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A Simple Alternative to Grading

By Glenda Potts

“Is this for a grade?” - Anonymous student

I decided to investigate options to traditional grading late one night when I was plowing through yet another stack of student essays. I felt I was putting more effort into grading the papers than my students put into writing them. I agonized over points: Is this one a 79 or an 80? It’s just one point, but to the student it’s the difference between a C and a B. And I asked myself, if the students don’t like writing the papers, and I don’t like grading them, and it doesn’t help them to improve, then what’s the point? Traditional grading just wasn’t working for me. And so I embarked upon a study to determine whether an alternative grading system would yield the same final grades as traditional grading, and whether or not it would be accepted by students.

Pedagogical theory and research have been shifting away from traditional grading in recent years, finding it too subjective, too arbitrary, and often not conducive to learning. In my chosen field, English composition, a resolution was issued by the National Council of Teachers of English over fifteen years ago, stating that grading student writing is actually detrimental to student learning.*

So why are we all still using grades? The obvious answer is that we have to. We teach in graded systems.

“The goal in classrooms should be learning and retention, not the acquisition of meaningless letters or numbers. I have realigned my own priorities in teaching, asking not ‘What grade did this student earn?’ but ‘What can I do to help this student?’”

But if the title promising an option to traditional grading drew you in to this article, perhaps you, like me, wish you had an alternative, a system that would be simple to use, accurate, fair, and less time consuming, one that would be accepted by students, that would stand up to scrutiny if questioned,

and ideally, would increase student learning and enhance retention. And of course, this system would also produce a grade to post on the roster at the end of the semester.

While this perfect system may not be attainable, there are numerous viable alternatives to grading available, not only in my field but in everything from psychology to mathematics. However, many educators are hesitant to try these alternatives. Perhaps it is because they are comfortable with the good old-fashioned ABCDF system that has been around for a hundred years, in spite of its flaws. Maybe they fear that a new system might be difficult to use, unlikely for students to accept, and yield an inaccurate result. And, indeed, it might. But our comfy old system can be illogical and uncommunicative. Worse, it emphasizes competition and reward, not learning.

There is a great deal of research that promotes alternative grading systems for student writing. Peter Elbow, the noted English educator and theorist, does not use grades at all, and he is in good company. At colleges as diverse as Antioch, Sarah Lawrence, Evergreen State, Reed, Bennington, Oregon State, and Brown University, grades are optional or nonexistent. Massachusetts Institute of Technology did not grade freshmen at all for over twenty years.

Elbow asserts that grading does not promote learning or retention; it is mere ranking. Elbow defines this as “summing up one’s judgment . . . into a single, holistic number or score” (“Ranking” 187). The NCTE agrees. Steven Tchudi explains in the NCTE-published *Alternatives to Student Writing* that this sort of grading does not communicate any feedback but only pins a judgment onto the student, reducing his or her work to a single letter or number without providing any useful information (xiii). The student does not learn how to improve his or her work, only where he or she is in relation to others. What a student might learn from a grade is “I am a C student,” not how to become a better writer or student.

The ABCDF system presumes that grading must be linear, with the graded items hung sequentially like laundry on a line (Elbow, “Ranking”). Just like me, many of you have probably stacked your papers in the order of the grades to make decisions on the finer points – this one is better than that one, worse than the other one. That’s ranking.

In contrast, Elbow defines evaluation as “looking hard and thoughtfully at a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions” (“Ranking” 191). Whereas in his definition of ranking Elbow describes the flat, linear quality of holistic grading, in his description of evaluation he evokes the complex, three-

dimensional qualities of writing. He uses the example of a piece of writing that has interesting and creative ideas but poor organization, which has an odd, angry tone of voice that is nonetheless memorable, and has a sprinkling of grammatical errors. How, he asks, can all of those complicated variables be summed up into a single holistic score (“Ranking”)?

Writing does seem much too complex to pin down with a single letter or number. I am reminded of one of the first situations that caused me to question traditional grading. For a narrative assignment, a student wrote an aching emotional piece about her best friend who had died in her arms from a gunshot wound. When she attended her friend’s funeral, she realized that the friend’s infant son had no one to take care of him, so the student adopted the child and raised him as her own. This essay had numerous grammatical errors. It was poorly organized, not very well worded, and generally needed a lot of work. But it had a raw emotional power that is rarely seen in student writing.

