THE first time I discovered grades ruled my life was when I was preparing my high school graduation speech.

I came across American student Erica Goldson’s words, which struck a deep chord in me. She said in her valedictorian speech:

“...I have successfully shown that I was the best slave. I did what I was told to the extreme. While others sat in class and doodled to later become great artists, I sat in class to take notes and become a great test-taker. While others would come to class without their homework done because they were reading about an interest of theirs, I never missed an assignment. While others were creating music and writing lyrics, I decided to do extra credit, even though I never needed it.”

We sometimes forget that education is about learning. It becomes apparent now as I enter university that I used to study for the sake of studying, for the sake of getting good grades. Even now, it sometimes still feels like a frantic race, as people around you strive for that prize called high distinction for every subject. There’s nothing wrong about excelling in our studies of course. In fact, we ought to do our best to get good marks – but how good is good enough?

My elder sister is in her final year of medical school at Melbourne University. She is at once excited, anxious and scared. She is uncertain about her chances of getting a job here in Australia as an international student, and there are not enough training places for everyone. She resents the fact that friends will have to compete against each other to get the top marks and top jobs.

For me, I’ve long given up trying to “compete” with my peers, especially local students for whom English is their first language. If you’ve ever sat in on an arts tutorial you would know how difficult it is to get a word in, let alone be heard. It takes courage, lots of it.

At other times it is easy to forget the joy of learning when you are faced with a seemingly never ending stream of assignments, tests, and exams. It is tempting to measure your success based on your grades. If I do well, I will be happy. If I score badly, I will feel miserable...
for the next few days, especially when you have a straight H1 student sitting by your side.

Of course, not every student thinks like me. I know a friend who holds a very different attitude towards university life.

“Pass is enough,” he tells me.

“But more than that, it is a bonus. For me, grades are important. I always aim to get C at the very minimum. But I never sweat at it too much. Knowledge itself is more important than some written exams.”

I stand convicted.

University was never meant to be a pressure cooker. We come to learn new things, not just for the getting of good grades or jobs. More than that, we learn because we are passionate about what we are studying. It’s all about seeing the bigger picture. Good grades aren’t the guarantee for success in life.

I watched a Bollywood movie called 3 Idiots last night, and there’s a quote that I want to leave you with:

“Most of us went to college just for a degree. No degree meant no plum job, no pretty wife, no credit card, no social status. But none of this mattered to him, he was in college for the joy of learning, he never cared if he was first or last.”

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9 Comments

Friday, 27 May 2011 at 9:25 pm

Jess said:
Great piece of writing. Grades are important but the knowledge is the most important. When you excel in the field you’re passionate about (not measured by your grades but by your effort and your passion), success will chase you. Or, at least you will have great satisfaction and a sense of reward. Three Idiots is a great movie indeed! LOL

Friday, 27 May 2011 at 9:57 pm

Steven said:
I agree that what’s more important than grades is the knowledge that you actually have. However, we have to accept that when we apply for jobs, they will first, take a look at our grades and second, our extra-curricular activities, et cetera. And after all, I guess if you love what you’re doing, you’ll get good grades too! 😊

Saturday, 28 May 2011 at 5:03 pm

Jason said:
Well written and thanks for putting some great thoughts out there.

I guess another wrinkle to consider would be that we are all unique – and uniquely gifted. Some people get poorer grades simply because their strengths lie elsewhere – and often, sadly, ‘elsewhere’ is an industry that holds a lots less recognition, security and wages.
Another corollary of our uniqueness is that in any given field, some would excel in it more than others: someone told a meaningful story a man who was about to leave on a journey, and before he left he entrusted his possessions to 3 servants according to their ability. Later when he returned, the first servant who was talented and thus given a lot of responsibility doubled what was given to him, and he was commended by his master. The second servant who was moderately talented and thus given a moderate amount of responsibility also doubled that smaller amount given to him. He too was commended by his master. But the third servant, who was given little, did not do anything with the little talent that he had, and he was punished by his master.

I understand one of the lessons of the story was you are only expected to do the best with what you’ve been given in life… rather than compare yourself with others who may have more or less.

Relating that last comment to the article, maybe the answer to ‘how good is good enough?’ is ‘good enough is doing your best based on what you have’ 😊.
City of Melbourne Comic Club  August 17, 2011, 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm

ASEAN Student Games Melbourne 2011  October 1, 2011, 12:00 am to 5:00 pm

Easy Breezy Acoustic Night  October 5, 2011, 8:30 pm to 10:30 pm

Melbourne Muslim Festival 2011  October 16, 2011, 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm

Public lecture by Professor Chomsky  November 4, 2011, 7:30 pm to 10:30 pm