BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

FALL 2021 NEWSLETTER

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SPECIAL ISSUE: ALTERNATIVES TO GRADING

Congratulations on making it through another unpredictable, and often demanding, semester! The uncertainty caused by the ongoing pandemic continues to cast a shadow over our teaching, and the transition to more face-to-face and hybrid teaching modes provides us with fresh challenges. However, the new and ever-changing situation—despite its manifold difficulties—also provides us with an excellent opportunity to reflect on our teaching practices, and to experiment with new approaches in the class(/zoom) room.

This semester, the BMCC WAC team have been thinking in particular about grading, and the alternatives to traditional grading practices that might be available. With face-to-face contact time still down on pre-pandemic levels, grading has taken on an ever more important role as one of the main routes of communication between faculty and students. But might there be reasons to reconsider when and how we grade our students? Might there be downsides to traditional grading methods? And might there be alternative ways of approaching grading that can avoid these pitfalls? Particularly in a context where the way in which we teach is changing at a faster rate than perhaps ever before, asking these questions provides us with a fantastic opportunity to explore new ways to improve the way we teach.

Wishing you all the best for the winter break,

The 2021-2022 WAC team

Building Intrinsic Motivation Through A Contract Grading System

Phil Keisman

For those of us privileged enough to learn and teach at the height of our discipline, the motivation to learn might come as second nature. As a historian, I cannot imagine anything but a posture of inquisitiveness towards the events of the past, and bringing to bear a critical eye comes for me with a great deal of joy. Intrinsic motivation is a skill; it can be cultivated to a certain extent with particular types of activities and reward structures. However counterintuitively, school can impede students' motivation to learn. In order to give students more of a chance to develop their own intrinsic motivation, I suggest incorporating some of the principles of contract grading into our classrooms. For our purposes, "contract grading" refers to the practice of determining grading criteria in consultation with a student, based on communication early and often throughout a course.

Contract grading is among the tools recommended by WAC theorists striving for a more equitable classroom. (Inoue, 2019, 5.) Contract grading begins with two questions: Students must answer what success in the course would look like for them. Teachers must ask themselves, 'how can I help this student achieve their rubric of success?' (Katopodis and Davidson, 2020, 56.) Contract grading involves communicating with students the options for assessment, meeting with students early to help them process their chosen path, following up with feedback tailored for their particular goals, and ultimately allowing them the freedom to propose their final grade based on a portfolio. All students in a contract grading class do all of the activities and assessments, but they are weighted differently for each.

By way of example, imagine an introductory level history class. Some students in that class might use the course as a chance to practice their skills doing independent research with a high degree of scaffolding from the professor. Perhaps these students are eager history majors and hope to grow their practice as historians. Their grade would be determined by their self-analysis of their ability to write a final paper based on selected archival sources. Other students might desire to encounter and retain new facts about history. Perhaps these students are new to the discipline. They would grade themselves based on how they perform on a series of quizzes assessing their retention of important people, places, dates, and concepts. A third group of students, perhaps those who see a career in classroom teaching, might weigh more heavily a monthly class presentation on a topic or theme in the course. In the middle of the course and at the end, meetings with the instructor provide students an opportunity to get live feedback and guidance. Of course, major and career aspirations are just two considerations for how students might choose their grading scheme.

The foundations of classical conditioning hold that connecting a behavior to extrinsic reward builds extrinsic motivation and lowers intrinsic motivation over time. If any stimulus is coupled with an external response frequently and regularly, that coupling will become stronger in the mind. Grades are extrinsic to learning; they might be

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wonderful carrots, or horrible sticks, but regardless they exist as part of a calculus in the students' minds that is separate from the "doing' of learning. The result is students for whom learning activities and grades are linked, not learning activities and actual learning! Students too often learn from graded activities that if they "game" the system, they will find ways to get a good grade with minimal effort. Students end up learning something we don't want to teach, that it is "sensible to do as little as possible to produce the highest possible reward (grade)." (Blum, 2020, 56.)

Theorists of motivation find three fundamental human needs that underpin one's self determination to act. The need to feel a sense of competence in one's ability begins in infancy, as babies are driven to play, explore, and manipulate their environments. Humans' need for secure connections with others produces in us a motivation for relatedness. Finally, the need for an integrated self, a sense of one's actions being in line with one's values and desire leads to a need for autonomy. (Desi and Ryan, 2000, 252-253.) In classroom settings, learning activities that cultivate in students a sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy correlate to higher degrees of intrinsic motivation. (Hosseini et al., 2020; Ebbeck, 2015; Guay et al., 2019.) Contract grading produces such activities.

