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Are Some of the Things Faculty Do to Maximize Their Student Evaluation of Teachers Scores Unethical?

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Abstract This paper provides a philosophical analysis of some of the things faculty do to maximize their Student Evaluation of Teachers (SET) scores. It examines 28 practices that are claimed to be unethical methods for maximizing SET scores. The paper offers an argument concerning the morality of each behavior and concludes that 13 of the 28 practices suggest unethical behavior. The remaining 15 behaviors are morally permissible.

Keywords Student evaluation of teachers · Teaching · Testing · Grading · Grade inflation

Introduction

The Student Evaluation of Teachers (SET) has become ubiquitous in higher education. Although peer review of teaching remains an important part of the tenure process at many institutions, the evaluation of faculty by students has become an essential and controversial criterion in merit pay decisions, tenure and promotion decisions, and in contract renewal decisions for faculty who are not eligible for tenure. The weight given to the SET by decision-makers in these vital personnel matters has prompted many faculty members to seek ways in which to maximize their SET scores. Although there is a considerable literature concerning the SET, not much has been said about the morality of the practices faculty engage in to maximize their scores. As Crumbley, Flinn and Reichelt observed in a recent article in this journal, “there is a paucity of research (even in ethics literature) on unethical SET management” (Crumbley

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et al. 2010, p. 192). This article is an effort to help fill the lacuna by providing a moral analysis of some of the things faculty do to maximize their SET scores.¹

“As a philosopher, my approach is fundamentally conceptual, qualitative and normative” (Corlett 2014, p. 2). First, Crumbley and Smith provide a list of 28 practices they describe as “recognized methods” for maximizing SET scores which they call Rules of the Trade (Crumbley and Smith 2000, pp. 46–47). Since Crumbley and others merely assert, but do not argue, that the practices on this list are “probable unethical behaviors” (Crumbley et al. 2010, p. 192), we are not given any reason(s) for thinking that they are likely to be morally impermissible. In response to this lack of justification, an argument concerning the morality of each practice is offered. Although a numerical list of the practices is provided in the Appendix, I will not address them in numerical order; rather, I will discuss each as part of a group of practices. While there is some overlap among them, the practices can be divided into five categories: Course Content, Teaching Time, Student Engagement, Testing, and Grading.

Second, the ethical standard by which I will assess each action is John Stuart Mill’s Liberty Principle. Mill’s consequentialist principle is an appropriate standard for this initial analysis because many are concerned that behavior aimed at maximizing SET scores will often result in negative consequences. The Liberty Principle is also consistent with the strong regard that faculty typically have for academic freedom. According to Mill,

the sole end for which mankind are warranted individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others (Mill 1975, pp. 10–11).

Mill takes what he calls “utility in the largest sense,” i.e., utility grounded on the interests of persons, to be “the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (Mill 1975, p. 12). These interests

authorise the subjection of individual spontaneity to external control, only in respect to those actions of each, which concern the interest of other people. If any one does an act hurtful to others, there is a *prima facie* case for punishing him, by law, or, where legal penalties are not safely applicable, by general disapprobation (Mill 1975, p. 12).

A practice will be deemed unethical, therefore, if the consequences of employing it include harm to the interests of others. Our primary concern here will be with the interest students have in obtaining an education.²

Finally, it is important to note an assumption that seems to inform the view held by Crumbley and others on teaching practices in higher education generally, including those practices that are meant to help maximize SET scores. Although the practices in question have been characterized as “pander pollution” (Crumbley et al. 2010, p. 192) and are thought to be “dysfunctional” and “counterproductive to teaching effectiveness and the learning process” (Crumbley and Smith 2000, p. 45), it is far from clear that many of the practices, when employed individually, constitute a harm to the student interest in obtaining an education. The assumption seems to be that there is some universal pedagogical standard which each of the

¹ I use “moral” and “ethical” interchangeably.

² There is some disagreement as to what we ought to take Mill to mean by “interest.” See Rees (1960) and Ten (1968) for contrasting interpretations. The view I am supposing is consistent with Feinberg’s understanding of individual interests as “distinguishable components of a person’s good or well-being” (Feinberg 1986, p. 146).

practices violates that results in dysfunctional teaching. However, this ignores the fact that “few faculty have been trained in the rigors of effective classroom pedagogy as well as on course design, including the construction of effective course syllabi” (Corlett 2014, p. 10). Although faculty are rightly viewed as professionals, i.e., as a group that “possesses and applies specialized knowledge built on research and theory, typically obtained through a postsecondary program that has been accredited or certified by the profession itself” (Biggs 2008a, p. 113), they are largely left to their own devices when it comes to teaching. Indeed, an important part of academic freedom is that, in general, faculty are free to teach in the manner they find appropriate for their environment. This typically includes the freedom to employ whatever materials they choose for a given course and to assess student performance in a way they see fit. So, given the lack of formal instructor training received by many (if not most) faculty, and given the professional license of academic freedom to teach what and how they choose, a more appropriate assumption might be that faculty have (or in the case of very junior faculty, are in the process of developing) a conception of what and how they teach at the various undergraduate and graduate levels, and that this conception includes some minimum standard of performance on the part of their students.

