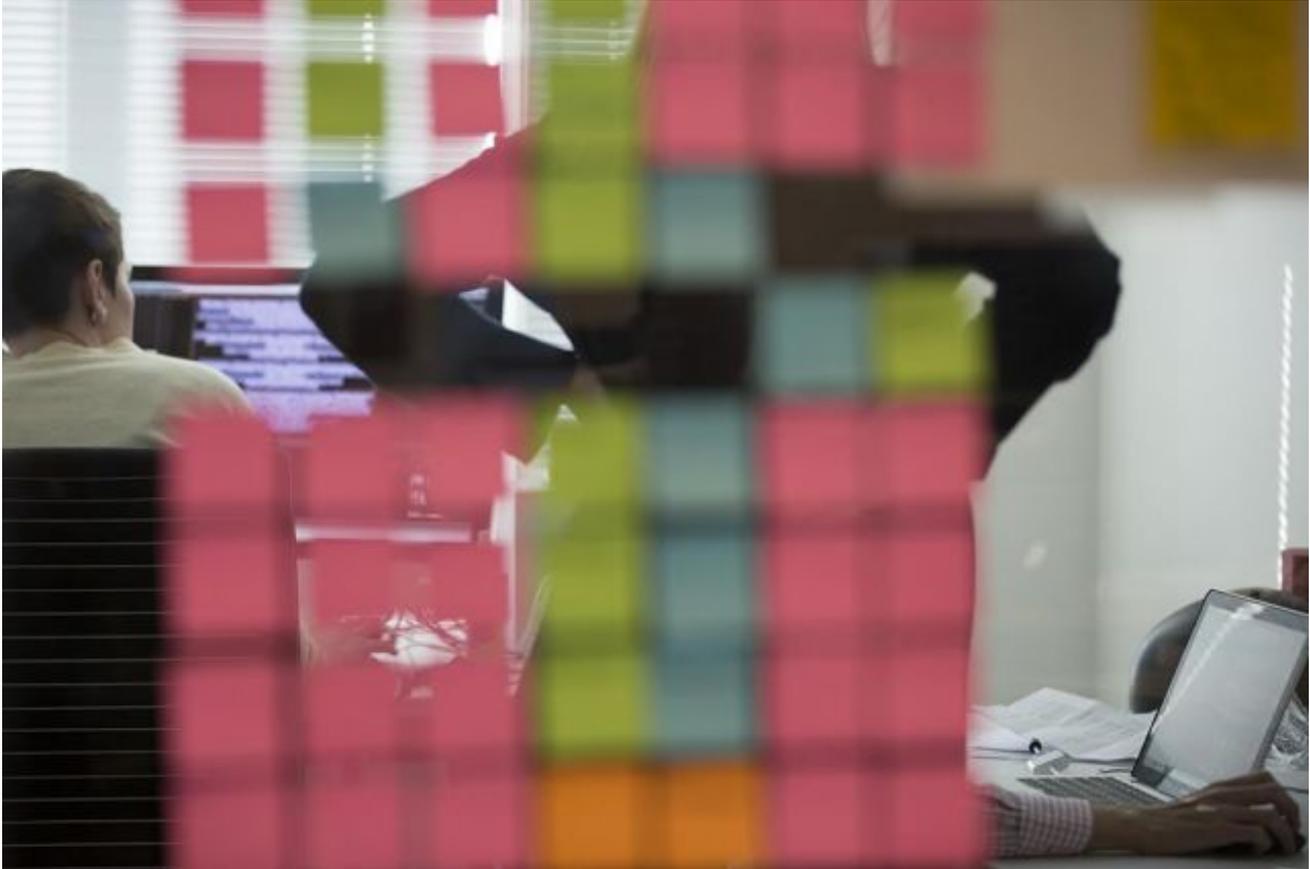


Rethinking Grading | Higher Ed Beta

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March 2, 2016 - 5:38pm

[Steven Mintz](#)

How can we make assessment more meaningful?