There are many benefits to contract grading: it promotes metacognition, corrects some of the structural inequalities that are built into standard grading systems, and enables pathways for success for students with heterogeneous backgrounds—allowing for a neurodiverse setting. I believe that among these documented benefits we must include the potential for contract grading to promote intrinsic motivation. Contract grading demands a relationship between instructor and student. It only works if students trust us to help them achieve their goals. Done well, it cultivates the relatedness needed to build intrinsic motivation. The feedback mechanisms of contract grading, in which instructors coach students towards their own measurements of success and incentivize an attitude in which students feel competence in their skills. Finally, of course, the entire structure of contract grading centers on autonomy. Students are guiding their own learning. They are asked to see the course as a set of choices, rather than a set of imperatives. By cultivating these three elements, contract grading is a powerful tool in the kit of a teacher hoping to inspire her students to love learning. Administrations would be wise to consider helping teachers construct their courses to allow for contract grading, and to provide instructors the time and freedom to give students this type of opportunity. We in higher ed suffer from a deficit of motivation in our students, hurting our ability to communicate the value of our disciplines. As we look for new ways to connect our students to their learning, contract grading offers one such way.

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Ungrading? In This Economy?

Chris Carpenter

One of the main tenets of the ungrading movement is “trust your students.” Instead of assuming that our students need to be coerced into learning—turning instructors into taskmasters at best, and cops at worst—we should meet them in the classroom as open-minded, intellectually curious, and critically sensitive interlocutors. This is a fantastic pedagogical principle, and undoubtedly a solution to many of the most pernicious classroom crimes. But what if trusting our students entails other obligations, less amenable to our ideals and motivations?

The same people who enter our classrooms as students leave them as cashiers, home attendants, machinists, and social workers. We might want to believe that we can offer an hour or two of respite from the world of waged labor, a space of intellectual exploration and inquiry that follows a different set of rules and allows different kinds of activity. However, regardless of the pedagogical practices we employ, this can only ever be partially true. According to Columbia Teacher’s College Community College Research Center, 80% of our students work, with 39% working full-time (CCRC 2021). Furthermore, according to a poll conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, 85.2% of students ranked “to be able to get a better job” as “very important” in their decision to attend college (Eagan et al, 2015). This is certainly not to say that students don’t come to class fully prepared and willing to engage with new ideas and develop critical thinking skills. But if we’re going to trust our students, we should remember that our goals as educators might not always align with their goals.

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For better or (almost certainly) worse, students are participating in or will enter an economy that prizes efficiency and quantifiable results over all else, measuring the value of its workforce primarily in terms of short-term returns on investment. For employers, a college degree is a simple way to sort potential hires, offloading the costs of training onto students. From the perspective of these students, there’s a triple bind: the costs are skyrocketing—for community colleges, the average cost of tuition and fees in 1980 was $200/yr, while in 2020 it was $3,300/yr (Hanson, 2021)—the necessity of a degree is increasing, and the relative value of these degrees is decreasing, as more degree-holders compete over worse jobs. The Harvard Business Review calls this phenomenon “degree inflation,” arguing that it is “making the U.S. labor market more inefficient” (Fuller and Raman, 2017).

Even if our concern, as educators, has little to do with the purported efficiencies of the job market, we should remember that these factors heavily influence our students’ motivations for seeking an education.

Grading, as Alfie Kohn argues, sends the message that “success matters more than learning,” that the “rational” decision for students necessarily involves taking the fewest risks and orienting one’s education towards outcomes rather than process (Kohn, 2011). But isn’t this what the job market rewards? In a sense, when Susan Blum laments that grades turn college into a “game” where the goal is “amassing points and winning at any cost,” she’s merely observing the kinds of incentive structures that many workplaces enforce. Learning to win this game can provide valuable experience when we

begin playing that other game, the one where "winning" takes on very material consequences.

But the classroom is not a workplace, and I think most of us would balk at the idea that we need to cater our pedagogies to the demands of the neoliberal economy. It's also a fact that not all of our students pursue higher ed solely for the career prospects, and we certainly don't want to dampen the intellectual enthusiasm they possess. So what's the solution? How can we recognize the imperatives of a labor market that seems hellbent on the ceaseless devaluation of labor, while still fulfilling our prerogative to teach skills and methods that might not be immediately practicable? How can we move beyond the stilted "efficiency" of the grading economy, and develop modes of assessment that acknowledge the motivations of our students without submitting wholesale to the paradigm of the "game?" What we can't do is pretend that our classrooms are utopian enclaves detached from the material problems of rent, healthcare, debt service, and childcare; our students have too much invested to entertain this fantasy.