For the same assignment, another student in the class wrote a well-worded, sensibly-organized, error-free essay about . . . band camp. Now, how can these two essays be graded on the same scale? With holistic grading, the essay about the dead friend might receive, at the most, a C-, and that student might never write again. The band camper would probably receive a B+, with half a letter grade taken off just for being boring. However, in a class using contract grading, the first student could revise her work and end up with a paper worthy of its subject.

With all this in mind, and convinced that anything would be better than the complicated, frustrating rubric I was using, I explored a modified form of contract grading, one of the systems recommended by the NCTE as an effective alternative to traditional grading.

How the System Works

Classic contract grading ordinarily features a written contract between instructor and student. However, I chose not to use an actual contract, which might require midterm revision or other complications. Instead, I adopted the “blanket” contract format, whereby the instructor sets out the tasks that the student must complete in order to receive each letter grade, and the student complies according to the grade he or she wishes to receive. Elbow states it well: “The point [of contract grading] is to focus less on trying to measure degrees of quality of writing and instead to *emphasize activities and behaviors* that will lead to learning” (“Grading” 133). Instead of using grading as a motivation for learning, and hoping that students will engage in learning activities in order to receive a grade, why not “*make* them

do the things that we think will lead to learning?” (“Grading” 133). The instructor’s role is therefore to create tasks that will improve the students’ writing and require the students to comply in order to pass the course.

Of course, not every student will complete every assignment, and so the requirement for each grade level must be clearly spelled out. For example, in the system that I used for this study, I prepared an evaluation sheet that clearly indicated what each student had to complete in order to receive the grade of his or her choice at the end of the semester (see Appendix A). The final grade depended upon adequately completing the specific percentage of work assigned to the desired grade level. This work included in-class assignments, homework, quizzes, and anything else outside of the four required formal essays. In order to receive an A, 90 percent of all of this work had to be completed, for a B 80 percent, and so on. In addition to this percentage, all four major formal essays had to be completed satisfactorily, with revisions if necessary, without exception. Each student was also required to achieve the desired grade level on the final exam, and in order to receive an A or B, the student had to complete an additional graded paper (Tompkins).

Contract grading also requires that the student fulfill basic criteria for each assignment, which is determined by the instructor. What this means is that for each assignment it must be clear what the student must accomplish in order for his or her work to be considered satisfactory. Here is a sample of Elbow’s criteria for an assignment: “I will count roughly two-thirds for content and one-third for form. By content, I mean thinking, analysis, support, examples. . . . By form, I mean clarity and correctness” (“Grading” 133). It is best to be as explicit as possible when outlining the expectations for assignments so that the students will understand what is required of them. Thus, a generalized essay assignment in my classes might include requirements that the finished paper must have a title, an introduction, a clearly described thesis that is well supported, a satisfying conclusion, and college-level writing in regards to grammar, spelling, organization, etc. If one of the criteria is not met, the assignment is not satisfactorily completed (see Appendix B).

Each criterion must also be fulfilled at a minimum level. The instructor determines where to place the bar to determine the borderline between levels. I consider the minimum level that is acceptable for my freshman students to be college-level writing that is at least average – what I would generally consider about a C level or above. So if a student completes each criterion, at an average level or above, the assignment is considered satisfactory.

All contract grading also uses very minimal grading. Each assignment is marked simply Accept, if the criteria has been met the minimum level, or Revise if it has not. The student must revise the assignment if instructed to do so, or he or she will not receive credit. More than two levels can be used; some instructors use three: Excellent, Satisfactory, or Unsatisfactory. During this study, I used Satisfactory, Revise, and Edit. Revise indicated problems with content or clarity, and Edit indicated grammatical or other technical problems.

And so, in the system I used, if a student completed 70 percent or above of all of the day-to-day assignments, completed the specified criteria of all of the major assignments (formal essays) at the minimal level of C, with revisions if necessary, and received a C or above on the final exam, a C in the class was guaranteed.

Not every student will be satisfied with a C, so there are a number of ways to advance to a higher grade. Some contract grading requires that students do additional work for an A or B. Others may feature a capstone assessment or final graded assignment to differentiate between the higher grades.

