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Grading Pains?

Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *College of the Holy Cross*

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It is that time of the year.

After weeks and months of class sessions and office hours, the spring semester is now over. There is, of course, something left for us teachers to do before the semester is *really* finished. (I hear that groan.)

Grading is, I think, on top of the “most hated” list for many if not most teachers. I have heard colleagues in religion and theology describe the end-of-the-semester grading as like being in “purgatory” and in “hell.”

But what makes this part of our work so dreadful? Is it because grading at the end of a semester is anticlimactic after fourteen or fifteen weeks of experimentation and excitement in classroom interaction? Is it because we stress over if and how a bad grade might affect a student’s confidence and future? Is it because student performance in these finals confronts us teachers to a degree on how well we have taught? Is it because we realize that a semester-ending final, whether in the form of an examination or a paper, is at best an artificial assessment tool that cannot adequately indicate whether a student has had a meaningful, transformative engagement with the topics and materials at hand? Or could the diagnosis for our dread sometimes be something much more prosaic?

The late literary critic, Wayne C. Booth, also compared grading to “hell” in an essay he wrote in the early 1960s: “Boring from Within: The Art of the Freshman Essay.” While Booth’s essay is over half a century old and targets teachers of English in undergraduate teaching, it has something that perhaps teachers of all subjects and at all levels should consider even today. For Booth, the hellish experience of grading has much to do with boredom. Teachers, forgetting that “any teaching that bores the teacher is sure to fail,” often give assignments that they themselves find boring.



Booth’s point challenges us to consider how often we operate in a kind of default mode when we plan our student assignments. Do we come up with assignments that will be easy for us to grade, or do we invest ourselves in designing something that will be fun for students to do and refreshing for us to review? Booth is careful to acknowledge that even our most imaginative and innovative assignments may not work every time and may not work with every student. As some of us would like to tell our students, however: it is the effort that counts.

Booth further suggests that we need to provide students with three things if we want to save ourselves from the hellish boredom of grading: (1) a sharp sense of the audience students are being asked to address and persuade; (2) a topic or issue to which students can relate and at a level that students can engage; and (3) adequate exposure to good examples that would help students develop as writers.

To put Booth’s suggestions into practice, we will need to, first of all, design assignments that are more specific than general. Without a specified and specific audience, students often see themselves as writing either for themselves or, more likely, for their teacher; as a result, their work has a tendency to be uninterestingly general or, worse, merely parroting or regurgitating their teacher’s ideas or opinions. Booth’s second point requires us to know our students: What do they care about? What are they capable of? It also requires us to further assess how one’s course material is relevant to one’s students as well as where those students are in terms of their ability to engage. The fact that you have assigned *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutiérrez as a required text for your seminary class does not mean that your students can say something substantial to Christians in Hong Kong about the city’s “umbrella movement,” especially if your students have not been concerned with the history of Asia and its current

events. Similarly, asking college freshmen to write a thirty-page essay is almost a guarantee that you will read pages and pages of meaningless “fluff.”

Booth’s third point may seem a little more oblique. As a literary critic and a teacher of English, Booth is emphasizing here the need to expose students to fiction and good narratives so they can become more observant and better develop what Booth calls their “writer personalities.” What Booth seems to have in mind here is our responsibility as teachers to equip and empower students so they can do what we are asking them to do. Since Booth’s “exposure” emphasis seems to rely on the power of imitation, I guess we, as teachers of religion and theology, can ask ourselves several questions. Do I expose my students to materials that demonstrate uses of critical thinking and reasoned arguments? Do I myself model what it means to critically engage the very materials that I assign to my students, so they can see that I use these materials to think for myself instead of using them to think for me? Given Booth’s focus on writing, we may also ask ourselves: Knowing how publications in our field tend to be written in dry and boring prose, do I make a point to expose my students to books and articles that are actually not only informative but also interesting? Do I choose and assign resources that are actually delightful to read?

I am sure that there are multiple reasons why grading can be so painful for us teachers, but perhaps we can work to minimize if not eliminate one factor: that of largely self-inflicted boredom.

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