My favorite solution is a combination of self-assessment and reflection, an approach outlined extensively by Jesse Stommel in his fantastic blog on ungrading. Self-assessment allows students to develop their own criteria for "success," oriented towards the outcomes they deem most important. If a student is interested in learning the conventional structure of an academic essay, they can pursue that goal; if they want to pursue more creative, unconventional forms, you can help them develop criteria for assessing that goal. Furthermore, students can be asked to reflect on their assessment choices, preempting arbitrariness and compelling a more thoughtful interrogation not only of the assignment itself, but also the ways in which it can succeed or fail. Stommel calls this process "metacognition," and encourages giving "students the space to figure out how to do this work as they go" (Stommel, 2018). Instead of measuring themselves according to a set of goals prescribed from above, students can interrogate assessment as an object of critique. Ultimately, this kind of practice can help students meet requirements in a variety of situations while simultaneously encouraging them to critically assess the assignments they're subjected to.

In more practical terms, the instructor's primary responsibility will be to provide feedback on both assignments and reflections on those assignments: to dramatize the role of "audience," another category which should be subject to its own critical analyses. We can design, without too much extra labor, reflective exercises that prompt engagement with form, genre, argument, inquiry, etc. Students can use these exercises to assess their own work; not for a grade, but to identify successful moves as well as potential mistakes, missteps, or faulty processes that can be improved in the future. Some questions we might ask them to explore in these reflections:

- What defines the genre you are writing in? What makes writing in that genre successful? How does your essay achieve (or fail to achieve) these goals?
- What kind of audience are you trying to reach? What specific rhetorical moves helped you reach that audience?
- What was your experience writing this assignment like? How could you improve your writing process in the future?

There is, of course, a lot of room in these examples for more detail, specificity, and focus. They are merely meant to outline, in the broadest terms, the kinds of thinking that metacognition entails.

We can't teach our way out of a deeply unequal and unjust society. Nor, in the majority of cases, do students want us to. What they do want is a way to navigate this society, in whatever way they see fit. Self-assessment and reflection—the tools of metacognition—helps them do so while inculcating the kinds of critical thinking skills that we hope to impart.

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In Defense of Pedagogical Anarchy: An Opinion

David Marker

I have an innate negative visceral response when I hear about "pedagogy". No, it's more than that. It's a physiological reaction. It makes me want to hurl my body into a mosh pit like in my teenage years at some grimy local punk rock show and rail against the invisible powers that be. By "pedagogy" I am referring to trends to standardize methodologies of teaching and curriculum across departments, colleges, and even the nation for the ostensible goal of creating a more palatable environment for students. The current paradigm of these standardized practices wrongly assumes that college students are incapable of learning and developing in a diverse environment of independent teaching methods, ideas, and approaches to knowledge, and that professors must compromise to the supposed incapability and disparate needs of students for fear of alienating them. This commoditizes education and benefits neither student nor professor. Pedagogical trends have become the vanguard of this ideology. It is the instructional equivalent of conformity and loss of individuality that I spent my angsty teenage youth rebelling against. Why? There is something about the formalization, or codification of teaching practices, regardless of their ideological position, that in my mind threaten to undermine the diversity of teaching styles that have historically comprised the university system. Any pedagogical trend that homogenizes teaching philosophy or methodology conjure up the same level of concern expressed when standardized tests were pushed on high school students in the early 2000s by No Child Left Behind. It is the "McDonalds-ication" of the classroom where a one-size-fits-all approach stifles autonomy and creativity in the name of some purported utilitarian goal.

> *"There is an intrinsic, perhaps unquantifiable, value to the unpredictability, and outright mystery, of diverse teaching styles"*

Allowing professors to push students out of their comfort zone helps students grow intellectually and personally. This is best achieved by removing pedagogical restraints and pressures that compel professors to adhere to standardized teaching practices. There is an intrinsic, perhaps unquantifiable, value to the unpredictability, and outright mystery of diverse teaching approaches and the freedom they allow professors to impart their knowledge in whatever way they see fit—which I contend is the best way for them to express the most passion about their mastered subject and inspire students. There is real value in the absent-minded professor lost in their thoughts waxing poetic about some obscure strain of knowledge that this singular person has dedicated their life to investigation. I argue for the most laissez-faire methodological structure that creates space for the most diverse array of thoughts and expressions, from the mundane to the radical. This challenges students. College is a time for blooming minds to be exposed not just to diverse ideas, but impassioned individuals who illuminate, advocate, and critique those ideas in their own unique and unbridled ways. Imposed "Pedagogy" stifles this potentiality.

