
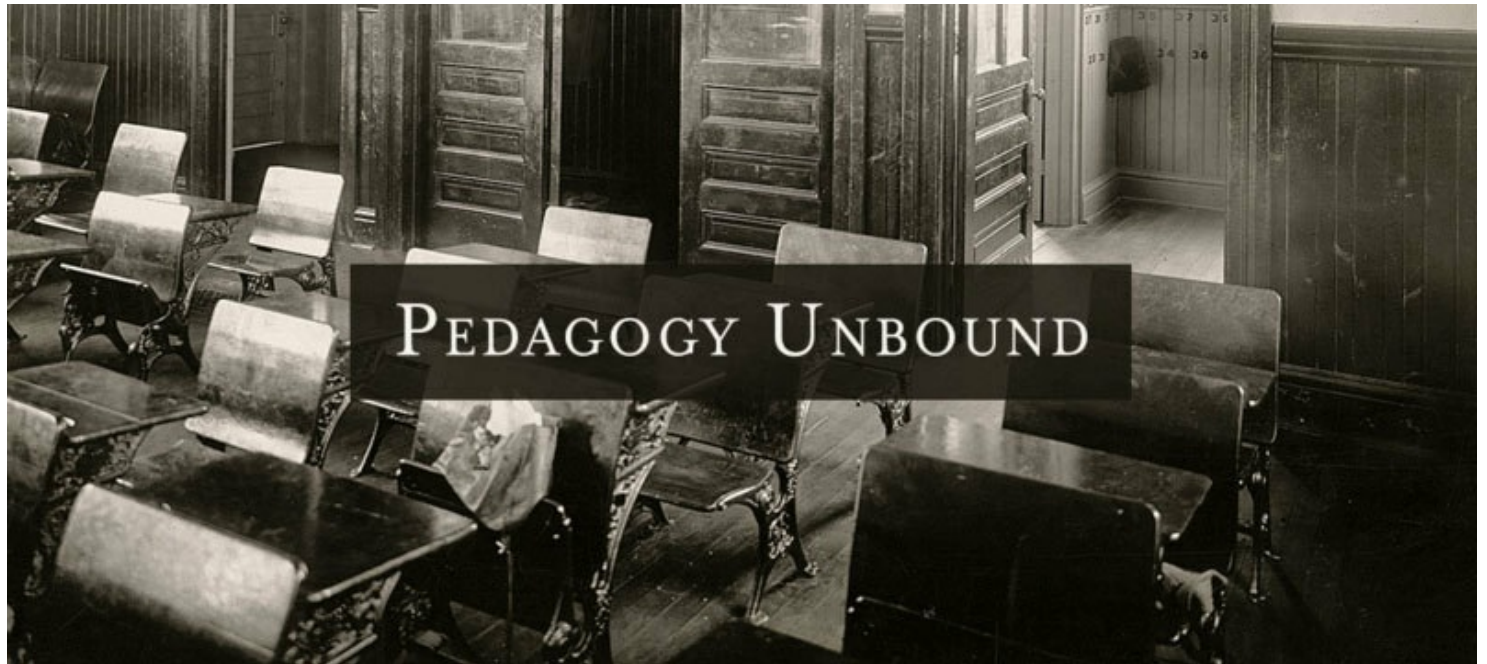


How Can We Minimize Grade Challenges?

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One of the most consequential lessons I learned last semester actually happened after it was over. Five days after the semester ended — to be precise, about 15 minutes after I updated the final grades for my courses — the emails started coming in, like clockwork. I'm sure you get them too: the earnest and pleading requests (sometimes polite, sometimes not) for better grades. I responded with my general policy (I only change grades if I've made a mistake; I round to the nearest whole number), and that seemed to satisfy most students. But one student was a tougher nut to crack.

Email after email arrived with detailed (and specious) arguments as to why he was shortchanged on the grades he earned for specific assignments. He requested documentation that explained why he received 12.15 points for an assignment instead of 12.16. He earnestly explained what it would mean if I could find an extra 1.05 points somewhere to bump him from a B to a B+. Each of my responses provoked an even longer email in reply. It went on for some time.

Even though I kept my head, the whole exchange was unnerving. Particularly for those of us without tenure, such episodes can feel fraught with danger. I feel lucky to have a supportive chair (when this student took his complaint upstairs, my chair told him that grades can't be changed just because of student preference). But for many instructors, a student complaint can be the difference between being hired for next semester — or not.

With a new semester approaching, the incident has got me thinking about ways to mitigate this danger ahead of time.

Look closely at your syllabi. I strive to be as clear and transparent as possible about my grading policies, and that begins with the document I hand out at the beginning of the course. In particular, I'm going to revise the sections on the more subjectively graded elements of my courses, like participation and homework. A breakdown of what constitutes an A-level performance (or B-level, etc.) can be helpful reference points down the line.

As well, it's wise to explicitly explain to students that they do not start with 100 percent and lose points for infractions. Rather, a grade is a judgment about overall performance. That is to say, students who have earned an 85 percent on participation did not necessarily "lose" 15 points through some bad behavior; they were judged to have performed at a B level.

Be clear about your grading policies throughout the term. When you introduce assignments, give students a breakdown of the grading criteria. Whether you use rubrics or [past student work](#) as a guideline, try to communicate to students what's expected of them, which aspects you will grade, and what distinguishes the various grade levels.

Make room for students to discuss grades appropriately. No matter how seriously we take the task of fair grading, we need to acknowledge that students are the ones directly affected. It's normal that they will sometimes have questions or concerns about their grades. Let students know some appropriate ways to bring up such concerns.

A colleague of mine uses a "24/7" policy: Students must wait 24 hours after receiving a grade before discussing it with you, and then have 7 days to question it. After that, the grade is considered set in stone. You may find that policy too rigid — or too lenient. So come up with a policy you're comfortable with. The important part is to acknowledge that you can make mistakes, and that there are constructive ways for students to discuss their grades with you.

Explain your reasoning on a particular grade clearly. Your comments on tests and essays [should be focused most of all on instruction](#): Use that space as an opportunity to help students see where they've gone wrong, and how they can improve. You do not need to preemptively defend yourself against grade grubbing or go out of your way to justify their grades. But students should be able to read your comments and understand why they earned the grade they did. If they read your comments and then are shocked by the accompanying grade, you're not doing a good enough job of communicating your criticisms. I think we need to accept both that instructors are qualified to make judgments about student performance and that students have a right to expect those judgments to be fair and explicable.

Stand your ground but be patient. Even if you do all of those things, you will probably still get emails after the semester asking for a few extra points. Although we shouldn't feel pressured to change what we think are legitimately earned grades, we don't need to vilify students, either.

Recognize that some students are under a lot of pressure to earn good grades, that their failures may not always be the product of apathy, and that we may not always be as clear as we should be in explaining our grading. It doesn't hurt to be civil, and as much as it might make you feel better to tell such students where to go, it's far wiser to take the high road, explain politely that you only change grades when you've made an error, and press send. If you've done your job well, the complaining students will understand their grade, even if they don't like it.

No one should teach in fear of the prospect of a wronged and vengeful student. Instead, we need to treat grading as a serious task with real responsibilities. If we carry that task out in good faith, we can respond to such students knowing we've held up our end of the bargain.

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