All of this explanation makes contract grading appear to be unnecessarily complex. It's not; it's actually very simple in practice. The students decide which grade will satisfy them. They complete the percentage of the day-to-day assignments that are specified for that grade. They complete all the major assignments (essays), with revisions if they are asked. If they want an A or a B, they may have to complete additional assignments or perform at an A or B level on a capstone assessment or final, depending on the instructor. That's it.

I have described the system that I used, but contract grading is infinitely variable. The instructor sets the bar for the minimum acceptable standard and decides on the criteria for each assignment. The instructor determines what students need to accomplish in order to receive the varying grades at the end of the semester and decides whether A and B seeking students should do additional work, and if so, whether it will be graded. There are probably as many variations of contract grading as there are instructors using the system.

The Benefits

Research has shown that contract grading has numerous benefits. First, it is beneficial in many ways for students. Students concentrate more on their performance and less on obtaining a grade, as there are no grades given during the course of the semester. It also strengthens the revision

process of writing because revision is mandatory if work is not completed satisfactorily. This means that students who enter the class with, say, a sentence-boundary problem will finally have to confront their problem and overcome it in order to succeed. Contract grading also improves the classroom dynamics because the instructor works *with* the student, becoming a collaborator rather than a judge.

Best of all, contract grading relieves the grading stress associated with traditional systems. Elbow emphasizes the importance of having a “safe” environment for students, one where they feel comfortable and confident (Bush). Students that do not have the fear of a bad grade hanging over their heads are more relaxed and more likely to take risks, since revision is always an option.

This reduction of stress is also applicable to the teacher, as this system is much faster and simpler to grade, causing less frustration and fewer headaches. Instead of the thirteen levels of traditional grading (A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc.) there are two levels – Accept or Revise. All that needs to be decided is, does this paper meet the criteria at the minimum level?

There are critics of contract grading, however. They fear that students will not do their best work if it is not required and that quality will be replaced by quantity. A student could do C level work all semester, for example, and then just do more of it to qualify for an A or B. These critics fear that students will resist such an unfamiliar system or may perceive it as unfair.

I was just as skeptical. Encouraged by an enthusiastic colleague, I decided to try contract grading in my summer courses in 2007. Because I did not see how this system could possibly work, I kept track of the holistic grades that I would have awarded each graded assignment, figuring that I was going to have to bail out in the middle of the semester and go back to rubric grading. Why *would* a student do his best work if he didn't fear a bad grade? Why *wouldn't* a student slough off all semester with mediocre work, then pull out a good paper at the end to secure an A or B?

Study Design

I tracked nine classes comprising a total of 188 students over five semesters, from Summer 2007 to Summer 2008. The classes included College Composition I and II (ENG 111 and 112), Creative Writing I and II (ENG 211 and 212), American Literature I (ENG 241), and an online College Composition II (ENG 112) class.

For each student in the nine classes, a traditional letter grade was recorded for each major assignment, in addition to the Accept/Revise

contract grade.

At the end of each semester, the letter grades for the major assignments, along with the percentage of completed everyday work, were averaged to obtain a final traditional grade for each student, which was then compared to the final contract grade, and any discrepancy was noted.

In addition, at the end of the semester most students completed surveys to assess their perceptions of and attitudes towards contract grading. The questions concerned their overall reactions, whether they found contract grading to be more or less stressful, and the extent to which the emphasis on revision improved their learning and their writing abilities.

Student attitudinal ratings were compared also to their final grades for the course to determine if a correlation existed between the students' ability and performance (e.g. A versus C students) and their perceptions of and attitudes towards contract grading. Written comments were also examined in order to develop instructional methods to facilitate student acceptance of this alternative grading system.

Accuracy of Contract Grading

Out of 188 students, 30 of the final grades awarded using the contract grading system differed slightly from those that would have been awarded in a traditional holistic system.

However, 11 of the 30 received a C rather than an A or B because they did not elect to complete an additional essay in order to receive the higher grade.

The contract grades for the other 19 were all within 3.8 points of the traditional grade that they would have received (e.g. 76.7 percent, or C, for the holistic grade, and 80 percent, or B, for the contract grade) – all less than one-half a letter grade. And 13 of the 19 were within only 2.5 points of the traditional grade they would have received.

While there was variance in these 19 grades, it was minimal, and many of them might have been rounded up to a higher grade anyway, depending upon the individual instructor. In addition, in the holistically graded scores, the early, possibly lower scores earned by the students were averaged in with the later, hopefully higher scores. This could account for some of the variance.

