

**Scott Grills**

Brandon University, Canada

## Considering Essays: The Social Construction of Subcultural Value

**Abstract** The article examines the social processes that accompany the social construction of value within subcultural settings. Taking the evaluation of university essays as the case-at-hand, this paper argues for the importance of attending to the generic social process of assigning evaluative meaning. Specifically, this article locates these processes relative to the themes of: 1) socialization of new academics, 2) contextualizing the essay pedagogically and pragmatically, 3) grades as currency, 4) recipes of action and meaning-making, 5) assigning grades, and 6) managing troublesome cases. The collective work that we do to rank, sort, evaluate, and determine the relative worth of social objects reflects a set of processes that are to be found in multiple settings. This article contributes to our understanding of these rather central everyday life activities.

**Keywords** Social Process; Value; Meaning; Grading; Symbolic Interaction

**Scott Grills** is a Professor of Sociology at Brandon University, Manitoba, Canada. He is the co-editor of *Kleine Geheimnisse: Alltagssoziologische Einsichten* (Trans. Little Secrets: Everyday Sociological Insights) (Springer 2015) and the co-editor of *Die Welt als Drama: Schlüsselwerke Symbolischen Interaktion* (Trans. The World as Drama: Key Works in Symbolic Interaction) (Springer 2016). Grills served as the President of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction in 2010/11 and as Vice-President in 2007/08. Earlier publications include those in the areas of interactionist theory, sociology of music, political processes, and the sociology of doubt. His current research attends to the development of an interactionist research agenda for the study of management processes.

**email address:** grills@brandonu.ca

The relative value of any social object speaks to the generic social process accompanying the attribution of subcultural meanings. But, how this happens is, to borrow Becker's (2014) analogy, something akin to a black box. We may know what goes "in"—a painting, a performance, or written text—and we may know what comes "out"—the value at auction, a cinematic award, a Nobel prize for Fiction—but what goes on "in between" is what produces the evaluative moment. Reflecting an interest in generic social processes (Prus 1996; Kleinknecht 2007), this paper takes up a specific case at hand—defining the relative value of the university essay. Drawing upon formal interviews, participant observations, and field notes, this paper offers a modest contribution to the study of generic social process

and the creation of subcultural value. Specifically, I examine the social process of interpreting the student essay and the pragmatic work of assigning grades. Adopting a symbolic interactionist/Blumerian approach to the work and life of university faculty and their students, this paper attends to the actions of participants and their world views (Blumer 1969). It is not my intent to advocate for some pedagogical perspectives over others (Krause 2001), but rather I am most interested in the social process through which the essay moves from work that is submitted for evaluation on the part of students to a social object that is assigned a particular meaning within the context of a local culture.

An attentiveness to local cultures is important here; organizations may have surface similarities. If universities are viewed as an ideal type, there are some rather central notions that one could suggest that all universities share. However, it is only by coming to know the local culture of an organization that the researcher comes to more fully appreciate how situational and specific practices, definitions, and divisions of labor may play important parts in creating meaningful differences (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). For example, campus communities may vary considerably relative to the understanding of their academic purpose and the academic life carried out therein.

While not wishing to undertake a detailed review of the diversity of post-secondary institutions to be found in Canada and the United States, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that the interviews to be found herein represent the experiences of participants working in medical/doctoral universities, composite

universities (mid-sized universities with some doctoral programming), and smaller, primarily undergraduate universities. The relative importance and the institutional resources that universities may direct to the promotion of academic skills on the part of students vary greatly. Some students may quite deliberately adopt course selection strategies to avoid those with mandatory writing requirements, and some universities adopt no organizational strategies to limit students' abilities to do so. Other universities have well-established writing intensive courses that are mandatory for all graduates. Simply put, a new Ph.D. who is accepting his/her first full-time appointment at a U.S. or Canadian university may find that their understandings of the work of being a junior faculty member (that were developed during a Ph.D. program at a larger research-intensive university) are somewhat different from those found within the local cultures of their employment (Epp and Spellman 2014). This consideration applies to essay assignments specifically, their perceived place within a program of study, their assignment, their evaluation/assessment, and teaching activities more generally.

### Grading Essays: A Comment on the Socialization and Integration of New Academics

The processes of becoming an academic are not dissimilar from the processes of becoming a doctor (Haas and Shaffir 1987), hockey player (Vaz and Clarke 1982), or weather forecaster (Fine 2009). There are careers of involvement that are associated with acquiring perspectives, learning the ropes, developing performance competences, and learning the life (Prus and Sharper 1991).

