Effective Grading

A Tool for Learning and Assessment

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Managing the Grading Process

"I don't give grades," announced one faculty member in the first few minutes of a workshop Walvoord was leading. The ensuing seconds of dead silence among workshop colleagues contained, among other feelings, awe and envy. When the faculty member recited the many problems with the grading system that had led him to his current stance, there were nods of agreement. However, at the end of the two-day workshop, he was still the only person present who chose to opt out of the grading system.

Grading is deeply embedded in higher education; most faculty will choose, perhaps uncomfortably, to work within its bounds. The challenge is to manage the grading process, not to avoid it.

In Chapter One we argued that grading, when well done, can serve departmental and general education assessment. Now we look at what *well done* means. This chapter analyzes those challenges and suggests twelve basic principles for managing the classroom grading process. Chapters Three through Nine then offer specific advice, organized around the course-planning process. We concentrate on steps that individual faculty members can take in their own classrooms, within the present system, despite its flaws and constraints.

To manage the grading process in their classrooms, faculty must abandon three common false hopes that belie the context and the complexity of the grading process:

1. The false hope of total objectivity in grading
2. The false hope of total agreement about grading
3. The false hope of one-dimensional student motivation for learning

These false hopes embody faculty members' wishes that grading could somehow be freed from its entanglements in the messy, difficult context of the classroom. We faculty members sometimes wish that our only obligation were to pass judgment on a student product. In our dreams, this judgment is securely grounded in incontrovertible standards. It represents an objective and accurate assessment of the product. No one challenges the grade; no one disagrees. Students, in our dreams, ignore the grades we give and concentrate solely on the joy of learning for its own sake.

This leads to our first principle for managing the grading process.

PRINCIPLE 1
Appreciate the Complexity of Grading; Use It as a Tool for Learning

Give up false hopes of a perfect, simple system. Accept that the grading system will have flaws and constraints. But focus on using the power and complexity of the grading process as a tool for learning in your classroom.

If faculty are to use grading as a tool, they need a concept of grading that acknowledges its power and complexity and that suggests additional principles for action. We suggest that grading is a socially constructed, context-dependent process that serves many roles and that, if well managed, can be a powerful tool for learning.

When we say that grading is *socially constructed* and *context-dependent*, we mean that no grade or grading system is immutably right by some eternal standard. People have constructed grading systems to meet the needs and constraints of their situations. Milton, Pollio, and Eison's review of the history of grading (1986) amply demonstrates that grades have had different forms and meanings in different eras of U.S. educational history. The same authors' questionnaire survey of more than six thousand students, faculty, parents, and business recruiters demonstrated that grades hold various meanings for each of these types of people, and they are used differently by each.

Among the respondents were more than forty-three hundred students from twenty-three colleges and universities distributed across types and regions of the United States. The meaning of

grades for these students also varied depending on the students' orientation, motivation, previous experiences, and so on. So when you look out across your classroom, you see students for whom your grading system has diverse meanings. You and they are engaged in a system whose context, meanings, and characteristics are changing over time.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) posit that evaluation is not only a judgment that outsiders pass upon inert recipients; evaluation is a socially constructed process with many participants, all of whom help to make it what it is. For example, if the evaluation is to result in improvement, those who have been evaluated have to buy in; *they* have to make the changes. Guba and Lincoln suggest that evaluators abandon the false hope of achieving objective judgment and instead collaborate with the evaluees and other participants to construct a system that serves everyone's needs. The greatest good is not to arrive at an abstractly perfect evaluation—there is no such thing. The greatest good is to serve the needs of the participants and to bring about useful change. Skills in listening, negotiation, cultural understanding, and empathy thus facilitate rather than sabotage the evaluation process.

In their social context, grades play multiple roles that can be managed for the enhancement of learning. We identify four major roles of the grading process—evaluation, communication, motivation, and organization

PRINCIPLE 2
Substitute Judgment for Objectivity

Recognize that there is no such thing as an absolutely objective evaluation based on an immutable standard. Even supposedly objective multiple-choice tests are anything but. The selection of items, the phrasing of questions, the level of difficulty—all these are judgments made by the teacher according to circumstances. As a teacher, your job is to render an informed and professional judgment to the best of your ability. You will want to establish the clearest and most thoughtful criteria and standards that your professional training can supply. You will want to exercise that judgment within the context of your institution, your students, and their future employers.

