

Is Fair Grading Futile? Evaluating and Rethinking Assessment

"Teachers often replicate what they experienced as students." –Pula Stitt

Educator Challenges

What is one of the most challenging aspects about your job as an educator? The usual suspects come to my mind: time constraints, course load, and student and faculty interactions. One survey found that educators' top five concerns are teaching specific technology skills, letting students create content, collaboration, communication, and the topmost concern, increasing student engagement. While each of these issues prove challenging, the purpose of this article is to tackle another issue not mentioned above: grading. Many faculty members spend a considerable amount of time grading students' work, and many of us find time constraints and fairness to be the most challenging aspects of that very important responsibility. This article highlights how to make grading fairer and more efficient, resulting in less time being spent grading students' work.

Fairness

Consider how from time to time you may have bent a rule or two to accommodate a student's needs. For example, one of my students sent me the following email regarding missing class:

"I am so very sorry for missing class, again. I was incarcerated for defending myself against my ex-fiancé... only I had a bat. I know I screwed up, but I'm out now. And I'm continuing to try and stay strong. This is why I haven't written my paper on domestic violence yet. It hits too hard. But I will get it done. I am SO SORRY."

What would you have done in this situation? When I pose this question to other educators, unsurprisingly, I receive a variety of responses. The variety of responses is part of the challenge of fairly grading students' work. Given that there are so many different responses about how to tackle this or a similar issue, it is helpful to ask whether each of the responses are fair, because they are surely not consistent.

Rate My Grading

Students quickly pick up on their educator's inconsistency. Below are just a few comments from RateMyProfessor that highlight the issue of fairness and inconsistency:

- "If you don't come up with what she is thinking, you are completely wrong. She says she is 'fair,' which is completely untrue."
- "He is extremely unclear about what he expects and he changes his mind daily about what should and should not be included in your stories."
- "Assignments were very vague and unclear. Never quite sure what she wanted or what she was going for."

The above comments illustrate a few concerns students have about inconsistent grading. How can we minimize these perceptions? One way is to take a closer look at how we assess students using rubrics. However, simply having a rubric is not sufficient. Rather, in order to achieve more accurate assessments, it is imperative that we create and use well-designed rubrics. Below are ways to maximize rubric effectiveness. However, first let us consider several reasons for seeking to practice fair and consistent grading.

The Selfie Generation

The millennial generation (aka, the selfie generation) is often accused of being entitled. *Time* magazine once called this cohort "The Me Me Me Generation." If millennials are entitled, then we should expect to see a rise in student demands for better grades, as well as accusations of unfair grading. Whether these issues are true or simply anecdotal is not important; it is important, however, that educators legitimize their grading processes in order to ward off any assertions of unfair grading. And if we can grade in a more efficient manner, then all the better!

Assessment

In sessions during which I discuss how to grade fairly, I often show a video of a student giving a presentation about basic sociological principles. I ask each person in the session to grade the student's level and quality of eye contact during the presentation. Invariably, the audience has a range of scores; in short, their grading is inconsistent. Why wouldn't it be? Each member in the audience uses their own specific criteria to evaluate the student's work.

This example leads to a question about whether each person grades objectively or subjectively. Some educators may look at the number of times the student gazed up from his or her notes or, alternatively, they may focus on the quality of the student's gaze, all of which results in a debate about quantitative or qualitative grading.

The essay should be free of spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax errors and should reflect an academic writing style.

Exceeds Expectations (10 points)	Meets Expectations (8-9 points)	Approaches Expectations (6-7 points)	Below Expectations (5 or less points)
0-1 of these errors are evident.	2-3 of these errors are evident.	4-5 of these errors are evident.	6 or more of these errors are evident.

Figure 1.

In addition, discussions often arise about whether the grading was a formative or summative assessment.

Objectivity, Quantity, and Types of Assessment

There are three factors necessary for fair grading to take place: objectivity, quantity, and summative assessment. Many educators argue that objective grading is in the best interest of the learner because it fosters fairness and equality. Other educators argue that quantity is the most efficient way to measure what students have learned. While qualitative review is necessary in certain disciplines, it does increase the possibility of grading bias and subjectivity. Therefore, measuring of the number of times a student was grammatically incorrect is safer and more accurate than assessing whether a student's use of "fantastic" was a better word choice than "amazing." Certainly, qualitative assessments have their place; however, I contend qualitative assessments are necessary at the formative level when learning happens through scaffolding and repetition. Moreover, in summative assessment when grades and fairness are especially important, it is best to apply a quantitative approach. Clearly, an effective rubric can eliminate subjectivity and other issues . . . right?

Consider the result of subjective terms within a rubric. For instance, perhaps we collect a random and non-scientific sample of 10 online rubrics that assess writing in a variety of disciplines such as from science, communications, psychology, English, and sociology. Some of the criteria within these rubrics include the terms "fresh," "thorough," "sloppy," "excessively brief," "haphazard organization," and "visually appealing."

Do the above terms provide students with clear, objective, and measurable criteria? While having a rubric is a strategy for fair and consistent grading, the components within the rubric need to reflect objectivity. This means that the rubric should outline specific criteria for grading. Instead of using the word "sloppy" as an evaluation of a student's work, use a term that can be quantitatively evaluated.

Figure 1 is an example of an effective rubric with specific criteria. Notice that the above rubric does not evaluate students' writing based on how "fresh" or "sloppy" it is. Instead, the rubric measures spelling,

punctuation, grammar, and syntax mistakes, which are far more quantifiable.

Rubrics should continuously evolve to detect and eliminate subjectivity and increasingly include quantitative, reliable, and objective measures. How can you revise your rubrics to include more objective criteria? Don't feel you need to completely revamp your rubrics. Instead, try improving upon the good work you have already produced.

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Join Sam as he continues the discussion about fair grading in NISOD's November 10 webinar, "Is Fair Grading Futile? Exploring a New Type of Assessment." [Register or learn more here!](#)

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