The transitions from undergraduate student, to graduate student, to faculty member involve a series of status passages (Glaser and Strauss 2011). These status transitions may be marked by a variety of initial involvements—initial involvements in lecturing, original research, course responsibility, and the grading of written work and essays. And all of this matters and matters quite meaningfully to subcultural participants, for those with the subcultural authority to determine grades have the subcultural authority to determine the relative value of work. Although some may assume that universities (whose mission statements often include declarations about the value of teaching) might apply related principles to the preparation of evaluators, in reality, the extent to which members of the subculture engage in more formal, organized, and directive training activities in preparation to become *determiners of value* may vary greatly.

One of my first experiences with grading was with a large class set of essays. I was in the first-year of my doctoral program and I was assigned as one of two T.A.s [teaching assistants] to a large second-year course of about 450 students. The professor divided the class set of essays into three piles and told me he wanted to see me back in his office with the *A* papers in one hand and the *F* papers in the other, nothing else. So that is what I did, he took one look at the stacks in my hands and said, “Too many *As* not enough *Fs*.” Then he asked for one of the *F* papers read the first couple of sentences and asked what I gave this “pile of shit.” He turned to the back, saw my *F* with a grade of 30, and took a big eraser and removed the three, leaving a zero on the paper. I was to go away and grade to that standard. That was the

sum total of my instruction on how to grade essays. [T.A., Sociology]

Like with other forms of initial involvements, participants may come to develop fuller appreciations of the life and work. Entering evaluation roles in university settings may provide opportunities for participants to enter backstage regions that were otherwise unavailable. Students may anticipate or infer what the life and work of being a faculty member involve. However, lived, first-hand experience with evaluation work may allow for a more complete understanding and framing of the everyday life of professors. As one graduate student noted:

I started grading as a way to make some additional money, the pay was good and I could do it mostly when I wanted. But, some of the work I had to read was really terrible, there was no saving it. What can you write on some of these papers—“The Wikipedia article you stole this from was better” is not really helpful. I know some university students are bad, but who wants to spend their lives reading this. [M.A. student, Political Science]

### Contextualizing the Essay Pedagogically and Pragmatically

At all of the universities that form the research basis for this paper, faculty members held relatively high levels of academic freedom relative to the determination of the pedagogical merit on the inclusion of any particular form of evaluation for their courses, the relative weighting of assignments, and the applicable rubrics for evaluation. Faculty rights in these respects were protected under collective

agreements (or their equivalents) and constrained, in some ways, by policies of Senate (e.g., policies pertaining to academic integrity, accommodations required for students with disabilities, policies pertaining to testing and testing procedures). But, while one may formally point to the exercise of academic freedom, in everyday life terms, faculty members may be quite attentive to: 1) the expectations of others (e.g., Department Chairs, Deans, tenure committees), 2) students’ resistance, 3) externally imposed *learning outcomes*, and 4) the management of workload in making determinations about the inclusion of essay tasks in their courses.

As social objects, essay tasks may come to hold a variety of meanings for multiple actors. For example, pedagogical meanings may be particularly helpful as a means of framing the in-order-to motives of faculty members (Schutz 1974). Faculty identified three themes that were of particular importance that framed and contextualized the essay relative to other forms of evaluation: 1) the evaluation of a student’s ability to work independently, 2) the evaluation of the student’s ability to construct a research question, conduct research on that topic, and develop an argument, and 3) the evaluation of the student’s ability to present thoughts clearly, concisely, and in a manner appropriate for the discipline (e.g., professional socialization). The essay may be understood as a form of essential skills development for the academic side of student life.

The main difference between the essay and having students write exams is that you are expecting the student to independently find sources of information that you wouldn’t have expected them to search out

for an examination written in class. You are looking for their ability to use reference materials, their ability to figure out the information on their own. [Faculty member, Psychology]

Mainly, the essay is my attempt to gauge how well the student can go beyond the material presented in the class. As a genuine skill, I don’t think you will find that [fully developed] until someone has been around here for a few years. It is just another aspect of their intellectual maturity that I am trying to assess. To me, it is just another academic skill that the student has to try to develop. [Faculty member, Psychology]

Mindful of these perceived pedagogical benefits, faculty members in the social sciences and humanities were also critical of the use of the essay. The educational benefits may be perceived as questionable, the appropriateness of the essay at differing levels of study may be raised, and the perceived academic preparedness of students may be considered in the process of determining course requirements.