Some may object to this assumption because of the conception of teaching they think it entails. According to this objection, assuming that faculty members set their own minimum standard of student performance allows for even the most trifling effort on the part of faculty to count as ethical teaching practice. This is an important concern. However, while it is certainly true that university faculty are generally “on their honor” to a much greater extent than members of many other professions insofar as the setting of standards is concerned, this does not foreclose determining when some aspect of teaching practice is harmful to student interest and therefore unethical. Take the dissemination of false information for example. Since faculty are presumed to be “guided by a deep conviction of the worth and dignity of the advancement of knowledge” and are expected to “devote their energies to developing and improving their scholarly competence” while accepting the “obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge” (AAUP 2009, para. 1), the dissemination of false information by faculty, whether deliberately or as a result of insufficient scholarly rigor, counts as unethical behavior—it constitutes a harm to the student interest in obtaining an education. Many of Crumbley and Smith’s 28 Rules of the Trade are unethical for the same reason.

Course Content

Rule 2. Reduce the course material covered and drop the most difficult material first.

If the consequence of following Rule 2 is that the amount and difficulty of the material fails to meet the instructor’s minimum standard for the course, then following it is unethical—it harms the student interest in obtaining an education by giving students less than they ought to receive from a given course. On the other hand, if following the rule does not result in the amount and difficulty of the course material falling below the instructor’s minimum standard, the practice is morally permissible. Since the morality of following Rule 2 depends on whether or not doing so is consistent with an instructor’s minimum standard, let us say that following Rule 2 is only *prima facie* morally permissible.

Rule 6. Spoon-feed watered-down material to the students.

There is some ambiguity in the first hyphenated expression of Rule 6. On the one hand, “spoon-feed” could mean a deliberately slow pace in delivering lectures, etc. On the other hand, it could mean simplifying one’s presentation in order to make the material easier to understand. The second hyphenated expression, “watered-down,” probably means reducing the quantity and/or difficulty of the material. If this understanding is correct, then the analysis of Rule 2 (sup.) holds for Rule 6 as well. Like Rule 2, the behavior prescribed by Rule 6 may or may not be morally permissible depending upon whether following it would result in the course failing to meet the instructor’s minimum standard. Following Rule 6 is therefore only *prima facie* morally permissible.

Rule 20. Use simple slides so the students do not need to read the book and post the slides to the course website from which test questions will be taken.

The phrase “so the students do not need to read the book” in Rule 20 makes it a bit unclear. How does the level of simplicity in the “slides” make it unnecessary for students to read the book? Perhaps the point of the rule is this: use simple slides, post them to the course website and base the test questions on the slides. Since having students purchase a book that is not needed for the course would be a harm to their financial interest, and since deleting reference to the book does not seem to change the thrust of the rule, let us cast this rule in the best possible light by assuming that the book is not required for the course and that we can safely ignore the reference to it.

The use of simplified material called for by the rule does not appear to be unethical, assuming the material is being used to clarify and establish the basic ideas to be covered and elaborated upon by the instructor. Posting this material to the course website is probably permissible as well, if it is being provided to aid student learning. However, this practice does raise at least one concern. If the material goes too far beyond an outline of the presentation’s content, it may present a harm to the student interest in obtaining an education. As Corlett reminds us about providing copies of our lecture notes to students, “[o]ne reason why this is a bad practice, pedagogically speaking, is that it robs students of the cognitive processes (information storage and retrieval, for example) that are crucial for them to develop in note taking” (Corlett 2005, p. 39). So in order to be permissible, the material must be such that providing it will not make it unnecessary for students to take notes during class.

The matter of taking test questions only from the simplified material may be a more contentious aspect of this rule. If “from which test questions will be taken” means that the *content* of the slides is the same as that of the test questions, then this is as it should be. One aim of an examination is to give students a means of demonstrating their grasp of the course material, so test questions should be based on the material covered in the course. However, if “from which test questions will be taken” means that the slides just *are* the test questions, then this may be unethical behavior if students are also given the answers to these questions. The morality of giving students exam questions and answers will be discussed in the section on testing (inf.), for now let us try to keep Rule 20 in the best possible light and suppose that it only calls for providing the content of the test questions in the posted material. This being the case, acting in accordance with this rule is morally permissible.

Rule 22. Allow students to participate in determining material coverage and the number of points assigned to difficult test questions.

As long as the extent to which students merely *participate* in making these determinations is managed by the instructor, and as long as students are not given the actual test questions before the test is administered, following this rule does not appear to present any obvious harm to students. The behavior prescribed by Rule 22 is therefore morally permissible.

