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Assessing for Student Success and a Target Class Average: Balancing two grade-related goals facing university instructors and teaching assistants

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Summary

In the current university system in Canada, course instructors and teaching assistants usually find themselves balancing two expectations related to grading:

- 1) The students (rightfully) expect assignments and exams to have criteria that are clearly expressed and are actually attainable for most/all students. (**Goal: Student Success**)
- 2) The university administration expects the instructor to meet grade-average and grade-distribution requirements for their course. (**Goal: Student Comparison/ Sorting**)

Many of those involved in university grading have personally experienced the tensions that can arise when attempting to balance both of the above-mentioned expectations. This is particularly true in Arts and Humanities disciplines, where graded assessments are predominantly (or even exclusively) essay style. This seminar will familiarize participants with two grading models that emphasize each of these goals. As a group, seminar participants will outline a practical grading scheme that can be used in the department to ensure that both of these goals can be achieved.

Keywords

Grading, evaluation, standards-based assessment, norm-based assessment, learning outcomes

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SUMMARY

In the current university system in Canada, course instructors and teaching assistants usually find themselves balancing two expectations related to grading:

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Background Assumption for the Seminar:

While a valuable theoretical debate is currently unfolding as to whether or not university education *should* use standards-based or norm-based assessments, this seminar assumes that university educators/assessors are currently working in a kind of hybrid environment: the university *does* currently act as a sorting institution in our society **and** educators *do* want their students to achieve learning objectives. This seminar addresses how to work in the current environment and is not a seminar on what that environment *should ideally* be.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the seminar, participants will:

1. be able to identify the various purposes and meanings of grades;
2. gain a basic understanding of two models of grading— the Standards Model and the Norm Model — and distinguish the purposes of each; and
3. formulate a practical grading scheme that balances two goals: learning success (attainment of learning objectives) and meeting course averages mandated by administration (to prevent grade inflation).

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Biggs, J. B. & So-Kum Tan, C. (2007). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does. Third Edition*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Society for Research into Higher Education.

In this book Biggs and Tang formulate and discuss an outcome-based model of teaching. Biggs and Tang consider how to formulate “intended learning outcomes” (ILOs) and how to design course activities and assessments in light of the ILOs. The book provides arguments for why this model should be adopted and looks at how to implement this style of teaching practically.

This seminar will largely focus on Chapter 9: “Aligning assessment tasks with intended learning outcomes.”

I will deliver a short presentation on two models of assessment that Biggs considers in this chapter: *The Measurement Model (Norm-based Assessment)* and *The Standards Model (Standard/Criteria-based Assessment)*. While Biggs is clearly in favour of the *Standards Model*, I will present both options neutrally.

The core of the presentation is captured in the following chart:

| | Measurement Model | Standards Model |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| a.k.a. | Norm-based Assessment | Standards-based or Criteria-based Assessment |
| What the mark represents: | an individual student's rank compared to his or her peers in terms of some particular performance or ability | the degree to which an individual student has attained one of the course's learning objectives (or intended learning outcomes) |
| Comparative | YES | NO |
| Presumes a Normal Distribution | YES | NO |
| Benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● highly effective for attaining compliance with averages and distributions set by university administration (provides an “impartial” way to do this) ● insofar as the grade represents a student’s rank within a course or section, students (who are in a competitive environment) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● emphasises student success ● mirrors actual educational processes that occur outside of competitive learning environments (focus on being able to <i>do</i> something, not on comparison with peers) |

| | | |
|-------------------|---|--|
| | are not penalized for variances in assignment difficulty or the quality of instruction between different sections (the content learned is not the determinant, but only how one did compared to one's peers) | |
| Drawbacks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the grades do not represent the objective quality of learning/teaching actually attained (i.e. it is possible that all submitted work was objectively low-quality, yet the “best” of the worst will still achieve the highest grade possible) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the grades may not be suitable for admission or competition (scholarship) decisions because they do not sort students based on ability, effort, or relative achievement. (It devalues the ‘currency’ of grades.) |
| Subjective Aspect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> comparisons of quality (better or worse) for each assignment deciding the weight of each assignment and each component of the assignment (rubric) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> determining to what extend each goal is attained determining what level of learning the student has achieved in an assignment (low-level or high level) |

I will also be looking at the examples that Biggs and Tang give on how to assess holistically within the Standards Model and how to translate these assessments into letter and percentage grades to help illustrate what is meant by the standards model.

Achen, A. C. & Courant, P. N. (2009). What are Grades Made of? *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23(3), 77-92.

This article examines the meaning of university grades from the “economic perspective” and considers some possible causes of grade inflation in light of this perspective. They assert that grades act as a kind of **currency**. In particular, they consider how supply and demand considerations related to course enrollment can affect grade inflation.

I will use this article primarily to emphasize the reality that the *meaning* and *purpose* of grades is multi-faceted. In addition to being a tool for learning feedback, grades *do* function in ways analogous to currency. Grades can act as a reward for students (if they are distributed sparingly), but students can also react to low grades in ways that motivate

professors or departments to distribute higher grades more frequently (i.e. students can stop enrolling in those courses).