When I started teaching, every class got an essay to write, from my first-year classes right on through. I was going to teach them all these essentials, I thought. And I trudged home with these stacks of papers and waded through them. Then, one day, I realized that most of them were pre-literate little fuckers and I said to hell with it. My time is more valuable than to serve as a proofreader for some poorly written essay. [Faculty member, Psychology]

I used to assign essays to my first-year students, in fact, to every class, but then that was twenty-five

years ago. I won't come out and say they were smarter then, but they certainly had a better command of the English language. They had had considerably more exposure to disciplined composition than our students have today. [Faculty member, Religion]

I really think that essays are not that much used at the beginning levels. I just don't think that the students have the maturity to draw out the information themselves...At the junior level maybe 10 out of 100 would even be interesting reading. [Faculty member, Psychology]

When I began my teaching career, there was no Internet, no Wikipedia, and no online paper writing services. I would not say that students were any more honest, but plagiarism was harder. Now it is cut, copy, paste. It is not uncommon for me to find that 20% of the papers I get in first-year courses have serious issues with plagiarism. I have cut back a lot on the written assignments and essays I give. I just have no confidence that I am reading the student's work anymore. [A member of my department] assigns what amounts to a diary to be kept during the course and last term student plagiarized that from a blog. Really, plagiarizing a diary, I thought, now I have heard everything. [Faculty member, Cultural Studies]

Faculty members may also be attentive to some of the unintended consequences of assigning essays. Some of which may include: 1) implications for student recruitment and retention, 2) decreased class sizes, 3) reduced numbers of majors/minors, and 4) demographic shifts in the classroom complement. An appreciation of the challenges here may be particularly acute where faculty members work

in departments with considerable variability in the assignment of essay tasks.

I continue to use a short research essay assignment in my first-year classes. But, a number of colleagues do not. By the end of the second week of class almost all of the international students from [a specific country] have dropped my course. If they stay in the department, they have moved to sections where there are no real writing requirements in the course. I am well aware that I could do the same things—evaluate using computer-based multiple-choice questions, bell my marks, and give up on teaching meaningful critical thinking. It would increase my enrolments, which tells you something about what students seem to want. But, I have not done that and have no plans to do so. [Faculty member, Sociology]

### Meaning, Grades, and the Currency of the University

Grades in universities are a somewhat unique subcultural phenomenon. In the classic work *Making the Grade*, Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) argue for an understanding of the culture of the university that is rather centrally focused on value and grades. Grades are, in many respects, the currency of the university. As Simmel (1978) has so carefully argued, all forms of money and currency rely, to some extent, on the social construction of trust. As a social construction, money may serve as an exemplar of the construction of objective realities (Berger and Luckmann 1967), for money has the potential to serve as an *objectifier*—a means by which social and cultural differences are lost to the leveling effect of the money market (Zelizer 1996). While various

cultural types may be prompted by the concept of the *millionaire*, the only requirement for admission is a quantity of money.

In the context of the university, students are paid for *their* academic work not through money, but through grades. Unlike wage labor, where the monetary value of work is known before the work is completed (e.g., an eight-hour shift at twelve dollars an hour represents a fully monetized income), the work of university students rarely is associated with a knowable wage. This is particularly true in the case of the university essay; the subcultural value of the work is not knowable with any certainty until the graded work is returned to the student with a value attached (though, of course, students can and do construct anticipated value).

As Goffman (1959) has discussed, one of the challenges of interpreting any performance is that audiences are often excluded from backstage regions. The work, or lack thereof, that has gone into creating the presentation is concealed or otherwise unavailable to the audience. As a practical matter, the submitted paper is the product of human action, but what that action has been is to some extent unknowable. Much like a dinner in a restaurant, the person evaluating an essay has only partial information about the processes that went into the production of the social object before them. The amount of time that a student has put into a particular task, how that time was utilized, whether this is a team or more solitary enterprise, and the effectiveness of that work is not available to the evaluator. The student/author, however, has the lived experience of the backstage region available to

them. In everyday life terms, the essay, therefore, may be a very different social object for the various actors involved. The student may define the essay as a document that they “sweated over,” “poured their heart into,” and “spent hours on.” When these kinds of definitions are in play, students may anticipate that their work will be rewarded with the kind of pay that would be expected of such efforts in more monetized settings. If time is money, then the time put into an essay task should be rewarded. If the essay is associated with the self and the students enter into some type of positive emotive relationship with the document (e.g., pride, courage, attachment), then, likewise, the grading of the essay can be viewed, by extension, as an evaluation of the worth of the person, their commitments, and their work (Albas and Albas 1988).