Teaching Time

Rule 11. Give [the] SET as early as possible in the term and then give hard exams, projects, etc.

Rule 11 seems to imply either that no exams or assignments be given to students prior to their completion of the SET, or that only the least challenging exams and assignments be given to students prior to their completion of the SET. Presumably this is done to create the impression that the work for the course will be easier than it actually is. As to the notion of giving the SET “as early as possible,” if this means as soon as physically possible, then following the rule could conceivably result in the SET being administered during the first week of classes. If it were to be given this early it might be counter-productive to the aim of getting high SET scores, since it might give students a negative impression of the instructor. Other than the possibility of this negative impression of the instructor, there does not appear to be any obvious impact on students from following this rule. It is important to note, however, that if giving the SET as early as physically possible would result in the instructor running afoul of an institution’s policy regarding the administration of the SET (as it certainly will in many cases), then doing so would be impermissible—it would be a violation of school policy. Since Rule 11 does not direct faculty to break school policy, let us assume that it means to give the SET as early as physically possible, within the bounds of any prevailing institutional policy. This being the case, and given the absence of harmful consequences, following Rule 11 is morally permissible.

Rule 14. Teach during the bankers' hours (9:00–3:00) favored by the students.

In general, colleges and universities typically schedule classes during hours of the day (and night) that fall outside of so-called bankers’ hours. Schools also have varying policies on how class times are assigned. It is far from clear, however, that a faculty member teaching during, or only during, these hours is somehow harmful to students. If no harm arises from following Rule 14, then following it is morally permissible.

Rule 26. Remember to spend the first ten minutes of class schmoozing and joking with the students.

Rule 26 calls for a behavior that I suspect is fairly common among faculty, even if all of the “schmoozing and joking” does not occur at the beginning of each class meeting. If this behavior is generally accepted and there is no obvious harm to students from doing it, then the only possible source of concern with Rule 26 is the amount of class time that it calls for. If this is correct, then as long as the course teaching objectives can be accomplished given the hours spent during the term schmoozing and joking, there seems to be nothing unethical about following Rule 26; doing so is therefore morally permissible.

Rule 17. Provide more free time (e.g., cancel classes on or near holidays, Mondays, Fridays, etc.).

Like Rule 26 (sup.), Rule 17 suggests a reduction in teaching time. Although following the examples given with this rule could quickly result in the loss of many hours of class time, the rule itself only calls for “more” free time. Conceivably, then, free time could just mean early dismissal from class. This being the case, as long as the course teaching objectives can be accomplished given the hours of free time, there seems to be nothing unethical about following Rule 17; doing so is therefore morally permissible.

Rule 4. Join the college party environment by giving classroom parties on SET day. Sponsoring students' officially approved class skipping days to ball games, etc. is a means to increase student satisfaction. One Oregon professor prepared cupcakes on the day the SET questionnaires are distributed.

Rule 4 combines the class cancellation behavior suggested by the examples in Rule 17 (sup.) with a class party on the day students complete the SET. If we take it that “students’ officially approved class skipping days” are days that the school administration has approved for students to miss class, then the moral bottom line for Rule 4 is analogous to that of Rule 26 (sup.): as long as the course teaching objectives can be accomplished given the time off, there seems to be nothing harmful in following this aspect of Rule 4.

The party aspect of this rule is a different matter. Giving a party on the day students complete the SET suggests a *quid pro quo*. Students get a day off and spend the class period enjoying the refreshments provided by the instructor. The implication seems clear: the party is being given in exchange for a maximum score on the SET. Since by following Rule 4 the instructor gives students a lesson in dishonesty, viz., that favorable evaluations of one’s performance can be bought, following this aspect of Rule 4 rule is unethical. Such behavior harms the student interest in obtaining an education insofar as that education ought to benefit the development of student characters. Since giving a party on SET day is a necessary aspect of adhering to Rule 4, following it is unethical.

Student Engagement

Rule 12. Keep telling students how much they are learning and that they are intelligent.

Rule 12 seems morally unproblematic, at least insofar as the first conjunct of the statement is concerned. Reminding students of how much they are learning (or ought to be learning) is a benefit to their interest in obtaining an education. Reviewing course objectives throughout the semester and noting how these objectives are being achieved, gives students an opportunity to assess their understanding and to raise questions. On the other hand, the second conjunct does seem morally problematic. Even if it is true that one has the pleasure of teaching a class in which every student is “intelligent,” to continually remind them of this amounts to a long series of unwarranted compliments that may inflate them. These superfluous compliments may harm the student interest in obtaining an education insofar as that education ought to benefit the development of student characters. Since Rule 12 conjoins one behavior that is morally permissible with one that is not, we should view this as an unethical practice.

