

Alternate Grading Strategies

Specifications grading

With specifications grading, students are graded pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory on individual assessments. Students' final grades are based on how many assessments they passed. For example, passing 20 or more assignments out of 23 would equate to an A; 17-19 assignments would equate to a B. Instructors create very detailed specifications (or 'specs') outlining what is considered a passing grade, which usually corresponds to B-level work or better (Kelly, 2018). Rubrics are often used to convey this information to students, indicating exactly what students need to do as well as the quality standards that need to be met.

Depending on how the instructor has set things up, students are often given multiple opportunities to reach their goals, including the ability to revise failed assessments. This allows them to learn from their mistakes as well as corrective feedback from the instructor in a self-paced, low stress environment (Kelly, 2018).

Eliminating or being flexible with deadlines

A long held belief is that punishing students for missed deadlines is good for them: students are taught time management skills and how to prioritize their academic work over more frivolous commitments. This way of thinking assumes that students are irresponsible or lazy rather than overwhelmed or struggling (Boucher, 2016). Some instructors have instead chosen to eliminate or offer students flexibility with deadlines. "Strict deadlines only serve to reproduce the inequalities of access and inclusion that universities are trying so hard to correct" (Ellen Boucher, *The Chronicle*, 2016). By enacting flexible deadlines, instructors choose to recognize students as adults who deserve the same respect and flexibility that they (the instructors) expect in their own lives. This strategy has the potential to reduce some of the stress associated with course work and in turn may enable students to engage more deeply with the subject matter.

Effort-based grading

Instead of exclusively relying on the evaluative aspects of grading, instructors may also consider participation and effort to help determine course grades. For example, if students use clickers in class, they could be graded on whether or not they participated in the clicker exercise, rather than the accuracy of their response. Another example is for students to earn credit for a writing assignment that meets effort-based criteria such as being the correct length, having the minimum number of resources cited, and turned in on time. This is not to say that quality should be ignored. But by providing a balance of effort-based and accuracy-based assessments, students are able to fully engage with the content without the pressure and negative repercussions often associated with traditional grading (Schinske, 2014).

Ungrading

Jesse Strommel describes his approach in which he focuses on giving students feedback instead of grades. Students write self-reflections 2 - 3 times throughout the semester. The first of these is usually more directed (with specific questions) than the last (which opens into something

more like an essay). His goal is to help students develop their metacognitive skills. At the end of the semester the students propose their final grade, and he uses this input to assign them a final grade. This is a radical approach, but may be appropriate for design courses.

Competency-based learning

Students are given a list of tasks to be mastered. Instructors provide feedback as students progress, but they are not given a grade. This could be seen as a derivative of specifications grading.

Self and peer evaluation

Self and peer evaluation are two strategies that allow students to take ownership of the grading process. When implemented, the role of the student changes from passive to active learner, which can lead to a greater depth of understanding of content (Schinske, 2014). These strategies help students identify their own strengths and weaknesses as well as encourage them to take responsibility for their learning. To prepare students for these evaluative processes, instructors should make sure students understand the objectives of the assessment and the criteria for success before critiquing the work (Topping, 2003). This can be done in class as an active learning/formative assessment activity. Skills acquired by doing self and peer evaluation can carry over into other situations; for example, we are often expected to assess ourselves as well as our colleagues in various career settings (Topping, 2003).

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