Faculty members/evaluators are faced with the task of determining the grade-value of the work on the basis of the performance before them. Much like the audience in a theatrical performance, for whom it is that show, on that day, at that time, which constitutes their experience of the performance, the professor is engaging and evaluating a particular essay performance in a particular here and now. And the determination of value is of considerable subcultural relevance. If grades are currency, they are also subcultural gatekeepers. Grades have an influence on progression through majors, graduation, scholarships, funding, and admission of programs. Given the subcultural relevance of grades and grading, how do professors go about assigning a value to the work before them? How are papers determined to be of differing values?

## Recipes of Action and Meaning-Making

Consistent with Schutz' (1974) notion of recipes of action, faculty members may develop generalized frames of reference with respect to grade-point categories. The distinction between *A* and *B* papers is a subculturally meaningful one in that it implies identifiable and distinguishable qualities between social objects. In my experience, it is not uncommon for hiring committees to question job candidates on their understandings of the content and differences between grade categories. The interest in the answer to such questions implies that there may be a problematic quality to the answer—that these pre-established definitions are salient to job performance, shared meanings, and collegiality.

I give very few *A*'s. I reserve those for the truly exceptional papers. They are the ones that are fully researched, they haven't missed tackling a classic statement in the field, and, most importantly, they have understood what they have read and are able to go beyond it. They are the students who are creative, who see the implications of what they are reading and can articulate them. *A* papers have a definite sense of purpose—they tend to give you the feel that the student would have written it even if they were not in your course. [Faculty member, History]

*B*s are for people who do not screw up. They don't do anything exceptional either, but fundamentally they don't screw up. They do the work that is required of them, they answer the question, they read the material, and you can read it because they have found that the use of sentences is helpful. But, after you've

read it, you feel like taking them aside and saying, "So what?" because they usually haven't said much, but they have reported a lot. They've got the tools there, but they haven't figured out which side is really up. [Faculty member, Philosophy]

Generally, I would say that my papers are some of the hardest to get an *A+* on, but at the same time they are the hardest to fail. Good philosophy requires a great deal of skill, but bad philosophy anybody can do. If they write on the page and give some sort of background to their thought, I have trouble failing that because, however badly, they've given it a shot. Clearly, if they don't hand anything in, they get a zero, if they hand in a paper that they basically wrote for last year's psychology course or whatever they were in, that fails too because it is so far off the mark. [Faculty member, Philosophy]

## Assigning Grades

Despite strong pedagogical support for assigning essays, and the development of typifications of grade categories, the process of applying these meanings to cases at hand remains problematic. In contrast to the grading measures that some define as more objective (e.g., multiple choice questions and short-answer questions), the grading of essays requires more interpretive work to address the diversity of assignments before them. Given the variability in essay writing and subject materials, faculty members may adopt a range of strategies to respond to this diversity.

If I were religious, I would say that as I begin to read a paper that God whispers in my ear, "This is

a *C* paper." My students would die if they heard me say that, but, to some extent, it is true. I think that after you have marked for a while, you get a sense of the quality of the paper right off the start. The thing just sounds like a *C* paper or whatever...In order to give them room to be creative, you have to give them some rope, and that's often just enough for them to hang themselves with. [Faculty member, Psychology]

If you set all the *A* papers aside, they can be quite different as well. They are all creative, but they often go in very different directions, you are always going to get what you did not expect. I do not have a marking key or anything that I can show you how I mark. You really just have to take them as they come. [Faculty member, Philosophy]

Given the variability, diversity, and work required to apply typifications to cases at hand, faculty members/evaluators may adopt a range of strategies to frame and inform the grading process. It is important to stress that these strategies are not mutually exclusive and that members may express various commitments and dissatisfactions with these strategies over time. Bearing these concerns and limitations in mind, it is perhaps useful to distinguish between grading strategies that emphasize relative comparison and those that emphasize grading by some form of fixed standard.