Rule 5. Give financial rewards such as establishing connections to potential employers.

The opening phrase of Rule 5 might seem to suggest unethical behavior, but the specific behavior mentioned is not, strictly speaking, a financial reward. Assuming all students are treated equitably with respect to establishing these connections, there seems to be nothing unethical about this practice. Providing this benefit to students would compliment the resume services, career fairs, etc. that student services departments at many institutions provide to help students connect with potential employers. However, when an instructor follows Rule 5 and gives what is unquestionably a financial reward, say by handing out gift cards to a local restaurant on the day of the SET, this suggests a *quid pro quo*. The harm to student interest is the lesson in dishonesty taught by the instructor's "purchase" of a favorable SET score (cf. Teaching Time, Rule 4, sup.). Acting in accordance with Rule 5 is therefore unethical.

Rule 8. Do not risk embarrassing students by calling on them in the classroom.

Being called upon by a teacher during class is something that students grow up with throughout their elementary and secondary educations. This practice is thought by many to be beneficial to student learning. But unless denying this benefit to students is sufficient to harm their interest in obtaining an education, it is not obvious how failing to call on them during class can constitute unethical behavior. Indeed, there are cases, very large lecture courses for example, where it may not be practical to call on students in an equitable fashion. If there is no harm in denying students the benefit of being called on, following Rule 8 is morally permissible.

Rule 16. Avoid the effort of trying to teach students to think (e.g., avoid the Socratic method).³

Because the harm to students' education that results from professors following Rule 16 may be life-long, it may reach farther than the harm caused by following any of the other unethical practices being discussed. With a professor having made no effort to teach them to think, students will be less reflective, whether about themselves or about the world around them. Lacking in the ability to think much beyond rote learning, students will be less well equipped to engage in critical analysis of the important issues of the day and will be less likely to become "life-long learners." With a less critical mind, they will be less able to perceive, understand and assess ideas and circumstances. Hence, they will be less equipped to solve problems in life and at work. And without a robust capacity to reason closely, to develop compelling arguments for their beliefs, and to think independently, students are far less likely to emerge as leaders in the public sphere. In short, students lacking in their ability to think properly are less likely to become part of the enlightened, educated citizenry that it is the responsibility of colleges and universities to help produce. Acting in accordance with Rule 16 is therefore unethical.

³ There is more than one conception of "the Socratic method." See Brickhouse and Smith (2009).

Testing

Rule 15. Give the same exams each semester allowing the answers to get out and grades to move higher and higher each semester.

The implication of dishonesty in the phrase “allowing the answers to get out and grades to move higher and higher each semester” may make Rule 15 appear problematic. It seems to assume that the instructor is providing the answers to the exam questions or that the exam questions have been compromised and students have (accurately) answered them and are sharing the answers with others (e.g., by posting them online). Presumably these future exam-takers will then use the compromised exams and answers to cheat, thereby guaranteeing themselves a high score. Fortunately, since none of these things are expressly directed by the rule, we can leave the latter phrase of the rule aside. Having done this, we can take it that the rule simply directs faculty to give the same exams each semester.

Is it unethical to give the same exams each semester? Certainly there are many instructors who do this without any intent to maximize their SET scores. Depending upon the course, subject matter and exam format, it can be a substantial undertaking to create an entirely new set of exams each semester. Of course, it does not follow from this that declining to make the effort to create new exams every semester is unethical. Indeed, if an instructor is satisfied that a set of exams for a course works, i.e., is a good vehicle for assessing student understanding of the course material, the only obvious reasons for doing more than periodic adjustments to the exams is because some aspect of the course has changed, or because of some security concern. If this is so, there is nothing morally objectionable about faculty acting in accordance with Rule 15.

Rule 23. When possible, teach classes where common exams are used; then help students pass “this bad exam” for which you are not responsible.

Rule 23 consists of two directives, the second of which is ambiguous. The first directive, to teach courses that use common exams among the various sections whenever possible, seems morally unproblematic. The analysis of Rule 15 (sup.) concluded that it is morally permissible for an instructor to use the same exams each semester, so we have some reason for thinking that using the same exams across various sections of the same course is morally permissible as well.

The second directive, on the other hand, appears to be morally problematic in at least two respects. First, it directs faculty to “help students pass” the common exam. This wording does not seem to suggest anything like teaching or preparation in order to maximize the likelihood that students will pass. Rather, it seems to suggest some action by the instructor before the fact, like assisting students with taking the exam, either by making a statement regarding each exam item that strongly suggests the proper response (hints), or by simply giving out the correct responses to a majority of the test questions while students take the exam. Either way, the exam’s function as an assessment tool would be compromised. The latter directive also appears to be morally problematic because it calls for faculty to act dishonestly. Assuming that all faculty who give the common exams have a say in the composition of those exams, all are equally responsible for exam format, content, etc. The rule directs faculty to characterize the exam as “bad” and to disavow any responsibility for it. So, although the first directive of Rule 23 calls for morally permissible action, since it is conjoined with actions prescribed by the second directive that are unethical, following Rule 23 is unethical.

