

“A Better Way to Grade”?

"Grading is often the least favorite part of faculty's job, and as course loads and class sizes grow, it takes more and more of our time." According to author Linda B. Nilson, "There must be--and there is--a better way to grade."

Writing in the *Nov. 2014 NEA Higher Education Advocate* (31:5), Nilson says, "Our current grading system is broken. It doesn't work well for faculty, students, post-secondary institutions, or prospective employers of our graduates." The system may or may not be broken. Do you agree with her that there is "A Better Way to Grade"?

Theories

Nilson: “we have abandoned rigor” (in part because of teaching a “more diverse population”

Schinske and Tanner:

- Grades “were initially meant to serve...pedagogical purposes,” but today they more often serve administrative functions including transfer and institutional coordination (160).
- “Grading does not appear to provide effective feedback....it is unclear whether students even read such comments, much less understand and act on them” (161)
- “at best, grading motivates high-achieving students....At worst, grading lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling” (162).
- “curved grading creates a competitive classroom environment, alienates certain groups of talented students, and often results in grades unrelated to content mastery” (163).

Applications and solutions

Nilson:

- “specs grading”: students earn either full credit or no credit on an assignment
- “tokens”: akin to a “Get out of jail free” pass that gives students some control
- “bundles”: sets of specs-graded assignments; choosing your bundle might mean choosing your grade (aspiring to an A, settling for a C, etc.)

Schinske and Tanner:

- “Designing and using rubrics to grade assignments or tests can reduce inconsistencies and make grading written work more objective. Sharing the rubrics

with students can have the added benefit of enhancing learning by allowing for feedback and self-assessment” (163).

- “balance accuracy-based grading [which rewards correct answers] with the awarding of some proportion of the grade based on student effort and participation....to promote student practice, incentivize in-class participation, and avoid some of the negative consequences of grading” (164).
- “self- and peer-evaluation of work are avenues for providing meaningful feedback without formal grading on correctness that can positively influence students’ learning” (164).
- Don’t curve grades (164).
- Teach more by grading less: “One wonders how much more student learning might occur if instructors’ time spent grading was used in different ways. What if instructors spent more time planning in-class discussions of homework and simply assigned a small number of earned points to students for completing the work? What if students themselves used rubrics to examine their peers’ efforts and evaluate their own work...? What if students viewed their peers as resources and collaborators...? Implementing small changes like those...might allow instructors to promote more student learning by grading less or at least differently than they have before” (165).

Questions

1. Do you agree that we have abandoned rigor?
2. How (if at all) would you use Nilson’s specs grading, tokens, and or bundles?
3. How far apart are your grades from your outcomes? (Does a grade of A mean a student met all/most of your course outcomes?)

Sources and resources

“A Better Way to Grade”? *Academic First Year Experiences*, CSU Northridge. Website. <<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/resources-better-way-grade>> Accessed 1/26/2015.

Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment by Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson. 1st edition. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998. Print. CSUN’s Faculty Development library (in CIELO) owns several copies of this book. See especially Ch. 8, “Making Grading More Time-Efficient,” and in any case take a look at the “Overview of the Contents” (xviii-xix). A second edition of this sensible and comprehensive book was published in 2009 and is now on order for CIELO’s AFYE library.

“Writing in Large GE Classes: Resources for Doing the Impossible.” *Academic First Year Experiences*, CSU Northridge. Website. <<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/writing-large-ge-classes-resources-doing>> Accessed 1/26/2015.