Let professors be weird, unconventional, confusing at times, boring, controversial, subversive, or completely strait-laced if that is what they need to be. It is this heterogeneity of teaching styles and methods, whether good or bad, that has helped produce the creative, robust educational ecosystem that nurtures a society of diverse viewpoints, forms of expression, and ingenuity. Inversely, "pedagogy" homogenizes thought creating an ideological monoculture. Out of respect for the intellectual capacity of our students, we should protect the tradition of professorial teaching autonomy at all costs. Pedagogical practices should take no more than a selective and adaptive role to the will of the most abstract, opaque, experimental, and absent-minded professor's opinion of how they should impart their hard-earned knowledge in whatever obscure subject that ignited their curiosity and passion so many years ago as a scared, clueless, yet promising student stumbling into their freshman lecture hall.

How Grading Can Harm Performance

Callum MacRae

Stereotype threat, social stigma, and educational achievement

Grading often feels like an integral and unavoidable part of teaching. After all, as teachers, the development of our students' abilities is one of our primary goals. And if we care about our students' abilities, then measuring those abilities through evaluation can seem to be an indispensable part of the educational process. However, counter-intuitive though it may seem, and complex though the broader issue may be, there is a robust set of experimental results in social science that supports the idea that in certain contexts the act of evaluation can have a significant negative impact on educational achievement. These studies suggest that if it really is the development of all students' abilities that we care about, then we would do well to think far more carefully about the role and shape of evaluation in our own pedagogical practice.

The phenomenon in question has come to be known in the social science literature as stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is well-illustrated by a 1999 study in which US college students were asked to perform a series of athletic exercises. When students were told that the tasks were designed to evaluate 'natural athletic ability' black students performed significantly better than white students. However, when the very same tests were presented as evaluating 'sports intelligence' black students' performance declined while white students' performance improved, and the racial gap was inverted. (Stone et al, 1999.) When students are faced with a task that is presented as evaluating them in a skillset that prevailing social stereotypes encode them as lacking, performance declines.

These experimental results reveal a vital truth for teachers. Evaluation is not just a measure of performance, in the way that a ruler measures length, or a thermometer temperature. How and when we evaluate students has a considerable impact on student performance itself. Particularly for students already disadvantaged by social stigma, the very act of evaluation for ability can have a significantly negative impact on performance levels. In an early and influential study of stereotype threat, Steele and Aronson found that results in standardized tests declined significantly for black students when they were told that the tests were meant to evaluate their intellectual ability. In the very same tests, black students' performance was significantly higher when students were told that the tests were not evaluating their abilities. White students' performance was uniform across both cases. (Steele and Aronson, 1995.)

There is much for us to learn from these studies with respect to our teaching practice. However, here I want to suggest just one major takeaway. The social scientific evidence on stereotype threat provides a clear rationale for low-stakes assignments, and for explicitly avoiding the language of ability and evaluation as a means of creating the low-stakes environments necessary for all students to have the opportunity to flourish. Particularly for students from stigmatized social groups, the raising of stakes in assignments through the explicit use of evaluation as a means of measuring ability can significantly hamper the very ability that the teacher is attempting to cultivate and measure. If we want all our students to have a chance to develop their abilities, it is crucial to create opportunities to work and grow in contexts where the evaluation of ability is clearly **not** at issue—and informal, low-stakes assignments which avoid the language and techniques of traditional grading, can be an

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invaluable tool for creating those contexts. (See Bean, 2011, 120-145 for some useful examples of informal, low-stakes assignment design, as well as the other contributions to this newsletter for more examples and discussion of ungraded assignments.)

As noted above, given our concern for student achievement, grading students can often feel like a natural part of what it is to be a teacher. However, the social scientific evidence on stereotype threat demonstrates that—particularly for student bodies like BMCC's—traditional approaches to grading can often do more harm than good.

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WAC at BMCC

Check out our website: https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/wac/

As a teacher, do you want to:

- Encourage your students' personal and critical engagement with what they are learning?
- Enhance your students' understanding and analysis of the readings and concepts in your courses?
- Develop your students' writing abilities without drowning in a sea of papers?
- Provide your students with critical thinking and writing skills?
- Help students to fulfill their writing intensive requirement?

If so, we hope you will apply for the Writing Across the Curriculum Professional Development Workshops, Spring 2022 (to develop a Writing Intensive Course for Fall 2022).

The Writing Across the Curriculum program is designed to help you integrate effective and interesting writing into your specific course curricula and to give you tips about how best to use more writing in your teaching without becoming overwhelmed. The workshop series will help you design a Writing Intensive course, a graduation requirement for our students.

For more information and to access the application, go to:
https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/wac/prospective-wi-faculty/

OTHER WAC RESOURCES ON THE WEB

- **Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): owl.english.purdue.edu/owl**
- **The WAC Clearing House: wac.colostate.edu/intro**

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