Rule 3. Give easy examinations (e.g., true-false; broad, open-ended discussion questions; take home exams; open book exams).

Leaving aside whether or not the exam formats given in the examples are somehow inherently “easy,” given the aim of maximizing SET scores, it makes sense to think that “easy” in Rule 3 means something like “easy enough so that everyone is guaranteed to at least pass.” The administration of an exam that is easy in this sense is morally problematic because the exam is *too* easy. Take-home and open-book exams (e.g.,) can be made challenging, but if “open book” just means open the book and copy the answer onto the answer sheet or exam booklet without any thought or understanding of the material required for a correct answer, the exam is too easy. In such cases the instructor has given an exam where getting a passing grade without giving a minimal passing performance is almost guaranteed. This is harmful to students because exams that are too easy do not give a legitimate assessment of their learning and do not provide legitimate feedback for students on their progress. Following Rule 3 is therefore unethical.

Rule 24. Allow students to re-take exams until they pass. It helps to put a page reference next to each question so the students can find the answer during an open-book examination.

Allowing students to retake exams until they pass is unethical. At the very least, it is unfair, and therefore harmful, to those students who pass the exam on the first attempt. Even if students know in advance that their ability to retake the exam is only limited by their achievement of a passing grade, those who retake it are effectively being assessed by a different standard than those who pass on the first try. Moreover, the second statement of the rule suggests precisely the sort of exam that is too easy (cf. Rule 3, sup.).

Rule 9. Hand out sample exams, or take your examination questions from the students' online exercises provided by the textbook publisher.

Giving students what amount to study questions for exams, whether in the form of a sample exam or simply a list of questions, is not necessarily unethical. In cases of the former, students may be provided with questions that are related to the questions on the exam, giving them a tool by which to study the relevant ideas and course content. Alternatively, they may be given the exact same questions that will appear on the exam, as is suggested by the second part of Rule 9. In either case, students are expected to do the work of researching the answers to the questions. Some might object to Rule 9 because receiving questions to an exam in advance typically makes doing well on the exam easier. Receiving the questions in advance does not, however, necessarily make an exam too easy (cf. Rule 3, sup.). If this is correct, then there is no harm in following Rule 9 and doing so is morally permissible.

Rule 7. Give answers to exam questions beforehand. Either pass them out in class or if you want the students to work harder, put them on reserve in the library or on the Internet.

When faculty give students exam questions in advance, even when they are the exact same questions that will appear on the exam, students are expected to find the answers. But when faculty give answers to exam questions beforehand, students need only memorize the answers

in order to benefit when they take the exam. Beyond too easy, any exam for which the answers to the questions have been given in advance is hardly an exam at all. Rather than an exam which might benefit students, an exam for which the answers have been given in advance is a harm—there is little or no sense in which such an exam could function as a tool for assessing student learning and as legitimate feedback for students on their progress. This being the case, following Rule 7 is unethical.

Rule 18. Avoid giving a cumulative final exam.

Obviously there are a number of ways to examine students throughout the semester in a non-cumulative fashion. Presumably many such alternatives can be used without any harm to students. This being the case, the analysis of Rule 2 (Course Content, sup.) also applies to Rule 18. The behavior prescribed by Rule 18 may or may not be morally permissible depending upon whether giving a cumulative final exam would result in the course failing to meet the instructor's (or the university's) minimum standard. Following Rule 18 is therefore only *prima facie* morally permissible.

Rule 19. Do not give a final exam and dismiss the class on the last class day. Even if the final is administratively required there are methods to avoid the final exam.

The analysis of Rule 2 (Course Content, sup.) applies here as well. The behavior prescribed by Rule 19 may or may not be morally permissible depending upon whether giving a final exam would result in the course failing to meet the instructor's (or the university's) minimum standard. Following Rule 19 is therefore only *prima facie* morally permissible. Conjoining the prohibition against final exams with dismissing the class “on the last class day” does not seem to alter the morality of following Rule 19, whether or not the final exam is given on the last day of classes, and provided that missing a day of teaching does not reduce the class time below the amount required by the instructor. As to the second sentence, since it does not directly state that instructors should follow the rule even if doing so breaks university policy, it is only a reminder that there are ways of circumventing university policies that require the administration of a final exam.

Rule 27. In online courses allow the students a two-day window to take the posted online examination.

