

## Self-Evaluation: The Humanistic Skill We Need in a Just Society

Christina Katopodis

City University of New York (CUNY)

In a February 2023 article for *The New Yorker* cryptically titled “The End of the English Major,” Nathan Heller draws from staggering enrollment data, statistics, and interviews to tell a bleak story about the systematic devaluation of the humanities in higher ed. He gestures toward a number of external factors, but he doesn’t talk as much about the classroom, where professors have the most control. What if, however, one of the problems isn’t the subject so much as the method? For example, we could use active learning to show students not only just what “career readiness competencies” they gain from the humanities,<sup>1</sup> but as well the crucial role of humanistic study in a just society, as my colleagues at the City University of New York (CUNY) have argued.<sup>2</sup> More than any of Heller’s numbers (which, as Jeffrey Cohen has rightly pointed out, are not the best measure of the health of the humanities),<sup>3</sup> what took my breath away was one half-hearted plug for English from a student who dabbles in one English course a semester:

“I get so much out of English because it’s the professor telling you what they thought about the work, as opposed to skills you have to learn,” he said. But he would never major in it, he told me, because he felt underqualified. “I try to figure out when to insert myself into the discussion.”<sup>4</sup>

If that is holding up a mirror to the major, it’s time we do some self-reflection.

Lately, the humanities have been the target of a lot of assumptions. Whereas Heller’s doom and gloom are set in the motif of numbers, and knee-jerk reactions to ChatGPT stem from a fear of plagiarism, my primary concern is pedagogy. How do we teach the humanities and what is implied by how we teach them? As I have argued with Cathy N. Davidson in *The New College Classroom*,<sup>5</sup> traditional teaching methods, which we inherited from an academy founded on policies of exclusion, only *alienate* the students in our classrooms. The student quoted above is describing passive learning, the banking model of traditional education in which one “expert”

deposits knowledge into “nonexpert” minds for later use. Progressive pedagogue Paulo Freire condemns this model as oppressive and elitist, which correlates with the student’s feeling of being “underqualified.”<sup>6</sup> It’s a familiar sentiment that I have heard on the threshold of my classroom every time I have taught the required college writing course: *I’m not a good writer*, or, *I can’t write*, or, *I’m probably going to fail this class*.

We are not here to fail our students. We are here to help them learn—to become independent, original thinkers who can define success for themselves. Who are we to tell a student what their success will look like? Academic elitism, thinly disguised by the veil of “rigor,” is toxic and often intertwined with racism, sexism, and classism. Instead of replicating a majority-White professoriate, we can guide students through one of the most empowering, rigorous, and difficult intellectual processes of all: self-evaluation, a humanistic analysis that begins and ends with their self-knowledge and expertise.

In the wake of the pandemic, we have an astonishing opportunity to engage with reparative modes of pedagogy like ungrading. Moreover, recent advancements in artificial intelligence (i.e., ChatGPT) have both shown us the value of human intelligence (e.g., creative, critical thinking) and made clear the need to reinvigorate our pedagogy by reexamining practices we haven’t changed in a while and shifting toward more effective and joyful teaching methods.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, I offer some practical ways to empower students using active learning in student-led evaluation methods. These methods prepare students to be leaders in their communities and for a workforce that is constantly changing; they also help students to connect to their own sources of motivation. The methods I discuss draw from more humanizing practices, as Sindija Franzetti notes in this forum, that center our focus—and that of our students—on what they came to college to do: to *learn*.

The recent dust-up about ChatGPT reminds us that, if the focus is on preventing plagiarism, then we’re maintaining a punitive system rather than incentivizing a real, tangible connection between students and their own learning processes. Self-assessment steps outside of the typical framework by connecting students with deeper, higher, and more personal professional goals. Self-assessment empowers students to be their own evaluators, experts on their own performance, and hopefully self-compassionate when evaluating how they were able to overcome challenges. The process helps to foster a sense of belonging in college—the opposite of alienating students from their education—by giving students agency and putting them in the driver’s seat of their education. Students are empowered to determine how and why they are measured. Against whom? Only themselves.