## Relative Comparison

Here, faculty members may attempt to address the challenges of the interpretive work of grading essays through an approach to grading that is cohort-based.

That is, there is some attempt to engage in the work of rank-ordering the essays received for a particular task.

The best papers in my classes get the top marks. They are the ones that get the *A*'s. So, over the years I would guess that I have given out *A*'s for a very wide range of papers. But, all of them were the best in their class. A number of things go into producing the quality of papers you are going to receive. Sometime you have to look at the assignment you gave out and ask if it was expecting too much, maybe it was, but the *A* papers are the ones that got the biggest part of it. [Faculty member, History]

Such approaches may quite explicitly attend to the interests that faculty members may have in being perceived as fair and equitable in the distribution of grades. Given the subcultural importance of grades, grading may involve the practical work of distributing scarce resources.

One of the most important things in marking is being fair so that people are treated equally across the board. To do that, you have to be sure that all of your *A* papers are better than your *B* papers and all your *A*'s are better than your *B+*. To do that, I mark by piling the papers up into their...groups, so that I have a pile of *B* papers and a pile of *B+* papers, and so on. So you pick up a paper and read it over and say it is better than this lot here and not as good as this group, so it ends up on the pile in between. When I am finished sorting, I go through each pile and see if there is a paper that seems particularly out of place one way or another, and if there is, I move it up or down. [Faculty member, Sociology]

Grading via relative comparison may be perceived to have the relative advantage of attending to unique circumstances that may come into play in any given class, term, or assignment. To some extent, if creativity is linked to typifications of excellence, then advocates of grading by relative comparison may perceive such strategies as being true to that commitment.

I tend to have a look at things as they come. It is not as though I have set out anywhere what the definitive A paper will look like when it crosses my desk. I just don't see how you can do that because then the highest marks go to the mind readers. [Faculty member, Psychology]

### Marking by Fixed Standards

Where faculty members attempt to grade by fixed standards, there is some directed attempt to objectify the assignment of grades and to do so in a way that transcends the variability that may be present in the cohort at hand. There is some attempt here to codify, quantify, or otherwise make the measurement of the value of the essay increasingly objectified. In this context, grades may be defined as the outcome of a process of measurement. In some cases, faculty members have developed a kind of *score sheet* that awards points for particular outcomes and then these various points combine to determine the final grade on the task at hand. Here, various tasks associated with essay writing, like preparing a title page, numbering pages correctly, length, bibliography, introductions, conclusions, and the like, are evaluated for presence, completeness, and correctness to create a final grade.

I want students to understand that the grade they get is not arbitrary and that a grade in the humanities is as rigorously determined as one in chemistry. I give students the reference point prior to them submitting the paper, so that they know what I expect and what each part of the essay is worth. They know, for example, that the reference work they do is worth ten percent of the paper. Even if their thesis statement is weak, it is still possible to earn all of those ten marks. They also know that there are marks for sourcing material properly. There are technical and research aspects of writing an essay that even students with little creativity can do properly, and they should be rewarded in some small way for that. It also says to the bright students that details matter, creative is good, but an essay is an essay, and you better know the difference between *it's* and *its*. [Faculty member, Philosophy]

Faculty members may utilize a number of strategies to apply fixed standards to the evaluation of essays. In some cases, faculty members may require students to submit written work electronically and may utilize various web-based or teaching software based resources to assist with the grading process. There are currently numerous resources available to assist students/authors and faculty members/evaluators in the evaluation of student essays. While the comparative sophistication of these programs varies, some do, in fact, offer the determination/recommendation of a grade as part of the software application. One such site, however, offers the following advice to those applying such an algorithmic-based grading tool to tasks at hand:

The grade above is NOT complete!...[T]his grade takes into account spelling, grammar, word choice, style, vocabulary, and more; but it does NOT examine the meaning of your words, how your ideas are structured, or how well your arguments are supported. We should also mention that our automated grader doesn't always get things right. So, please consider this grade to be one facet of your paper's overall grade. [See: paperrater.com. Retrieved May 09, 2016]

While such electronic supports may provide various types of assurances to faculty members, such software solutions are problematic in some important ways in that they cannot (yet) evaluate the kinds of learning objectives that faculty members spoke to when discussing the pedagogical import of the assignment of essay tasks in the first instance. Reflecting this, some faculty members rely rather centrally on previously established meaning sets in the social construction of fixed evaluation standards.