When these factors are taken into consideration, contract grading appears to be impressively accurate.

Student Reaction

120** of the 188 students responded to a survey which asked the following

questions:

- What did you think of contract grading?
- Did it cause you less stress because there were no grades on your papers or more stress because you didn't know what to expect?
- Do you think having to revise assignments helped you to learn better writing skills, or was it just an annoyance?

In answer to the first question, 82 students reported that they liked it, 13 students were not sure, or did not respond to the question, and 25 students hated it. It is interesting to note that all of the 25 students who hated the contract grading system were A or B+ level students.

In answer to the question, "Did it cause you less stress because there were no grades on your papers or more stress because you didn't know what to expect?" 75 students said it was less stressful, and 23 students said it caused them more stress. All 23 were A or B+ level students.

In answer to the question, "Do you think having to revise assignments helped you to learn better writing skills, or was it just an annoyance?" 70 students reported that it helped them to revise.

The following are some of the quotations from the students who responded positively:

- "I didn't stress out seeing what grade was on the paper."
- "It gives you the opportunity to redo your work. Honestly, it did help my writing skills."
- "I kind of like it because I don't like the idea that a teacher can put a grade on a learning experience."
- "Revising taught me some grammatical mistakes I have been making for awhile."
- "I liked it because as long as you do what you're supposed to do and get all your work done, you pass."
- "It was easy to understand."
- "It focused on improving our work instead of just pumping it out."
- "It was a laid-back feeling . . . a comfortable place to write."
- "I enjoyed its merits, especially since most of the top law schools have implemented similar grading methods."

The following are quotations from the students (the higher achievers) who hated the system:

- "To me it caused more stress."
- "I didn't know what to expect as a final grade."
- "It is unfair to A or B students because they are not graded on performance, only on an additional paper."

- “I miss seeing an A on my paper.”
- “Hate it! I don’t know how well I’m actually writing.”

As you can see, a significant number of A and B+ students did not like – in fact, despised – this grading system. During the first semester the contract grading system was used, more than 80 percent of the higher-achieving students hated it. In response to some of the reactions listed above, in subsequent semesters I more thoroughly explained contract grading. Subsequent semesters showed a much higher level of acceptance by the A level students.

On Reflection

When the results were tabulated, contract grading was indeed demonstrated to be an acceptable alternative to traditional letter grading. The differences between the recorded traditional grades and the final contract grades were inconsequential. Only 19 out of 118 final grades awarded using the contract grading system differed from those calculated in a traditional holistic system, and the variance was minimal, less than one-half of a letter grade in all cases.

In addition, this study demonstrated that contract grading was widely, and for the most part, enthusiastically accepted by the majority of students. Their survey answers attested that contract grading was less stressful for many of them, and that the revision process helped them to improve their writing skills. Contract grading also enabled my students to write in a more relaxed atmosphere, increasing their confidence and encouraging them to take risks in their writing.

While, as previously reported in other studies (Spidell), the more advanced students did indeed initially resist contract grading, this experience enabled me to modify my explanation of the system so that students could more easily understand it. In later semesters, I learned to present the system in a different light, emphasizing that the initial results of this research had proved it to be both accurate and fair. I explained that with this system no grades would be considered until the end of the semester, after they had had ample time to develop their writing. I also reassured the high achievers throughout the semester and discussed their performance with them if they were concerned. The results of the survey indicated that the majority of advanced students did accept contract grading, once a more considered explanation and additional support were offered.

I also learned that, when a grade was no longer the primary objective, advanced students were more prone to assist less able students,

since competition had been eliminated. A more pleasant workshop atmosphere was achieved, where collaborative learning could flourish, improving students' learning and retention.

An unexpected benefit was that contract grading was so much less time-consuming and stressful for me. Because decisions are minimal (Accept or Revise, compared to the thirteen levels of traditional evaluation), I could concentrate on aiding the students in revision and improvement instead of wrangling over numerical decisions. The extra time that I gained could be spent on improving teaching strategies, interacting with students, and writing more detailed and useful suggestions on their papers. In addition, the stack of student essays that awaited me at the end of the day was no longer a dreaded chore. Instead, I could enjoy my students' writing accomplishments, offer insight and assistance, and rediscover what brought me to teaching in the first place. In this way, both my students and I profited from the adoption of contract grading.

