

Students' Grades and Student Gradings

May 23, 1973

Many *Current Contents* readers are teachers. The use of CC® in university instruction is significant. Some professors use CC to find interesting current-reading assignments. Others make regular perusal of CC a training assignment in itself. Large numbers of students use CC to feed their sophisticated reading habits. This includes both undergraduate and graduate students.

I myself teach a course in information retrieval at the University of Pennsylvania. I am always concerned about the effectiveness of the course material and my presentation of it. Any evidence of one's effectiveness is gratifying, since so many students seem impervious to even the most exciting ideas. Their unperturbable "cool" so often leaves you with the feeling you are lecturing a stone wall. Nevertheless, student ratings of my performance have been encouraging. But I am con-

cerned lest those ratings are affected by my somewhat lenient attitude in grading.

With rare exceptions my students do whatever I require for a passing grade. First, there is a large dose of reading of reprints I obtain from usually willing authors. Then there is my "bootleg" subliminal course in how to use a library and how to write a paper. Finally, each student reconstructs the history of a selected topic in scientific research (preferably a dissertation topic). For this he uses citation network methods I have described elsewhere.^{1,2} Some students have become interested enough in information retrieval to supplement the course work with elaborate algorithms and computer programs. Most of them are taking degrees in computer and information sciences.

Students' evaluation of instructors doesn't appear to be affected by grades!³ Apparently

most students are as honest in evaluation of their own efforts as they are critical in evaluation of their instructors'. One might assume that a student who receives an A from an instructor whom others rate low *might* be inclined to rate him high. *Au contraire*, students who get high grades are very demanding in their expectations. They rate their instructors lower than others do. It was not proven whether students who just barely squeak through show a bias in favor of the instructor. I am inclined to think they may.

I tell my students quite explicitly that it is a waste of money--theirs, their parents', the government's, etc.--to attend lectures merely to obtain course credit. They could take another elective course of greater interest. A few drop out after the first lecture. By the end of the spring semester, I am usually satisfied that my efforts and theirs have been worthwhile. Most students have become quite knowledgeable about a broad range of topics in information science. I am confident that none will ever consider writing a paper or dissertation without first undertaking a comprehensive literature search. The field of computer sciences is

badly in need of this discipline! In addition, if they intend to remain up-to-date in their chosen fields, they must use one or more methods of current awareness. As any instructor will understand, presenting the course is of great advantage to me personally. I am continuously reminded of the gaps in my own knowledge of information science. More important, I think my understanding of the younger generation has been aided significantly. Somehow I feel younger for the association.

1. Garfield, E. "Historiographs, librarianship, and the history of science." In: *Toward a theory of librarianship: papers in honor of Jesse Hawk Shera*, ed. by Conrad H. Rawski (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1973), pp. 380-402.
2. ----- . Primordial concepts, citation indexing, and historio-bibliography. *Journal of Library History* 2(3):235-249, 1967.
3. Shen, L.C. Does the professor who gives higher grades receive higher student ratings? *IEEE Transactions on Education* E16 (1):61-62, 1973. (The author is with Cullen College of Engineering, University of Houston, Houston, Texas.)