Rule 27 is ambiguous. “Two-day window” might mean that students can take up to 48 hours to complete the exam. When on-campus students are presumably taking the same or similar exam under timed conditions, giving online students 48 hours to complete an exam is, at the very least a harm to on-campus students—it treats them unfairly. There is also the matter of cheating. Studies have reported “that college faculty perceive online testing as offering a greater opportunity for cheating than traditional classroom environments[,]” however, the extant research “does not offer a clear set of findings suggesting that online testing facilitates cheating” (Fask et al. 2014, pp. 102, 111). Nevertheless, the present case of allowing such a large amount of time to complete a single exam would seem to facilitate cheating. Students would be free to search for the answers to the exam questions over a two-day period. On the other hand, “two-day window” might mean that online students can take a timed exam at anytime over the course of a 48 hour period. Since one of the virtues of online courses is their

flexibility, and since online students are typically not required to meet on campus at a predetermined time to sit for an exam, giving them a two-day window to take a timed exam seems reasonable. Since this latter interpretation casts the rule in a better light than the former, let us suppose that it is correct. Following Rule 27 is therefore morally permissible.

Rule 28. Allow anonymous taking of online examinations by students (i.e., do not use a test center).

Following Rule 28 may do more to facilitate cheating than following the first interpretation of Rule 27 (sup.). When an online student knows that exams can be taken anonymously and without proctoring, that student can have someone else take their exams for them. This approach to giving exams may be harmful to the development of student characters as well. At best, it prompts the instructor to set a poor example (lax standards); at worst, it facilitates harm to the characters and educations of those who are moved to cheat by the instructor's policy. Consequently, following Rule 28 is unethical.

Grading

Rule 10. Grade on a wide curve.

The idea of grading students on a curve has a substantial history in the USA, one that is worth noting. In the 1920s and 1930s education scholarship “was strongly influenced by ideas underlying the new enthusiasm for ‘IQ testing’ and by statistical theory, especially the ‘normal distribution’ or ‘curve’” (Biggs 2008b, pp. 132–133). Grading on a curve was seen by many as a way to replicate the statistically “normal” grade distribution that was thought to result from every course. It was a convenient method which helped to produce a uniformity among grades and grading systems. Although there was a good deal of variation, a curve of 5 % As, 20 % Bs, 50 % Cs, 20 % Ds, and 5 % Fs was the typical recommendation circa 1930. During this decade some colleges even experimented with administrative grading. Using this approach, students would be ranked by faculty and an administrator would convert these ranks into grades by “applying the normal curve” (Biggs 2008b, pp. 134–135). By the 1940s

letter grades were so widely used as to be effectively universal, yet controversies about grading were growing ever more strident and often touched raw nerves. Although some writers continued to chase the dream of scientific objectivity and precision in grading... and adherence to the normal curve would not be totally abandoned for some years, many people no longer believed that thorny questions about grading could be answered by *any* science (Biggs 2008b, p. 138).

Prior to the 1960s, “[t]he published commentary on grading... struggles to find its footing on the undulating ground of attitudes toward the ‘sciences’ of psychology, intellectual measurement, and statistics” (Biggs 2008b, p. 132). Since then, “[t]he validity of the normal distribution formerly accepted as a mathematical truth” has been challenged, thus raising a host of questions; among them, the question of whether an “absolute standard” should replace the curve (Biggs 2008b, p. 141).

By definition, a grade is a degree on a scale that classifies according to quality. Since an essential function of colleges and universities is to teach students, whatever else grades may be

thought to mean, entail, or imply, a grade in higher education must necessarily indicate something about student learning in the subject for which the grade is given. The grade communicates the classification of a student's knowledge and understanding of a particular subject, at a particular level, based on an instructor's assessment and evaluation. Recall our assumption that faculty have a conception of what and how they teach at the various undergraduate and graduate levels, and that this conception includes some minimum standard of performance on the part of their students. In what I call an objective standard of grading (also referred to as an absolute or non-comparative standard), the minimum standard established by faculty is the basis upon which letter grades for a course are determined. Some object to this standard because, as Urmson points out, we can only employ "grading words [or symbols]... successfully for communication where criteria are accepted. Where they are not there can only be confusion and cross purposes" (Urmson 1950, p. 167). Hence, intra and inter-institutional variances in student learning at each grade level are a necessary consequence of an objective standard of grading. By using a relative standard (also referred to as a comparative standard) and grading on a curve, at least some of the inherent inconsistency of an objective standard is avoided. Indeed, contemporary writers like Knapp (2007) who advocate a relative standard, see this as an important advantage. Others object to a relative standard because they think it serves as a disincentive for students. In contrast to students working under an objective standard, "which simply sets out a general and reasonably high standard to be achieved for the various grades, and holds all students to it without prejudice" (Corlett 2005, p. 54 n. 25), students seeking out faculty who employ a relative standard "really want to know how little they can do to receive (not *earn*) a high mark in the course" (Corlett 2005, p. 40).

