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Grading Glitch

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National Association of Independent Schools

It was Jennifer's second year as a language arts teacher. She was enjoying the work at Independence Boarding School, although she was concerned about the overemphasis some students put on grades instead of on learning — especially one girl named Nancy. On a couple of occasions that year, Nancy had actually questioned Jennifer's scoring on her essays, and tried to nudge a paper from a B to a B, or to make her case for a solid A instead of an A-. On one occasion, Jennifer tried to lightly remind Nancy that a plus or minus here or there is less important than depth of understanding or expression. Nancy frowned and explained that, in fact, a plus or minus could make all the difference between being valedictorian of the class or merely salutatorian. It was obvious that Nancy's goal was to have the highest grade point average in her class — and to that end was quick to challenge grades, especially those that come with a certain level of subjectivity, such as essays.

Perhaps that's why Jennifer felt slightly relieved that the final exam for Nancy's class would be mostly multiple choice and short answers to questions about *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and other texts from the semester. There would be no gray area with which Nancy could challenge or cajole. But to Jennifer's dismay, an issue arose just the same. One entire page of Nancy's exam was blank. Apparently in her haste or overconfidence she had skipped over 10 questions, costing her dearly. Jennifer felt conflicted about what to do. She had a strong suspicion that Nancy had simply made an error, was perfectly capable of answering the questions, and would be devastated to see that her score landed in the C range because of this oversight.

Jennifer tried desperately to think about how she might respond if this had been any other student, one who had never pushed her about her grading system or who didn't feel it was the end of the world to pay for a mistake by receiving a lower grade. Jennifer was caught in a difficult right vs. right dilemma. It was right, on the one hand, to give Nancy the benefit of the doubt and invite her to complete the missing answers on the page she had skipped. But wasn't it also right to use the same approach for Nancy as for anyone else? Wasn't it actually a good thing for Nancy to learn that we all make mistakes sometimes, that a low grade isn't the end of the world? Jennifer imagined that other students in a similar fix who would probably accept their own blunder with a shrug and a smile.

Jennifer could consider the "justice vs. mercy" angle to this predicament, since she was in the position of either upholding the same grading approach used for everybody else or making an exception in Nancy's case. In fact, a few students had been stumped by one or two short answer questions and had simply left these blank. They knew full well that points would be taken off for these blank spaces. Technically, if Jennifer treated Nancy like everybody else, she'd take points off for each question skipped on that page. But the "mercy" side of this dilemma compelled Jennifer to consider the difference between not knowing an answer, and accidentally skipping items by mistake. Doing what was right in the short term vs. the long term was another angle for Jennifer to consider. She was wary of setting a precedent just to keep Nancy from challenging her again. Would giving Nancy a chance to fill in the missing page prompt students in the future to complain that they'd skipped test items "by mistake"? And how could she be sure that it was fair to the rest of the students to meet Nancy's needs even in this case. Would deferring to this individual risk teaching the rest of Jennifer's students a negative message about favoritism or coercion?

Jennifer spent a sleepless night tussling with this dilemma. She found herself double and triple guessing her own intuition, wondering if she was gauging Nancy's reaction correctly and imagining what the other students might think, depending on Jennifer's decision.

The next morning, she called a close friend at another school and they talked through the situation together. First, they tried to imagine what would result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people impacted by Jennifer's decision. They discussed the likely fallout if Jennifer simply graded Nancy's paper as is. Nancy would be devastated and angry, and there was a good chance Jennifer would hear from Nancy's parents, especially since this was a final exam and weighted more significantly than some other grades for the semester. But would anyone else really be affected by Nancy's low grade? Jennifer was not grading on a curve, so the other students' grades would remain the same regardless. But what about the lesson taught when a teacher bends to student intimidation? If Jennifer gave Nancy a chance to remedy her error, was the "greatest number" actually all the other students who learned that it pays to strong arm a teacher? Jennifer felt equally confused by both "consequentialist" options, so she considered a different approach. What standards could be developed through this situation? From now on, when Jennifer or any other teacher encountered a student overly concerned about grades, would she want to maintain a standard of consistency and "blind justice," or work case by case and endure more sleepless nights? Jennifer was tempted by the clean and neat solutions: "Skipped items are counted off, no exceptions." But then her friend asked, "What if you were Nancy?"

Jennifer imagined the frustration Nancy would experience in this case. For once, this wasn't a question of nudging Jennifer a half point higher on a subjective question of quality. This was a clear oversight on material Nancy knew well and had demonstrated throughout the rest of the exam. Couldn't Nancy interpret Jennifer's inflexibility as personal, and an opportunity to repay Nancy for all the nagging during the rest of the year? And in fact, would Nancy be right in this interpretation?

In the end, talking through various ways to resolve the dilemma helped Jennifer better understand her own motivations and concerns. She realized that, in fact, she had been worn out by Nancy's badgering during the school year and should have managed that differently from the start. She also could not bring herself to believe that, in any other student's case, she'd be adamant about sticking to the "skipped items mean points off" approach. If another student had clearly skipped a section of the exam by

mistake, Jennifer finally realized, she was likely to give the student a second chance. In fact, Jennifer understood, she did want to exact a tiny price from Nancy because of her excessive focus on grades. It was by thinking through the many angles that Jennifer realized her own petty reaction to Nancy, and that allowed her to see more clearly what she felt to be right.

The next day, Jennifer announced to the class that one student had skipped a page of the exam by mistake, and would be given the opportunity to complete it before final grading. None of her students objected, and when Nancy was discreetly informed that it was her exam, she was grateful and apologetic about the mistake. She stopped in Jennifer's classroom that very afternoon after school, and filled in the missing items without hesitation. Clearly Nancy knew the material, and her final grade would reflect that.

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Note: This and other dilemmas on this site come to you without their real-life resolutions. We encourage you to think for yourself about how you might resolve them, since the nature of each dilemma is highly individualistic. In sharing these dilemmas, we do not endorse them in any way, but rather offer them for your consideration.

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