The essence of the way I mark is summed up by that chart on the wall. Each of those four boxes outlines the basics for each of the main grades—A through D. If it falls outside the boxes, it is an F. I leave this chart on the wall through most of the semester. When I mark, I read the paper through and decide which one of those boxes it falls into, then give it a plus or minus accordingly. One of the real advantages with this is that you are surer of the mark you give, your criteria are very clear...So, if a student wants to know how you came up with the mark, you show them the requirements for the next letter grade up and give them a chance to argue that their paper does those things. [Faculty member, History]

### Troublesome Cases: Plagiarism and Other Deviant Definitions

Like others involved in evaluative work, faculty members may come to define student essays in terms of the normal paper. As Jeffery's (1979) work on normal deviance in emergency wards demonstrates, members of subcultural associations develop shared understandings of the normal, routine, and everyday, within that subcultural context. It is sociologically meaningful to talk of the normal armed robbery, the normal expression of road rage, and the normal prostitute-john interaction. While those outside of the subculture may view these activities as being anything but normal, and may, in fact, imbue them with a deviant mystique, these practices take on an aspect of normality for those who experience them on a more routine and sustained basis (Prus and Grills 2003).

Confronting those instances that are outside the normal may be defined in highly problematic terms by members. In terms of grading essays, two understandings of troublesome papers were particularly salient to respondents: 1) the off the mark paper and 2) the plagiarized paper.

Those papers that are defined as *off the mark* are assignments that are submitted which appear to have little or no relevance for the task at hand. While faculty members may develop well-established typifications relative to grading scales, some assignments fall well short of: 1) anticipated presentation expectations, 2) course requirements, or 3) what the member may have considered fairly clear performance requirements.

It doesn't happen very often, but every once in a while you do get an assignment that comes at you completely out of left field. I remember one where the student submitted a short series of haikus for their research essay. I looked at them quickly and simply assumed that the student had submitted the wrong assignment to me. So I contacted the student and it turns out no, the poems were for me. I received a long email talking about the artificial constraints of the conventional essay and the expressiveness of poetry and the like. What do you do with this? [Faculty member, Education]

I had given the class two specific essay topics to write on. This was a summative assignment in a senior course that was in lieu of a final exam—a bit of a hybrid between a research essay and a take-home exam. Every student was to give me two short essays; instead, one student gives me one long one and does not attempt the second question. When he hands it in, he tells me that the second question did not speak to him so he would not be true to his own inquiry to answer it. I was completely taken aback, nothing like that had happened before so I talked with a few colleagues about it and they were divided. One said I should respect his intellectual courage and grade the paper and waive the second one, another said just the opposite—that the most he should get would be 50% because he did not do the task. [Faculty member, Sociology]

Papers may also depart from the normal essay under circumstances where the faculty member comes to define the paper as plagiarized—as reflecting the work of someone other than the student. Recognizing that plagiarized work can be-

come normalized in its own right, that is, faculty members may develop understandings of normal trouble—even everyday examples of plagiarism may be defined in particularly unwelcome terms.

Nothing messes up your grading like hitting one that is plagiarized. I dread it; it takes so much time, because once you get a feel for it, then you have to find it. It is no one thing that can make me think I have a problem, sometimes it is phrases and words, sometimes it is irregular sources, sometimes the paper seems beyond the skill level of the student. But, once I start to wonder, then I need to follow through on it. [Faculty member, Philosophy]

You expect to deal with plagiarism at the first-year level. I talk about it in class, put the policy on my course outline. Talk about it again, but still it happens. But, by the time students get to third- and fourth-year, this should not be happening. I had a student in a fourth-year class who handed in a paper that had been lifted off of the Internet. She was a good student, and pleaded not to have this dealt with formally because it would affect her chances of getting into the Faculty of Education, but I went ahead with it. She was crying and saying that I was ruining her life. I did point out that I was not the one who tried to steal my degree. These things are hard on everyone, but do you really want a cheat as a teacher? [Faculty member, English]

In a contemporary context, everyday plagiarism is often associated with materials that students have ready access to through web-based sources and these materials are then inserted, for the

most part verbatim, into the submitted work. Where this occurs and where the faculty member attends to these acts and elects to act upon them detection is often not particularly problematic. The lower the lack of sophistication on the part of the deviant actor, the greater is the ease of detection. However, like the appreciation that may be expressed relative to high quality art forgeries (Briefel 2006), some troublesome papers are such fine examples of plagiarism that they may be held in certain esteem by faculty and those responsible for the administration of related policies.

