

EXPLORING BETTER WAYS TO ENCOURAGE AND EVALUATE STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Are there better ways to encourage and evaluate student learning outcomes than the well-established methods most of us currently employ? As proponents of continuous improvement programs assert, there are always ways to do a job more efficiently and effectively. As we consider ways to improve, the starting point for designing individual courses and entire curricula is a focus on learning outcomes—not only what we want students to learn, but how we can best assure they learn it, how they can apply what they learn, and ultimately how it shapes our fundamental understandings of ourselves in relation to others and the broader society.

The panelists collectively have several decades of teaching experience; each also has a deep interest in student learning and is committed to mutual exploration for shared meaning. The intention of the proposed workshop is to have participants explore broadly the question of encouraging and evaluating student learning outcomes.

For the purposes of this submission, we would like to offer an example of the sort of pedagogical element the workshop could explore: Contract grading as an alternative form of student evaluation.

Why consider alternative forms of student evaluation?

The shortcomings of traditional grading are legion. First, and perhaps most important, grades replace the intrinsic motivation to learn with the extrinsic rewards of good marks (Kohn, 1993), leading to a performance orientation rather than one of mastery (Hiller and Hietapelto, 2001). Second, students often feel they have little control over their grades in a conventional grading system (Polczynski and Shirland, 1977; Potts, 2010). Third, grading attempts to reduce a student's work (after the fact) to a single number or letter that conveys no real information to that person (Tchudi, 1997). Fourth, the purported benefits of grading are based on false assumptions—that there is a common standard among graders, and that a multidimensional piece of work can be accurately or fairly represented with a single letter or numeric score (Danielewicz and Elbow, 2009). What the single grade actually does is rank students in a class, not evaluate their work (Potts, 2010). Finally, many instructors find grading to be an onerous task, one that is time-consuming, often at odds with their value systems, and may lead to an adversarial relationship with students instead of a collaborative learning environment (Danielewicz and Elbow, 2009; Potts, 2010).

What is contract grading?

Contract grading is an evaluation process in which "...the student selects and works for a particular grade knowing ahead of time in fairly specific terms the type and amount of work required for that grade" (Bredderman and Haggerty, 1980: 63). As the term implies, student and teacher enter into a contract that specifies the amount and quality of work the student must do to earn a specific grade at the end of a course. The contract can specify virtually any combination of learning activities—one teacher notes that she groups her required and optional actions into four categories: 1) attendance and participation, 2)

projects, 3) quizzes, and 4) oral assignments (Stelzner, 1975). Grade levels are typically determined by a certain quantity of work completed in a satisfactory manner (as determined by the instructor) rather than attempting to gauge the quality of a set amount of assignments (Potts, 2010).

Contract grading runs a spectrum on many different criteria, including power to set the terms (Shor, 1996), extent of the work covered (Potts, 2010), ability to renegotiate (Hiller and Hietapelto, 2001), quantity vs. quality (Danielewicz and Elbow, 2009), etc. For example, some instructors utilize a unilateral or blanket contract (Danielewicz and Elbow, 2009; Potts, 2010), while others encourage students to either individually or collectively set virtually all terms of the contract (Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Shor, 1996; Thelin, 2005). Danielewicz and Elbow (2009: 246) guarantee their students a “B” grade based entirely on adequately completing a set number of assignments; however, to earn an “A,” the student must display high quality work: “we ignore quality of writing for grades up to B—but focus explicitly on writing quality for higher grades.”

Potential benefits of contract grading

Educational literature today is rife with distinctions between “teaching oriented” institutions and “learning centered” situations. A teaching orientation focuses on what faculty members do in the classroom, while a learning centered approach focuses on the actual process of students’ learning (Blumberg, 2008). The distinction between the two approaches may be best summed up by two educators’ observations: “[T]eaching is telling, knowledge is facts, and learning is recall” (Bilimoria, 1995: 445) clearly depicts the teaching centered orientation; while “Teaching is enabling, knowledge is understanding, and learning is the active construction of subject matter” (Elmore, 1991: xii). To the extent that a faculty member embraces the learning centered approach, contract grading may enhance her success in the classroom. Traditional grading, in which the teacher assigns a numeric or letter grade to students’ work is most closely associated with a teaching orientation, while contract grading has many of the earmarks of the learning centered approach (Elbow, 1997).

In the few papers that report comparison of outcomes using both traditional and contract grading systems, the benefits of contract grading appear substantial. Contract grading has been shown to be correlated with students’ feelings of greater control over their grades and reduce the stress they feel (Lindemann and Harbke, 2011; Potts, 2010). To the extent that the teacher desires, student empowerment can reduce classroom power differentials (Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Shor, 1996; Thelin, 2005). Potts (2010) concludes that her students concentrate more on learning than on grades, enjoy improved classroom dynamics, and experience less stress over the span of the course. Another scholar linked expectancy, equity, and path/goal theories to students’ increased motivation and better attitudes (Grau, 1999; Polczynski and Shirland, 1977).