Student-led evaluation methods can take many forms. Students can imagine and establish learning goals for themselves—as a collective and/or individually—in the first week of class. As a collective, they can meet in small groups to brainstorm learning outcomes that are meaningful to them and add those to the departmental ones on the syllabus. As individuals, they can write the instructor a letter outlining their own learning goals for the semester; then, at the semester’s end, they can revisit those goals and write a follow-up letter evaluating how close they came to meeting them. Or, in a five-minute activity, the instructor can survey the class with a simple entry ticket on the first day: “What do you want to do for the rest of your life? How can this course help you get there?” I’ve also done a guided self-assessment with students by asking them to fill out a self-evaluation form at the end of the semester.<sup>8</sup> The ways to organize and mentor students through a self-evaluation process are endless, but they ought to have one thing in common: fostering a growth mindset.

Prioritizing students’ self-discovery in learning is essential. For those students who have what Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset”—the belief that, with effort and time, they are capable of improvement—the self-evaluation process described above taps into and may deepen their lifelong journey of self-definition.<sup>9</sup> For those students who have a more fixed mindset (e.g., “I am bad at math,” or, “I’m not very good at writing”), a growth-oriented self-evaluation process can be transformative and improve their overall performance and success in their academic careers.<sup>10</sup> One major study cited by Beverly Daniel Tatum’s 2017 edition of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* reports that students who learn about “the malleability of intelligence”—that “their intellectual capacity [is] not fixed but expandable through their own effort”—improve their grades more than students who are not exposed to this information. Further, the benefits of a growth mindset are “even more striking for Black students, who reported enjoying academics more, saw academics as more important, and had significantly higher grades...than those Black students who had not been exposed to this brief but powerful intervention.”<sup>11</sup> Coming into an understanding of intelligence as malleable brings students into greater self-awareness—of themselves as learners and as agents—and is part of a lifelong journey toward self-literacy and liberation.

Self-evaluation (and moving students away from traditional letter grades more generally) effectively motivates students to acquire self-knowledge, especially when it is integrated throughout the semester, beginning in the first week of class, rather than saved for the end. Students must look inward and get to know themselves to craft truly authentic, personal-

ized learning goals, whether they are writing letters to the in-structor, crafting collective goals in groups, or creating a multimodal representation of their goals. (The medium need not be a letter, but I will use that as my primary example.) “Goals” is plural for a reason: the first goal might be similar across their letters, something along the lines of “get an ‘A’ in this class,” because that is what they have been encultured to believe is best for them. To push students to think beyond the grade, toward stronger motivators for learning, the instructor might ask them to develop four to six learning goals. Here answers will vary more widely. The idea is to give students room to sprawl, unfurl, and wander in different directions, asking themselves *how* they might grow and develop as learners in ways that are meaningful to them.

Evaluation too often is considered a last step rather than a starter. With the methods outlined above, evaluation becomes about one’s whole learning journey up to this point *before* embarking on a new course. This is a critical part of life-long learning: being able to acknowledge where we are in our learning journeys, what we already know, taking stock of our accomplishments, and looking ahead to where we see room for growth and development. Lorgia García Peña reminds us in *Community as Rebellion*, “Students come into the classroom with a diversity of experiences and perspectives. Connecting to that rich diversity of experiences can be a powerful contradiction to the academic culture of individuality. It is a form of freedom-making that extends beyond the classroom.”<sup>12</sup> Starting by *asking students* is the best way to learn where they are so we can mentor them as they work toward their own learning goals. *Responding* to students is also key. By allowing student self-evaluations to inform final grades, we begin to abolish—to truly dismantle—old and outdated assessment methods. I like the form of the letter because it encourages a growth-oriented learning trajectory by being addressed to someone who will read it in the future. At first, the student may address the letter to their professor; however, in the end it is meant to be read and considered by none other than the student themselves when they are asked to evaluate their progress toward their goals. I call this writing to your “future self” and then responding to your “past self.”