The main lesson I wish to draw from this paper is that students and professors working in environments where grades have functions other than learning feedback are not irrational to treat grades as they do (i.e. comparatively and competitively). While this may not be ideal, it is important for graders to acknowledge the fact that there are strong motivations to inflate grades and good reasons to attempt to prevent grade inflation for students and faculty alike.

Macaulay, A. (2004) Making the Grade. *National 13* (8), 16-16. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/196551317?accountid=15115>

This article discusses the effects of grade inflation in Canadian Law Schools, with special focus on the University of Windsor. The article describes how Windsor's grade-curve average was lower than that in competing law schools and how students complained this was affecting their opportunity to compete on the job market. The article notes that the students' concerns were somewhat justified given the fact that employers in this field do, in fact, consider the grade averages of applicants when hiring. The article also presents the tension faced by law school administrators who want to balance the needs of students (with extremely high debt loads) to get jobs with the university's need to maintain academic integrity in educating and assigning grades.

I will mainly use the material in this article as an example of the tensions that can occur in balancing concerns about grade inflation, academic integrity, and the desire to have students succeed. The article highlights the reality that grades are not simply tools for learning feedback, but are used by graduate schools and employers for access to competitive programs and jobs.

Brookhart, S. M. (2011) Starting the Conversation about Grading. *Educational Leadership*, November, 10-14.

In this article, Brookhart offers practical advice on how to facilitate discussions among instructors about the *meaning* of grades. She warns that discussing the particulars about grading (for example, "B+ means ...") will not be successful until there is consensus about the general function and purpose of grades. She provides a number of activities and discussion questions to facilitate group work that can result in consensus, and I will use some of these in the workshop. While the article clearly supports the adoption of a particular grading model (the Standards Model) the activities are meant to be neutral, and I will present them as such.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

| DURATION (min) | SUBJECT | ACTIVITY | PURPOSE |
|---------------------------|--|--|--|
| 5 | Seminar Overview | In groups of two, introduce yourself (if necessary) and in one or two sentences say what you enjoy about grading and what (as a student) you enjoyed about getting grades. | This will start the discussion off on a positive note, and hopefully people can look back to this statement to help identify what they think the purposes of grades are. |
| 10 | What are the purposes of grades? What do grades mean? | Participants will be broken into groups of 4-5. Small group discussions: Before the seminar, registered participants will be sent an online survey (via a service such as Survey Monkey) allowing them to identify possible purposes for assigning grades at the university level (from both the instructors' and students' perspective). During this session a summary of their responses will be provided (i.e. PowerPoint or handout) to each small group by the facilitator, and participants will look for common themes and identify any surprising answers. | Participants will actively evaluate reasons for grading and will identify important differences and commonalities among the responses provided. |
| 10 | Two Purposes of Grading: How do instructors balance two grading goals? | Short Synthesis/Presentation | This short presentation is meant to focus attention on two aspects that will most likely result from the discussions (or introduce them, if not): learner feedback and sorting/ranking. Participants will then understand how two grading goals (student success and meeting departmental grade targets) can appear to conflict. |
| 20 | Two Models of Assessment | Presentation | Participants will understand the Measurement Model and Standards Model of grading and see how each model is designed to meet one of the two goals at issue in the seminar. |
| 5 | Break | | |
| 15 | Developing | Small Group Activity: | Participants will apply the |

| | | | |
|----|---|---|---|
| | an Assessment Rubric | Participants will be divided into groups of 4-5. They will be provided a mock writing assignment and will need to create a grading rubric that captures both goals discussed in the seminar (student success and maintaining departmental targets). Participants will be encouraged to draw upon the benefits they noted in the two models discussed in the previous segment. | concepts provided in the two previous presentations and come to identify beneficial aspects of each model of grading. Participants will ideally be able to synthesize these various beneficial aspects into a new hybrid model of grading that allows them to attain both goals at issue in this seminar. |
| 25 | A Balanced Approach: How can we find a middle ground? | Group Discussion (all participants, moderated by the facilitator): Each group will briefly describe their model. Then, everyone will be invited to comment on the benefits they see in each of the models created. Next, through consensus, the group will select a model they believe best captures the goals of student success and maintaining target averages. The model selected will either be one of the ones created by a small group, or a revised version of one of these models. | To get participants to develop consensus about the possibility of balancing both grading goals and to develop a working model that will allow them to do so as a department. |

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

I have attempted to design a seminar that will allow the participants to discover and create for themselves an assessment model that can balance both grading-related goals set for university instructors in our current educational environment. While the literature often engages in arguments for adopting one model over the other, this seminar is meant to present both models neutrally and foster discussion among instructors on how to combine the best aspects of both models to best fit the current grading situation.

The first half of the seminar seeks to provide the participants with a common understanding of the issues and provide a common vocabulary for engaging in dialogue through the language of models. The group activities are meant to allow for diverse opinions and options to be focussed on and discussed in larger groups. It is hoped that by starting in small groups and working towards larger group discussions participants will be

encouraged to seek consensus along the way. The goal is to have the participants become aware of the tensions and ideally to create some working hybrid model that they can further develop to balance these goals within a department.