I also found this system easy to modify to any specifications. I could set up the requirements I deemed most beneficial to student learning and compel students to complete them satisfactorily. The minimum standard could be adjusted according to the course; in sophomore courses, I used a B level as the standard. The system also provided an excellent structure for developmental courses. And it worked well in conjunction with other grading practices, such as collaborative writing, peer reviews, and portfolio grading.

My experience with this study entirely changed my view of grading. I no longer see grades as necessary or desirable. In my opinion, the goal in classrooms should be learning and retention, not the acquisition of meaningless letters or numbers. I have realigned my own priorities in teaching, asking not "What grade did this student earn?" but "What can I do to help this student?"

While I do not expect everyone who reads this article to immediately rush headlong to adopt this method of grading, I hope you will investigate alternative grading systems, or at the very least, reflect upon your own grading practices and explore more recent research and theories in your discipline. You may find, as I did, that you will no longer approach a stack of student papers with trepidation and loathing. Instead, you may look forward to reading what your students have written for you and deciding how you can best help them to improve.

"You have freedom when you're easy in your harness." - Robert Frost

*“The NCTE Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing finds that both teacher experience and educational research argue powerfully for the abolition of letter grades on individual student papers. *We prefer and promote alternatives to grading student writing.*”

**A note about these results: Because not every student attended the class the day the survey was given, not all students completed the survey. In addition, some of the students that did complete the survey did not answer some of the questions.

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Appendix A: Sample Evaluation

We will use a contract grading system for this course. This means that you will not receive letter or numerical grades for any of your work during the semester. Instead, for each major assignment, a minimum standard must be met, or the paper will be returned for revision. All major assignments *must* be completed, with revisions if required, in order to pass the course. I will calculate final grades for the course as follows:

For all grade levels:

- Attend class, complete homework and class assignments, and participate in the course as directed.

A

- Complete at least 90 percent of all homework, class and journal assignments, and all of the four major assignments.
- Write one additional assignment from the list of options below.
- Perform at an A level on the final exam and the optional assignment.

B

- Complete at least 80 percent of all homework, class and journal assignments, and all of the four major assignments.
- Write one additional assignment from the list of options below.
- Perform at a B level on the final exam.

C

- Complete at least 70 percent of all homework, class and journal assignments, and all of the four major assignments.
- Perform at a C level on the final exam.

D

- Complete at least 60 percent of all homework, class and journal assignments, and all of the four major assignments.
- Perform at a D level on the final exam.

F

- Fail to meet the course requirements outlined above.

In the event that a student's performance falls between two categories, I will use my discretion to award the final grade, taking into account factors such as attendance, class participation, and homework and journal performance.

Your Major Assignments Are as Follows:

Required for all students:

Personal Focused Assessment (3-4 pages) (“Where are you coming from?”)

Synthesis Response Essay (5 pages) (Singer & Hardin)

Researched Essay (6+ pages, 4 source minimum, no encyclopedia sources)

Critical Analysis Essay (4-5 pages) This will count as your final exam and must meet grade level criteria.

Optional (for A or B grade): Choose one paper.

1) Opinion Paper (4 pages) with at least one outside source, based on “A Case for Torture.”

2) An additional Critical Analysis Paper (4 pages) on one of the short stories on the list or the film.

3) An additional mini-research paper (4 pages) with MLA citations, open topic, subject to my approval.

Appendix B: Sample Criteria

Paper #1 Assignment – Personal Narrative

Write about a pivotal event, experience, or some aspect of your childhood that helped to shape you in some way. Use description and detail to capture the event/experience/aspect that influenced you, and explain how it affected who you are.

Checklist:

Length: 4-5 typed pages, double spaced, 12-point type.

- 1) Craft an opening that captures the readers' attention and lets them know what to expect from your essay.
- 2) Show, don't tell. Use description and detail based on the five senses to help the reader travel with you to the past to understand your experience.
- 3) Be sure that it is clear how the event or experience affected your life.
- 4) Have an interesting title.
- 5) Have a satisfying ending to your paper.
- 6) Be sure that your paper meets college-level writing standards with respect to the following items: purpose, audience, focus, organization, paragraphing, development and details, clarity, style, grammar, and mechanics. For this paper, watch your tenses as you move from past to present.