PRINCIPLE 3
Distribute Time Effectively

Spend enough time to make a thoughtful, professional judgment with reasonable consistency, then move on. There are other aspects

of student learning that need your time. Faculty often know from their own observations, and research (Jacobs and Chase, 1992) affirms that teachers in the same discipline will vary in the grades they give to the same student. Even the same professor, a few weeks later, may give the same paper a different grade. Repeatedly reviewing student work will not bring you to the perfectly objective grade.

PRINCIPLE 4
Be Open to Change

The social meaning of grading is changing all the time. Your grades and grading system will be interpreted and used within the system that *is*—not the one you wish for or the one you experienced as a student. For example, the "average" grade in the United States today is in the *B* range. A grade of *C* communicates, therefore, a set of meanings to employers, students, parents, and graduate schools. Because grades are useless apart from the meanings that people impart to them, we suggest you abide by the system of meanings in which you find yourself. Except when issues of integrity and ethics are at stake, it's okay to use French coins in France and Spanish coins in Spain, and it's okay to pay for a hamburger at the current inflated rates, not the rates you paid in the good old days. Grade inflation is a national problem and must be addressed by institutions in concert at the national level. Individual teachers cannot address the problem in isolation; all you can do is use the coin of the realm.

PRINCIPLE 5
Listen and Observe

Focus on understanding and managing the meaning of grades to various kinds of students. A grade does not have the same meaning for students that it has for you, and it means different things to different students. It's the meaning students attach to grades that will most affect learning. Be very clear and explicit to your students about the meanings you attach to grades and the standards and criteria on which you base your grades; don't assume they know. Observe your students and listen to them. In establishing grades, you are not invoking the immutable laws of the universe; you are invoking a set of cultural beliefs and values that will shape the learning potential of your grading process. The better you understand that culture, the better you can manage the grading process for learning.

PRINCIPLE 6
Communicate and Collaborate with Students

The grading process need not provoke antagonism. Fair and help-
ful evaluation of their work is something learners naturally seek
and teachers naturally want to give, because it can help them both.
Though external forces limit what can be done, students and teach-
ers can influence the way grading works in their classroom.
Research affirms that student-faculty and student-peer interaction
powerfully influence student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini,
1991). Try to build in your classroom a spirit of collaborating with
your students toward common goals. Explain the criteria and stan-
dards you hold for their work and seek their active engagement in
the learning process. The following chapters offer specific sugges-
tions for accomplishing this goal.

PRINCIPLE 7
Integrate Grading with Other Key Processes

Grading cannot be separated from planning, teaching, and inter-
acting in your classroom. Don't shove it to the periphery; instead,
we suggest making grading integral to everything else you do.
Chapters Three through Nine discuss how to coordinate grading
within the course planning process.

PRINCIPLE 8
Seize the Teachable Moment

Because grades are highly symbolic, because they reveal and compli-
cate the bases of power in the classroom, because they so powerfully
shape interrelationships among students and teacher, and because
they often carry high stakes for learners, they will evoke strong emo-
tions. In fact, the learning process itself, like any significant change,
can evoke strong emotions in learners and teachers alike.

The years of education are often years of multiple changes for
your students. These are sometimes years of great openness, great
elasticity. You're in the middle of this learning and growing. You're
in the kitchen, as the saying goes, so expect the heat. In fact, we
suggest that you welcome the heat. Informal feedback and discus-
sion about grades can be significant events for students, affecting
their attitudes and their learning (O'Neill and Todd-Mancillas,
1992). When a student bursts into tears or shouts angrily in your
office, don't be flustered or dismayed; be alert and stay focused.
What do you want the student to learn in this moment? What

memory do you want the student to carry away from this encounter? What values of human life do you want to communicate through this interaction? Such moments of emotional intensity may be the most powerful teaching moments of the semester.

PRINCIPLE 9
Make Student Learning the Primary Goal

External audiences need information about a student's achievement in a course. While grades are sometimes misused in that context, such a report seems reasonable and necessary in a society where achievement, rather than birth and class, should lead to advancement. Thus you will want to make the fairest and most careful reports you can through grades, letters of recommendation, and other forms.

Sometimes the need for an external report will conflict with the needs of learners in your classroom, but often the needs will be consonant. Learners need reality checks; they need to know how a professional would judge their work. Often a tough judgment, delivered in a supportive way, can be the most helpful feedback you can offer.

