Talking About Grades

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Overview of Workshop
1. Purpose of grades
2. What can be graded?
3. Grade inflation
4. Do certain teaching styles generate higher grades? Is that a problem?
5. Do answers to above questions fall into coherent philosophies of grading?

Expectations
- Workshop – not presentation
- False advertising:
  - We will look at “why” and “what” to grade, but not “how” to grade (contra abstract)
- No answers, but a lot of questions
- Goals:
  - Explore your own ideas about grades and grading
  - Exchange ideas with others
  - Possibly refine your own position

Clickers
- It’s a radio device: don’t point
- Device flashes green if your answer is registered
- Pray to the gods of tech demos that everything works.
- Try not to fuss too much about question wording

Primary purpose of grades for you
- Provide information for grad schools, employers, external audiences, etc: 7%
- Provide information to students: 36%
- Provide motivation to students to learn material and skills: 57%

If I stopped giving grades in my class (and other courses did give grades) my students would:
- Do very little of the assigned work: 31%
- Do some of the assigned work: 29%
- Do same amount of assigned work: 50%
- Do more of assigned work: 0%
If there were no grades at all at my institution, my students would:

- 7% Do very little of the assigned work
- 21% Do some of the assigned work
- 33% Do same amount of assigned work
- 39% Do more of assigned work

Topic 1: Using grades as motivators

- Should faculty members use grades specifically as motivators?
- Example:
  - Peter Fernald the Monte Carlo Quiz
  - Survival Cards

Arguments against motivational grading

- Unfair: Daryl Close: “the idea of punishing a student with a low course grade for excellent performance on grade components, but who skipped class frequently, will seem counterintuitive to many teachers” (366). Using grades to motivate good learning practices is like “punishing the innocent for the greater good” (367).
- Counterproductive: Alfie Kohn: “The more people are rewarded, the more they come to lose interest in whatever had to be done in order to get the reward” (8).

Arguments for Motivational Grading

- Attacking the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction.
- Nilson: “Does the fact that you get paid for teaching make it less appealing to you” (52)?
- Providing accountability in a world of competing responsibilities.
- Motivating learning centered pedagogy (class participation, group work, blogs, etc).

It is appropriate to use grades as motivators:

1. Regularly 50%
2. Only sometimes 43%
3. Seldom 0%
4. Never 7%

Topic 2: What can be graded?

- Where to draw the line between grading the work and grading the student?
- Some professors try to grade all work blind. Others think that context is important?
I might give higher grade to disadvantaged student who made progress over semester

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly Disagree

Which of the following may be appropriate as part of a final grade (for you)?

- 93% Tests and papers
- 87% Short assignments (reaction papers, blog posts)
- 60% Behaviors (e.g., participation, attendance)
- 33% Student characteristics (e.g., effort, progress, background)

Which of the following may be appropriate as part of a final grade (for institution colleagues)?

- 100% Tests and papers
- 92% Short assignments (reaction papers, blog posts)
- 100% Behaviors (e.g., participation, attendance)
- 69% Student characteristics (e.g., effort, progress, background)

Topic 3: Grade Inflation

- Not just increase in grades but an upward shift in grades “without a corresponding increase in student achievement” (Kamber, 46).
- In other words, a paper that would have gotten a B ten years ago now gets an A.
- Harvey Mansfield (Harvard) now gives two grades: an inflated grade (for transcript) and a real grade (for student information).

Which comes closer to your view?

- 43% Grade inflation is a major problem symptomatic of decay of standards
- 57% There are lots of reasons why grades have gone up. This is not as big a problem as conservatives make it out to be.
Topic 4: Grades and Learner-Centered teaching

- Do certain styles of pedagogy impact grades?
- Is that a problem?

Instructor-Centered Learner-Centered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor-Centered</th>
<th>Learner-Centered</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Students absorb specified content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor goals</td>
<td>“Course will cover this material . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Instructor has responsibility for what is to be learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Largely evaluative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Policies created by instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does learner-centered teaching produce higher grades

- Examples:
  - Building intro course around blog, and including frequency of blog posts as part of grade (Long)
  - Bringing in materials from popular culture to illustrate theories (hard to grade, but produces energetic discussions).
  - Using rubrics, giving out questions in advance of test, etc.
  - Allowing students to decide what percentage of their grade is based on what part of course?

- Do these substitute mechanistic tasks for tasks that can be evaluated?

Which comes closer to your view?

1. Examples above may increase grades, but also improve learning

2. Examples above produce grade inflation

3. Learner-centered teaching does not have anything to do with grade inflation

Topic 5: Are there two philosophies of grading?

- Developing a philosophy of grading.
- Fill out instrument
- Add up total score

Total score

1. 35–45
2. 25–34
3. 15–24
4. >15
The two sides:

- Do they mark out a coherent set of ideas?
- How would you label each side?
  - Content-driven grading vs. process-driven grading?
  - Achievement-centered vs. learning-learning centered.
Preliminary research on attitudes about grading suggests that there is a wide range of opinions about the meaning of grades and grading among our colleagues. But do those differences fall into broader categories? My hypothesis is that there are some underlying philosophical consistencies. To test this hypothesis, please rate yourself (as much as possible) on where you fall between each of the following extremes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Type 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of grades</td>
<td>Primarily purpose of grades: communicate achievement to external audiences.</td>
<td>Primary purpose of grades: communicate to students and provide motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades as motivators</td>
<td>Grades should only be used to evaluate achievement, not to motivate behaviors</td>
<td>Appropriate (esp in intro courses) to use grades to provide accountability for activities that promote learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basis of grades</td>
<td>Grades should be based on written work (papers and exams) only</td>
<td>Often appropriate to make class participation, reaction papers, and blog posts a component of grades, especially in intro classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of student characteristics</td>
<td>The ideal would be to grade all student work blind.</td>
<td>It is sometimes appropriate to understand broader context and, if necessary adjust grades upward to reward or compensate for effort, enthusiasm, disadvantage, or progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of course</td>
<td>Approach to grading is independent of level of course</td>
<td>Motivational and contextual grading more appropriate for younger students in intro courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriousness of grade inflation</td>
<td>Grade inflation is real and pernicious</td>
<td>There are many reasons why grades have gone up. Higher grades can also reflect the fact that students or teaching have improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High grades</td>
<td>If every student in the class gets an A, it usually reflects a problem with the teacher or the course</td>
<td>If the course objectives are clearly spelled out and every student has met them, then every student should get an A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria</td>
<td>Criteria for high grades cannot be reduced to mechanistic criteria</td>
<td>Spelling out course objectives clearly helps students learn more, and should lead to higher grades.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effort vs. quality</td>
<td>Giving out exam questions in advance, allowing students to rewrite papers, substitutes effort for quality</td>
<td>Giving students exam questions in advance, allowing students to rewrite papers, encourages greater learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some articles on grades and grading, including those referenced in the talk. For other material on pedagogy developed by John Immerwahr see: www.teachphilosophy101.org


Close, Daryl. 2009. Fair Grades. *Teaching Philosophy* 32, (4): 361-398. This essay was the recipient of the 2010 Mark Lenssen Prize for the best article on the teaching of philosophy.


