

GRADING AND FEEDBACK

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Grading as Interpreting

Grading is an interpretation of students' learning products to:

- Reflect where students stand in relation to an orderly development of competence
- Inform both student and teacher not only where the student currently is, but also what needs to be done to improve that position
- Be able to be combined with other grades in order to meet administrative requirements for awarding of levels of pass, and the like

"Students' marks tend to follow a normal or bell-shaped curve, with a few at the top, most in the middle and a few at the bottom. It's up to you where you set the cut-of point for pass/fail. The place where it is usually set is with most students passing (and therefore a few getting credits and even fewer getting distinctions) and a few failing. If most students fail an assignment, then you have not been successful in what you hoped to teach - go back over the topic again, or lower your expectations. Similarly, if most students do too well, the assignments are probably not offering them enough challenge"

(Beattie & James (1994), *Assessing Essays*)

There are a number of questions that need to be asked in the planning phase, namely:

- Who will judge the product or performance?
- What grading scales will be used?
- What assessment criteria and points of reference will be used?
- What strategies will be used to determine validity and reliability?

Who will Judge?

Common practice often assumes that it is the teacher who will interpret and assess students learning practices. However, a number of alternatives are possible, for example:

- Student assessment and peer assessment
- Neutral external examiner
- Expert professionals and community representatives
- Computer aided assessment
- Teachers

What Will Guide the Grading Process?

Grading Scales and Schemes

Grading Scales

A question that may be raised in planning assessment tasks is whether students' learning products and performances ought to be graded. Wolff (1969) has described three *species* of grading:

- *Criticism*: the analysis of a product or performance for the purpose of identifying and correcting its faults or reinforcing its excellences
- *Evaluation*: the measuring of a product or performance against an independent and objective standard of excellence to which nothing is added to education by adding a grade. The true rationale of evaluation is not educational but professional in that it indicates if a person is qualified
- *Ranking*: the relative comparison of the performances of a number of students. This is the grading activity that produces the greatest anxiety and provokes the most opposition and is neither educational or professional but economic

Non-Graded Passes

Alverno College in the United States is the only example found where the rule is not to grade. Rather than using grades, standards are established in clearly defined profiles of desired learning outcomes. These outcomes must be demonstrated in a combination of self, peer and teacher assessment before a pass is recorded.

Grading Schemes

Grades can be assigned on a numerical basis, including ordinal or nominal forms, or letter grades can be used, depending on institutional policy.

Points of Reference and Grading Criteria

Judging and grading implies that what is being observed is being compared with something. The meaning of grades is embodied in both the criterion and the points of reference and, theoretically, they are selected based on the purpose or intentions of particular assessment.

Points of reference can be reduced to three types

- *Pre-established criteria*, in which the assessor asks:
"Did the student performance or learning product demonstrate or address the criteria for which the task was established?"
- *Pre-determined behavioural norms*, in which the assessor asks:
"How does the student performance or learning product compare against established norms for this particular level of students?"
- *Ideographic*, in which the assessor asks:
"How does the performance or product measure against this student's earlier performances or products?"
Actual practice demonstrates that the points of reference that academics use is not so clear cut and rational. Those identified in experienced academics' cognition during assessment include:
 - Products of other students
 - Recall of classroom events and conditions
 - Broad pedagogical objectives and the specific intended learning objectives
 - Knowledge of content
 - Recall of prior assessment events
 - Incrementally developed construct based on assessor's perceptions of form, process and content cues in their students' texts

Criteria for Judging the Quality of Performance Assessments

- Transferability of the skills and knowledge required to novel conditions
- Fairness for all students
- Degree of cognitive complexity of the processes the student must use to complete the performance
- Meaningfulness of the problems
- Quality of the content
- Comprehensiveness of the coverage

Consistency, Accuracy and Representativeness in Judging and Grading

Bachor, Anderson, Walsh & Muir (1994) suggest that rather than a concern for validity and consistency on a single test at one moment in time, the concern should be for:

- **Representativeness**
Questions the meaningfulness in the information the student is required to generate and the extent to which the task reveals the student's cognitive activities
- **Accuracy**
A concern for mapping a student's typical performance related to clearly outlined criteria
- **Consistency**
A concern to use consistent established criteria but in tasks that best suit

individual students. Not all students can demonstrate their learning in the same manner

Factors that Influence the Grade

- Graphic quality of the students' texts
- Students' use of writing grammars
- Cues in students' text
 - the quality of handwriting
 - the readability of a student's papers
 - the quality of the introductory paragraph
- Teachers' knowledge and expectation of students
- Teachers' personalities
- Teachers' beliefs about grading and education
- Teachers' experience in grading
- Quality of the other papers
- Readability of the text

Grading Strategies to Achieve a High Degree of Reliability

- Multiple marking of the same paper by either the same assessor or by two different assessors
- Blind marking (Newstead & Dennis, 1990)
- Establishing standards through the use of model essays (Heywood, 1977)
- Marking all responses to the same question in the case of essay tests that contain several short essay questions
- Neutral external examiners (Fong, 1987)
- Using computers in grading (Marshall, 1986)
- Assessor self monitoring
- Randomised in quality prior to marking rather than sorted beforehand. Sorting essays into perceived grade categories prior to assigning grades exacerbates the tendency for contrast effects (Daly & Dickson-Markham, 1982)

Expert Assessment Behavior Depends on Assessors having:

- A detailed knowledge of their discipline, of curriculum intentions and of learners
- A detailed knowledge of assessment options and the knowledge of the limitations of these options
- Clarity in their understanding of the purposes of assessment
- A repertoire of meaningful approaches that have been intentionally developed for interpreting students learning performances
- Awareness of contextual influences on their practice and of the limitations of their own interpretations and judgments

Giving and Getting Feedback

Feedback defines for students what their teacher thinks is important for a topic or a subject. At its best, feedback should:

- Guide both teachers and students
- Be a core part of teaching and learning, not an add-on ritual
- Focus around course and topic learning outcomes
- Guide students to become independent learners and their own critics
- Account for a developmental approach for achievement in a discipline

Crooks (1988) suggests the following tenets of effective feedback:

- It should focus on mastery rather than effort
- It should take place while it is still clearly relevant
- It should be specific and related to need

Sadler (1989) argues that feedback ought to be such that students will be ultimately capable of assessing the quality of their own work.