Students may be prompted to consider a third addressee: their peers. This encourages them to think through what and how they can learn through collaboration. Beronda L. Montgomery observes in *Lessons from Plants* that some plants may compete when there are limited nutrients, but each must decide “whether to engage in competition, cooperation, avoidance, or tolerance.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, we can invite our students to think through this question for themselves when crafting at least one of their learning

goals. Self-evaluation may sound like an isolated activity, but I urge students to evaluate their engagement with the larger community as well. How we conduct ourselves in collaborative settings can be evaluated, and it is a crucial life skill as one continues to work in collaborative settings after graduation. Here are some prompts that might be helpful, especially if students are asked to give specific examples:

“Did I pick up a loose end, keep the conversation going?”

“Did I communicate when I needed help?”

“Did I check in with a peer to see how they were doing?”

“Did I listen to feedback and implement it?”

“Did I celebrate my peers’ success as well as my own?”

Making students aware of opportunities for joyful collaboration, for mutual support in learning together as a community, sets them up to be successful in future semesters, the workforce, and the world.

Collaborating in teams and on self-reflective practices will be essential to any career path students choose. Guided self-evaluations are one effective way to aid students in acquiring self-literacy, and the impact of this intervention in assessment is made greater when reinforced by metacognitive reflection, or reflecting on how and why we are conducting assessments this way. In these metacognitive reflections, students can appreciate the higher order thinking and career skills and proficiencies they acquired and practiced in a humanities course, such as self-evaluation, collaborating, summarizing, and reporting. Our students also benefit from open discussions about the Taylorist history of grading, and from understanding the learning science behind principles of alternative assessment practices.<sup>14</sup> They are co-learners who can apply humanistic critical thinking skills to analyze the curriculum and evaluation methods themselves, working alongside us as we upend oppressive, traditional systems of schooling. Ultimately, connecting course goals to students’ lives, and asking students to lead their own evaluations, help students to see why all their humanities courses are vitally important, but only if they are taught in this open-eyed, collaborative way using active learning and metacognition throughout a course.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys of what employers want list communication skills, critical and creative thinking skills, and collaboration skills as primary considerations in hiring. These skills belong to the realm of the humanities. See “Career Readiness Competencies,” NACE, <https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/>.

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<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Etoke, quoted in “End of the English Major? Hardly!” Graduate Center News, March 8, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Cohen, Twitter post, March 25, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major: Enrollment in the Humanities is in Free Fall at Colleges around the Country. What Happened?” *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis, “Why Change Now?” in *The New College Classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 21–28.

<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> John Warner, “Freaking Out About ChatGPT—Part I,” *Inside Higher Ed*, December 5, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Katopodis and Cathy N. Davidson, “Contract Grading and Peer Review,” in *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 105–122.

<sup>9</sup> Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See also Jason S. Moser et al., “Mind Your Errors: Evidence for a Neural Mechanism Linking Growth Mind-Set to Adaptive Posterror Adjustments,” *Association for Psychological Science* 22/12 (2011): 1484–1489; and David S. Yeager et al., “A National Experiment Reveals Where a Growth Mindset Improves Achievement,” *Nature* 573 (2019): 364–369.

<sup>11</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 163. See also, Joshua Aronson, Carrie B. Fried, and Catherine Good, “Reducing the Effects of Stereotype Threat on African American College Students by Shaping Theories of Intelligence,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 38/2 (2002): 113–125; and Carol Dweck, “Messages That Motivate: How Praise Molds Students’ Beliefs, Motivation, and Performance (In Surprising Ways),” in *Improving Academic Achievement: Impact of Psychological Factors on Education*, ed. Joshua Aronson (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2002), 37–60.

<sup>12</sup> Lorgia García Peña, *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Beronda L. Montgomery, *Lessons from Plants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 44–46.

<sup>14</sup> Cathy N. Davidson and Christina Katopodis, “Why Change Now?” in *The New College Classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 21–28.