Rigorous assessment is central to education. It tells us whether our students are mastering essential skills and knowledge and whether our teaching is effective.

But grading also provokes much grouching.

Many students complain that grading is arbitrary, inconsistent, and unfair, while many instructors grumble about grade inflation, the excessive amount of time devoted to grading, and the many complaints that grading prompts.

Then there are the frustrations expressed by educational psychologists and psychometricians:

- That a single, over-all grade conflates elements that need to be disentangled.
- That grades tend to overly reward lower-order thinking skills (such as memorization and recall) rather than higher order skills (involving analysis, application, and synthesis).
- That grades too often fail to accurately reflect student learning or mastery.
- That grades are frequently de-motivating and discouraging.

It is a sad fact that in many institutions we have the worst of all worlds: Grades are inconsistent across disciplines; grades offer students little feedback; grades do not reflect engagement and growth; and grades, outside the sciences, cluster around an A-. Too often, grades do not truly recognize students who excel or motivate students to persist and ultimately master the material.

If we are to improve grading, we must first ask why we grade. Is it to rank students? To measure performance or knowledge or memory or higher order thinking skills? Is it to motivate students to study, or diagnose learning problems, or to assess mastery.

Grades can serve multiple roles:

- Informational: To tell students how they are doing.
- Motivational: To encourage students to study and master essential material.
- Diagnostic: To identify weaknesses and strengths.
- Evaluative: To measure mastery of skills and knowledge.
- Metacognitive: To encourage self-reflection and to help students develop the ability to assess their own learning
- Formative and Summative: To prompt students to improve their performance and provide an overall assessment of their success

Grades can serve as a measure of a student's level of understanding, the range of their work and the sophistication of their ideas, facility with various concepts and skills, the amount of work they have performed, or their growth.

What is it, then that we want to grade. We can grade:

- Process: Thought processes or the application of skills and knowledge.
- Effort: This might include time spent or research conducted.
- Participation: Active engagement in class activities.
- Progress: How far students have advanced.
- Outcomes: Demonstrated performance.

Grades can be:

- holistic, or targeted (based on discrete assignments);
- norm referenced or criterion referenced (that is, grading can be relative to their classmates or it based on predetermined criteria); and
- calculated or judged based on subjective or objective criteria.

We can provide opportunities for extra-credit or retakes and revisions – or not.

In recent years, assessment specialists have advocated in behalf of a variety of approaches to grading. These include:

- Standards-based grading: Under this approach, students must demonstrate proficiency on well-defined course objectives.
- Achievement-based grading: Here, assessment is based on how far students go beyond minimal expectations.
- Mastery based grading: Students must retake assignments until an acceptable level of mastery is achieved.
- Specifications Grading: Create detailed “specifications” on what it means to adequately do an assignment and design assignments that give the students opportunities to demonstrate they have met these specifications.

I might add some alternative ways to think about grading:

- A game-based approach: This involves incentivizing attainment of certain learning goals by awarding points for completing certain assignments or badging certain accomplishments.
- A simplified approach: This involves replacing fine-grained assessments with more general categories, such as "Exemplary," "Accomplished," "Promising," and "Developing."
- A proficiency-based approach: This approach focuses on progress toward clearly-defined learning objectives. Grades, from this perspective, communicate what a student is able to do, but gives them extended time to practice and develop their skills.

What advice would I offer?

1. Make your criteria available ahead of time.
2. Involve students in defining grading criteria to help them better understand your standards. Have them draft a rubric and evaluate sample answers.
3. Adopt a multi-tiered assessment strategy that assesses performance in varied ways. These might include checks for understanding, practice sets, project-based assessments, and team-based assessments. In other words, include application and creation of knowledge within your grading toolkit.
4. Make grades more meaningful by clarifying their purpose.
5. On specific assignments and activities, substitute multiple grades for a single overarching grade, with separate grades for each learning objective, for example, depth of research.
6. Make grading a more positive experience by making it more forward looking. That is, place greater emphasis on progress in student learning.
7. Design your grading system so that it encourages and reward progress toward your learning objectives.

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