An important and neglected aspect of assessment is providing students with adequate feedback on their work. It is important for students to get feedback on their learning, but there are problems associated with:

- Getting timely feedback as to whether our teaching is really supporting learning and focused on students' actual learning needs
- Giving students enough feedback to help them develop and improve their capability and achievements

Despite this, research tells us that it is the design of assessment and the quality of feedback that largely determines what and how students learn, not our erudite lectures.

Difficulties Associated with Giving and Getting Feedback

For Academics:

- Giving feedback can be very time consuming and has limited value if students do not read it
- It is not uncommon to correct the same common errors on a particular student's work and on most students' work with little change occurring over time in students' performances
- Few assessment tasks enable teachers to get timely feedback to adjust either content or teaching strategies to focus on actual learning needs

For Students:

- It is often students who do not do well that get the feedback and the good students receive little more than 'excellent' on their work without gaining an insight into what they have done well and what they could do to enhance their performance
- Many assessment tasks are 'one-off' and for real grades and students do not get the opportunity to take the advice given

- Much feedback does not actually give the student a sense of what they might do to improve their learning

Making Feedback Consequential

Feedback ought to aim at enabling students to improve their future efforts. However, one often gets the impression that students leave university making many of the same errors that they made when they entered.

Explanation for this common phenomenon could be that:

- Assessors' feedback is little more than editing and does not give students a clear message about what they must do to improve future submissions
- Students do not read or take the advice that is given

A Case Study

An academic who questioned the value of his diligent editing of students' texts especially when the assignments lingered in his office for over a year because students failed to collect them. He paid a graduate student to survey his undergraduate students and found that students did not read what he had written on their assignments and particularly did not use his comments as a reference for the next assignment. His solution to the problem was as follows. On the first assignment:

- Resist writing all over the assignment. Note a particular type of error once, and indicate that the student needs to look for other potential errors and find out a way to correct them, for example:
 - poor spelling, advise them to use a spell checker etc
 - poor grammar, direct them to advice or use a computer programme
 - poor paper design, direct them to courses or books on essay writing
 - poor conceptualizing, redirect them to texts
 - lower level cognitive achievement e.g. simple retelling of the text. Describe it and explain what you are looking for instead
- Give students three or four pieces of advice about the changes/improvements
- Expect the advice to be attended to for subsequent paper(s)
- Make the grade assigned to the subsequent paper contingent upon students' clear and specific indication about how they had acted upon the advice given

This teacher required that the first essay and his feedback be returned with the subsequent assignment with a single page explanation of the ways in which they had acted on the advice provided in the prior assignment. In this case, the last paper his students submitted merely received a grade with no written comments. His rationale for this was largely based on an assumption that students will not have the opportunity to act on advice at the end of a topic. (When I have tried this approach, I have added an A4 typed page of feedback, (common for all students), that briefly describes the characteristics of papers that achieved each grade. This enables students to see how their learning product fitted into a scope of possible achievements.)

This Type of Approach to Feedback:

- Reduces the 'one-off' nature of most assignment demands
 - Makes students take responsibility for their own learning
 - Increases the value added nature of your teaching (you can indicate improvements made for all students)
 - Increases the opportunity for high achieving students as well as low achieving students to get constructive feedback
 - Helps to increase students' metacognitive awareness
 - Reduces the hoop jumping approach to assessment and the repetitive nature of assignment writing and giving feedback
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Review

Feedback defines for students what their teacher thinks is important for a topic or a subject.

Feedback is needed by

- Teachers to adapt and adjust teaching to accommodate learning needs
- Students to adapt and adjust their learning strategies

Principles for effective feedback.**Feedback should be:**

- Timely, so that students can use it
- Prompt, so that they can recall what they did and thought at the time
- Support learning, so they know how to improve their performance
- An iterative process between student and teacher
- Linked to a clear statement of orderly progression of learning
- Focus on mastery, not effort
- Specific
- Consequential, so that you are not continually giving the same student the same advice
- Lead students to being capable of assessing their own work
- Efficient for staff to do

Types of Feedback

- Informal, (worked examples, verbal feedback in class)
- Formal (in writing, checklists)
- Direct to individual student
- Indirect to whole class
- Formative, to enable adjustment
- Summative, to let students know what they have achieved

Challenges

- Much feedback is either editing, hortatory, cursory, recipe-like and atheoretical (Sadler, 1989)
- Students report that they are often left not knowing what they have done well, what they need to change and why they have achieved the grade they have
- This often occurs when a subject/topic is over
- Is 'one-off' and does not allow for risk taking, experimentation and practice
- Does not give students a sense of what they have achieved in progressing towards a goal
- Students are rarely required to act upon it

Feedback at its Best

- Guides both teachers and students
- Is a core part of teaching, not an 'add-on' ritual
- Focuses on course and topic learning outcomes
- Guides students to become independent learners
- Assists students to become their own critics
- Accounts for a developmental approach for achievement in a discipline