Focusing on student feedback about contract grading, Hiller and Hietapelto (2001) reported that more than ninety percent of their students preferred it to traditional grading systems and recommended that they continue using it. Perhaps even more telling, of the students who did *not* prefer contract grading to traditional systems, sixty percent still recommended its continued use.

Most researchers reported benefits to their teaching activities. In many cases, this was caused by the need to clarify learning goals and activities that would lead to those objectives (Danielewicz and Elbow, 2009; Grau, 1999; Hiller and Hietapelto, 2001; Stelzner, 1975). From a more mercenary standpoint, virtually all researchers noted the reduction in time and stress grading, and some noted that they were able to provide more feedback, both in quantity and degree of incisiveness.

Concerns about contract grading

No system is perfect; as one would expect, there are potential drawbacks to contract grading. Perhaps the most prevalent concern is that students will not do their best work—they will simply do a larger number of “adequate” assignments to receive higher grades. Most of the researchers cited in this proposal reported similar anxieties before adopting the system, but all became much less concerned after implementing it. They found that the benefits, discussed above, appear to mitigate students’ potential waning efforts.

Hiller and Hietapelto (2001: 666) describe their primary challenge was “...to give students enough freedom and control of the system to motivate their learning and improve their likelihood of performing successfully while providing enough direction so that they do not flounder or experience undue stress.” They also cite the need to minimize free ridership for group projects, a concern of virtually any system of evaluation. Potts (2010) reported that, initially, her better-performing students (based on cumulative grade point averages) despised contract grading, which she attributed to her inadequate explanation. Subsequent use of the system, with better explanations of its workings, encountered much less resistance. Grau (1999) noted similar initial confusion.

Another cause for concern may be resistance from the teacher’s institution. While many faculty members may see the benefits of reduced emphasis on (or even elimination of) grades, the institutional reality for most of us continues to mandate their use. This entrenched system often causes suspicion of alternatives. Reviews of the available literature largely obviate the concerns about contract grading, but resistance in the face of contravening facts is, unfortunately, not rare in academia.

Concerns about commensurability between grading systems seems largely unfounded. The overall distribution of grades shows little change when faculty members utilize both systems to record performance (typically, the only grades reported to the student have been those based on the contract system). These researchers general report grade difference of only a half-grade level, for example a B+ or B- instead of a B for an individual student, and class distributions are roughly equal or slightly higher (Grau, 1999; Lindemann and Harbke, 2011; Potts, 2010).

Logistics of the workshop (90 minutes)

All three of the panelists have deep-seated and long-term commitments to highly participative learning environments. We plan to engage the group attending the symposium in an active conversation about practical aspects of encouraging and evaluating student learning, addressing colleagues’ and students’ concerns, and exchanging ideas about ways to do so; as a result, we expect to have tangible outcomes from this workshop. We believe there is significant interest in ways to enhance student learning, de-emphasize

the focus on ordinal ranking of our students, and allow us to engage with our students in a more collaborative learning model.

Problem selection via Nominal Group Technique (25 minutes):

- **Step 1 (2 minutes):** Workshop leaders will break attendees into equal-sized groups; our goal is to have about four people per group.
- **Step 2 (3 minutes):** Each person will brainstorm on their own about specific problems they have encountered with student learning and/or the evaluation of student learning.
- **Step 3 (5 minutes):** Each table is covered with butcher paper. The group at that table will create a single list for that table. In abbreviated format, each person will add their list of problem examples to the butcher paper on their table.
- **Step 4 (10 minutes):** Someone at each table should act as time keeper. Divide the 10 minutes available by the number of people at the table; each person has that amount of time to discuss any/all of the examples they included on the list.
- **Step 5 (5 minutes):** Each table will select 3 problems to have the whole workshop discuss. They will write their list on a large Post It and stick it to the wall where everyone can see it.

Problem Discussion (60 minutes): The workshop leaders will facilitate conversations about each of the problems identified, covering one problem from each table before covering a second problem from any table. In each case, the facilitator will get the person who listed the problem to describe their specific circumstance; they will take questions from the audience for clarification, to be certain that everyone understands the core of the problem before discussing potential solutions. Then they will open the floor for suggested ways to handle the situation, particularly if anyone has actual experience with the suggestion or has familiarity with the suggested approach. Throughout the workshop, panelists will lend their knowledge of the research, expertise, and experience as appropriate.

Concluding Comments (5 minutes): Workshop leaders will make final summarizing comments and thank participants. Outcomes from the workshop will be written up and submitted to the *2017 IABS Proceedings*.

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