The best plagiarized paper I ever saw was one done by a philosophy student. The philosophy professor was sure that the paper was not original, but the evidence was hard to come by. So, I spent some time with it and we eventually figured it out. The student had used two different strategies to cover their tracks. In the first case, they had used a thesaurus to great effect, strategically replacing words to make a simple Internet search harder. Secondly, they had replaced every empirical study within the paper with a Canadian equivalent. It was based upon a paper from a journal that was published in the United States, the argument presented was entirely that of the original author, but the context was shifted to Canada. It was stolen work, no doubt about it, but you do have to appreciate the skill that went into the deception. [University Administrator, Arts]

## Conclusion

Faculty members/evaluators play a central subcultural role in the determination of the relative

value of the work of students. Whereas grades serve as the symbolic currency of the university, faculty members determine the value of work and that valuing has extensive and far-reaching subcultural import. The work of grading essays is particularly problematic in this respect, as faculty members attempt to undertake the interpretive work of defining an essay as holding some relative subcultural value. In undertaking this work, faculty members may employ a number of strategies to make the determination of grades reasonable and reportable within the subcultural context. This work, as challenging as it is, is further complicated by those instances where the essay they are attempting to evaluate deviates from expectations of the normal paper, and comes to serve as an exemplar of the troublesome case that demands or requires alternative strategies to manage cases-at-hand.

While faculty members may individually eschew or otherwise resist the monetary analogy made here (adopting, for example, a *learning-for-learning's-sake* worldview), the social organization of the university generally requires of faculty members their participation in this process of the determination of value. This is a rather central generic social process—the collective work that we do to rank, sort, evaluate, and determine the relative worth of social objects. This paper has contributed to the study of the practical work that accompanies the creation of subcultural value, and by so doing sheds some light on the process through which the rather central activity of making evaluative meaning is made in everyday life.

## References

- Albas, Cheryl and Daniel Albas. 1988. "Emotion Work and Emotion Rules: The Case of Exams." *Qualitative Sociology* 11(4):259-274.
- Becker, Howard S. 2014. *What about Mozart, What about Murder?: Reasoning from Cases*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Becker, Howard S., Blanche Geer, and Everett Hughes. 1968. *Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Briefel, Aviva. 2006. *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Epp, Roger and Bill Spellman, (eds.). 2014. *Roads Taken: The Professional Life, Scholarship in Place, and the Public Good*. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press.
- Fine, Gary A. 2009. *Authors of the Storm: Meteorologists and the Culture of Prediction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Glaser, Barney and Anselm L. Strauss. 2011. *Status Passage*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Haas, Jack and William Shaffir. 1987. *Becoming Doctors: The Adoption of a Cloak of Competence*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Holstein, James A. and Jaber F. Gubrium. 2000. *The Self We Live by: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jeffery, Roger. 1979. "Normal Rubbish: Deviant Patients in Casualty Departments." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 1(1):90-107.
- Kleinknecht, Steven. 2007. "An Interview with Robert Prus: His Career, Contributions, and Legacy as an Interactionist Ethnographer and Social Theorist." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 3(2):221-288.
- Krause, Kerri-Lee. 2001. "The University Essay Writing Experience: A Pathway for Academic Integration During Transition." *Higher Education Research and Development* 20(2):147-168.
- Paperrater.com. 2016. *Sample Report*. Retrieved May 09, 2016 ([https://www.paperrater.com/images/2016/sample\\_report.pdf](https://www.paperrater.com/images/2016/sample_report.pdf)).
- Prus, Robert. 1996. *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Human Lived Experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Prus, Robert and Scott Grills. 2003. *The Deviant Mystique: Involvements, Realities, and Regulation*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Prus, Robert and C.R.D. Sharper. 1991. *Road Hustler: Hustlers, Magic and the Thief Subculture*. New York: Kaufman and Greenberg.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1974. *Collected Papers: The Problem of Social Reality*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Simmel, Georg. 1978. *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Vaz, Edmund W. and Wesley Clarke. 1982. *The Professionalization of Young Hockey Players*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Zelizer, Viviana A. 1996. *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and Other Currencies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Grills, Scott. 2017. "Considering Essays: The Social Construction of Subcultural Value." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13(4):70-82. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)).