Perhaps the difficulty with Rule 10 is not that it calls for grading on a curve, but that it directs faculty to grade on a *wide* curve. Ideally, the consequence of grading on a normal curve is that students receive the grades they have earned. This is because it is thought that, in general, every class will yield more or less the same grade distribution. However, the consequence of grading on a wide curve is a percentage of high grades far beyond what is thought to be the statistical norm. The wider the curve, the larger the percentage of high grades. Indeed, at its widest, the curve becomes a straight line—everyone gets an A. By directing faculty to employ a wide curve, Rule 10, for all intents and purposes, tells them to engage in grade inflation. The behavior suggested by Rule 10 is therefore unethical for the same reasons the behavior suggested by Rule 1 (inf.) is unethical.

Rule 25. Give significant above-the-curve extra or bonus credit.

Since Rule 25 does not direct faculty to employ a wide curve, let us suppose that the extra or bonus credit will be given above a normal curve. Since only about five percent of a class will receive an A when employing a normal curve, the bonus or extra credit only applies to the grades of those students in the remainder of the class who have completed the requirements for this credit. One way to gauge the morality of offering these students extra credit is to consider the quality of the assignments that must be completed to earn it. Only if the work required for the bonus or extra credit is at least as substantive and challenging as the regular course requirements, is allowing for this credit morally permissible. This is a necessary condition because, if bonus or extra credit is offered for the completion of "fluff" assignments, students would be given an enhanced grade in exchange for no real work. This would amount to giving students something for next-to-nothing (cf. Rule 13, inf.). Given this condition, and casting

Rule 25 in the best possible light, let us suppose that it suggests only work that is at least as substantive and challenging as the regular course requirements. If this is correct, following Rule 25 is morally permissible.

Some will object to the permissibility of Rule 25 because the very idea of extra or bonus credit of any kind is inconsistent with their grading philosophy. When this is the case, giving significant above-the-curve extra or bonus credit would be unethical. In response to this objection, we can again apply the analysis of Rule 2 (Course Content, sup.). The behavior prescribed by Rule 25 may or may not be morally permissible, depending upon whether giving significant above-the-curve extra or bonus credit would result in the course failing to meet the instructor's minimum standard. Following Rule 25 is therefore only *prima facie* morally permissible.

Rule 21. Where multiple classes are taught by different instructors, always ensure that your classes have the highest GPA.

Given the purpose of this rule, it seems doubtful that, when Rule 21 directs us to “ensure” that our classes have the highest GPA of all the sections of a course being taught, it means something like “solicit the brightest students and do your best to teach them.” Rather, it seems likely to mean that if, after calculating the course grades for a class, your class grades are not higher than those of the other sections of the course, you should raise your grades so that they are the highest. In other words, Rule 21 is directing us to inflate our class grades whenever they are not the highest grades attained in the course. Rule 21, therefore, is essentially the same as Rule 1 (inf.), so following it is unethical for the same reasons.

Rule 1. First and foremost, inflate your students grades.

Grade inflation is an enhancement of a student's grade that has no basis in student performance. An inflated grade is therefore a misrepresentation of student performance. “A grade that misrepresents a student's performance sends a false message. It tells a lie” (Kamber and Biggs 2002). Moreover, it tells a lie that is not only harmful to students, but also harmful to our profession and to society as well. Grade inflation is harmful to students because inflated grades often conceal failure. In a typical grade inflation scenario, no one fails. In such cases students who have otherwise failed the course are given a passing grade, or worse, a medium or high grade. Grade inflation is also harmful to students because it “gives many students a false sense of knowledge of the subject matter” (Corlett 2005, p. 37). Upon completion of the course, students who are given As for only an average performance may be left with the sense that they have performed at the highest possible level. Grade inflation also discourages excellence. Students who enroll in a course taught by a known grade-inflator begin the semester secure in the knowledge that even the most trifling effort will get them a high grade. Finally, grade inflation is harmful to students because it “diminishes the capacity of grades... to reward students for superior performance” (Kamber and Biggs 2004, p. 34). Students who, but for the inflated grades of their classmates, would stand out as members of the top five to ten percent of the class, are relegated to the top fifty percent or worse. The more grades are inflated, the less superior performance is awarded by a high grade.

Grade inflation is also harmful to our profession. If the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Statement on Professional Ethics is correct: “Professors make every

reasonable effort... to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit" (para. 2). The lie of grade inflation is antithetical to this. Faculty should keep in mind that

we hold and strenuously guard sovereignty over abstract knowledge and many applications of that knowledge, and complex skills that are essential to society's well-being and growth. Our construction of reality is accepted, and our associated definitions of value are endorsed, to the extent that our definitions of fact are trusted. And, short of the academic equivalent of an Enron or an earthquake, they *are* trusted, more or less. To reject them would be to invite the earth to shudder under our collective feet, the entire social infrastructure based on expert services possibly to collapse. Should we betray that trust less spectacularly, in small ways day by day, grade sheet by grade sheet, trust will erode gradually (Biggs 2008a, p. 116).