When values do clash, we suggest that teachers remember to hold learning, rather than reporting to outsiders, as the most important goal of grading. A survey of more than six thousand students, faculty, parents, and business recruiters showed that while these groups believed that reporting to outsiders was a major focus of grading, they felt that learning should be the main focus (Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986). We suggest, then, that when dilemmas arise and values conflict, the teacher should choose the option that will best lead to student learning.

Research suggests that the grading process does significantly affect learning, in ways both beneficial and harmful (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Students study for the tests we give them, seek to meet the standards and criteria we establish, and engage in different kinds of intellectual activity depending on our assignments. Their involvement in learning is in part determined by their perception of faculty members' interest and friendliness toward them, including the fairness and helpfulness of the testing and grading system and the teacher's communication about their work and their grades (Boice, 1996).

Astin (1996), summarizing hundreds of studies of college undergraduates, cites three "conditions of excellence" in student learning and personal development. The most important is the student's *involvement* (that is, "the amount of time and physical and psychological energy that the student invests in the learning

process" [p. 124]). As he states, "Literally hundreds of studies of college undergraduates . . . have shown clearly that the greater the student's degree of involvement, the greater the learning and personal development" (p. 124). The other two conditions Astin cites are *high expectations* and *assessment and feedback.* A teacher's testing and grading system is crucial to all of these.

Chickering and Gamson (1987, pp. 3–7) summarize in seven "principles of good practice" what research suggests are the best teaching strategies for student learning.

Good practice in undergraduate education

1. Encourages student-faculty contact
2. Encourages cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes the time the student devotes to the task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

How many of these principles of good practice in some way involve the grading system in your class, the tests and assignments on which that system is based, and your ways of communicating with students about their work and their grades?

Grading, then, is a powerful lever, capable of influencing the learning in your classroom. We suggest you make learning your primary goal and use grading in all its roles to enhance learning.

PRINCIPLE 10
Be a Teacher First, a Gatekeeper Last

One function of the U.S. educational system, and especially its grading system, is to act as gatekeeper: to sort out those who aspire to advancement, allowing some students to move forward and keeping others in place. But in a just society, in a meritocracy, the sorting should happen only after everyone has had an equal chance to learn and should be based on what people have been able to learn.

School is the bridge between learning and gatekeeping. If we as teachers operate, explicitly or implicitly, as though our students were already sorted when they came to us—either by ability, talent, former learning, gender, race, or other factors—then we serve only the gatekeeping function. We must be gatekeepers at the end of the process, not at the beginning. Our entire effort, throughout the semester, should be pointed toward understanding our students, believing in them, figuring out what they need, and helping them to learn, no matter what their backgrounds.

PRINCIPLE 11
Encourage Learning-Centered Motivation

Grading is a powerful part of the motivational structure of the course. Student motivation is a key factor in student learning. Students are most affected by their engagement with you and with others and by the values of the campus community. Engaging and connecting with your students is a way to increase their motivation for learning. Further, you must battle against ingrained ideas that some of your students may hold: that they are powerless to affect what happens to them; that hard work will not pay off; that success is due to luck, and failure is due to circumstances beyond their control. Research suggests that these attitudes toward grades, more than the grades themselves, negatively affect students' motivation to learn (Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986).

PRINCIPLE 12
Emphasize Student Involvement

This principle summarizes all the others. As we mentioned earlier, student involvement is the bottom line for learning (Astin, 1985; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Throughout this book we urge that, in every aspect of your teaching and grading, you seek meaningful student involvement—that is, the student's investment of time and energy in the academic enterprise.

These twelve suggestions do not eliminate all the problems with the grading system in classrooms and institutions. They do, however, provide a focus for faculty attention and energy—a focus that helps faculty construct classroom grading systems that are conducive to learning and that also, as the final chapters of this book explain, create information about student learning that can be used for departmental and general education assessment.

The twelve principles in this chapter underlie the more specific suggestions we make and the course-planning process through which we lead the reader in the next chapters. We discuss selecting assignments and exams that will both teach and test the learning you most care about (Chapter Three); helping and motivating students to learn what they need to know to do well on the assignments and exams (Chapter Four); establishing criteria and standards for grading (Chapter Five); calculating course grades (Chapter Six); communicating with students about their grades (Chapter Seven); making the grading process time-efficient (Chapter Eight); and using the grading process to improve teaching (Chapter Nine).