranked lower on some scale of productivity). In meritocratic logic, those offered no jobs can only blame themselves: They must assume they have too little merit. Workers learn in school to seek to accumulate merit and achieve higher rankings along the scales that count for employers. Coalitions of educators and employers have inserted the educational system into this merit system as an important place to acquire and accumulate merit that employers will recognize and reward. Better jobs and rising pay reward rising merit acquired through more education as well as “on-the-job” training.

Schools not only enable the consumers of education to acquire and accumulate merit; their operations also exemplify the merit system they support. Harvard University conveys more merit, per credit, than Kentucky State University. Schools that signal more merit can charge students more money. Among schools, within each school, and within each classroom, merit rules.

Meritocracy and the educational system’s key place within it are important because capitalism’s survival depends on them. The merit system organizes how individual employees interpret the unemployment they suffer, the job they hate, the wage or salary they find so insufficient, the creativity their job stifles, and so on. It starts as schools train individuals to accept the grades assigned to them as measures of individual academic merit. That prepares them to accept their jobs and incomes as, likewise, measures of their individual productive merit. Under this framework, unequal grades, jobs and income can all be seen as appropriate and fair: Rewards are supposedly proportional to one’s individual merit.

This paradigm leaves little room for any systemic criticism. Inadequate educations are not blamed on an inadequate educational system unable or unwilling to fund high-quality mass schooling. Unemployment, bad jobs and insufficient incomes are not blamed on the capitalist economic system. Had they been so blamed, both systems could well have come under criticism and opposition and died off long ago.

Meritocracy redirects the blame for capitalism’s failures onto its victims. Schools teach meritocracy, and grading is the method.