Finally, grade inflation is harmful to society. As Biggs reminds us, the professoriate is not only a profession, it is also

a metaprofession, controlling, as it does, not only its own ranks and what students will learn in order to prepare for thoughtful living and useful citizenship, but also what they must know to enter virtually all of the other professions in America and how attainment of that knowledge will be measured. Who gets in—for the benefit of society. Who is kept out—for the protection of society. Who is distinguished as 'excellent' (Biggs 2008a, p. 115).

When professors inflate grades they misrepresent a student's performance and falsely communicate to society that students are better prepared than they really are. Consequently, these professors facilitate the attainment of positions by students that call for a more substantive education than those students actually possess, in many cases positions in "the most rewarding, perhaps the most interesting, and probably the most critical, work that their society offers" (Biggs 2008a, p. 116).

Misrepresentation of performance also communicates a false sense of a student's character, a sense that may be relied upon by decision-makers who are considering the student for a position. Take Lois Braverman, chief executive officer of Ackerman Institute for the Family, for example. She "look[s] for people who are very responsible. If [she is] looking for a young person for an administrative job that requires a lot of attention to detail, [she] hire[s] someone with a high G.P.A.[.]" Like many employers, Braverman thinks that "[y]ou don't get great grades unless you have worked really hard" (Bryant 2015).

Rule 13. Delete grading exams, projects, and other material. If they turn in work, give them credit. The correctness of the work is not an issue.

Rule 13 suggests that professors give students something for next-to-nothing. Students only need to hand in some semblance of the academic work required in order to receive an A for the course. Since the professor does not examine the work, a student could get full credit for a paper assignment by handing in a sheaf of papers with nothing but gibberish typed on the pages. Following this rule means that absolutely no assessment of student learning is taking place. Giving students credit without any assessment of their work by the instructor may be the quintessence of grade inflation. This is because there is nothing even remotely resembling a legitimate grade which can then be inflated. Short of handing out As merely for attending classes, this may be the easiest A imaginable.

The behavior suggested by Rule 13 is therefore unethical for at least the same reasons that grade inflation is unethical.

Conclusion

If this analysis holds, the answer to the question posed by its title is “yes”—some of the things faculty do to maximize their SET scores are unethical. Among them are the things suggested by Rules 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 16, 21, 23, 24 and 28. Following any of the other rules is morally permissible.

Appendix

Rules of the Trade (Crumbley and Smith 2000, pp. 46–47)

1. First and foremost, inflate your students grades.
2. Reduce the course material covered and drop the most difficult material first.
3. Give easy examinations (e.g., true-false; broad, open-ended discussion questions; take home exams; open book exams).
4. Join the college party environment by giving classroom parties on SET day. Sponsoring students' officially approved class skipping days to ball games, etc. is a means to increase student satisfaction. One Oregon professor prepared cupcakes on the day the SET questionnaires are distributed.
5. Give financial rewards such as establishing connections to potential employers.
6. Spoon-feed watered-down material to the students.
7. Give answers to exam questions beforehand. Either pass them out in class or if you want the students to work harder, put them on reserve in the library or on the Internet.
8. Do not risk embarrassing students by calling on them in the classroom.
9. Hand out sample exams, or take your examination questions from the students' online exercises provided by the textbook publisher.
10. Grade on a wide curve.
11. Give [the] SET as early as possible in the term and then give hard exams, projects, etc.
12. Keep telling students how much they are learning and that they are intelligent.
13. Delete grading exams, projects, and other material. If they turn in work, give them credit. The correctness of the work is not an issue.
14. Teach during the bankers' hours (9:00–3:00) favored by the students.
15. Give the same exams each semester allowing the answers to get out and grades to move higher and higher each semester.
16. Avoid the effort of trying to teach students to think (e.g., avoid the Socratic method).
17. Provide more free time (e.g., cancel classes on or near holidays, Mondays, Fridays, etc.).
18. Avoid giving a cumulative final exam.
19. Do not give a final exam and dismiss the class on the last class day. Even if the final is administratively required there are methods to avoid the final exam.
20. Use simple slides so the students do not need to read the book and post the slides to the course website from which test questions will be taken.
21. Where multiple classes are taught by different instructors, always ensure that your classes have the highest GPA.

22. Allow students to participate in determining material coverage and the number of points assigned to difficult test questions.
23. When possible, teach classes where common exams are used; then help students pass “this bad exam” for which you are not responsible.
24. Allow students to re-take exams until they pass. It helps to put a page reference next to each question so the students can find the answer during an open-book examination.
25. Give significant above-the-curve extra or bonus credit.
26. Remember to spend the first ten minutes of class schmoozing and joking with the students.
27. In online courses allow the students a two-day window to take the posted online examination.
28. Allow anonymous taking of online examinations by students (i.e., do not use a test center).

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