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Putting Grading Into Context : From a Nightmare to a Learning Experience

As a teacher, I try hard to ensure that students have opportunities to be thoughtful, informed, and self-directed learners. This is true whether I am teaching elementary-aged children or graduate students. I now spend most of my time teaching prospective and practicing teachers and, although we meet only infrequently, I am determined to put into practice learning and teaching principles that guide me as a teacher of all learners. They include the following:

1. Learning is socially constructed, so it is essential that the classroom environment foster learning in and with both students and teachers;
2. The primary role of a teacher is to guide and challenge students, not to transmit information; and
3. Assessment procedures should inform the teacher about students' accomplishments as well as needs and encourage student self-reflection.

For the most part, I am successful in implementing the first two principles, even though students are usually not accustomed to being invited to take a more active role in their learning. What has been most difficult for me at the university level, however, has been to institute an assessment system that is consistent with my teaching goals and principles. As a teacher, I am most interested in using assessment to inform myself about individual students' growth, interests, and needs so that I can make appropriate instructional decisions. Student self-assessment has a key role to play in this endeavor. However, in higher education the most common form of assessment – grading – is seldom used to inform teachers and learners. Instead, grading simply judges students' worth. Some teachers claim that through grading we are able to “maintain standards” and ensure that students will work, the assumption being that without this type of extrinsic motivation students will not work.

Perhaps this is true in some teachers' classrooms. But while I have taught in situations in which students were allocated credit/no credit grades

and in situations in which letter grades were allocated, I have not found that the presence of grades has had this effect of keeping students on task. Instead, I have found that the allocation of a grade can transform engaged, responsible learners into dependent students who seem to be more concerned about the grade they will receive than with the quality of their work. This can be a very distressing transformation to witness and be a part of.

About two years ago, concerned about the negative impact of grading on students, I decided that I would try to eradicate the nightmare that was building around me and petitioned to teach credit/no credit courses. After my requests were denied, I realized that I needed to explore ways of better integrating university requirements with my own teaching principles and priorities. I began to explore alternative ways of arriving at grades, ways that would recognize the effort and achievement of students, and encourage students to view assessment as a means to learn about one's learning and learning processes.

One of the first changes that I instituted was to collaborate with students on grades. At mid-semester and end-of-semester conferences we now discuss their progress and grades. In preparation for these conferences, students hand in a written self-assessment in which they discuss their progress in each component that constitutes the final grade (e.g., participation, self-chosen reading and writing goals, and special project). I also refer to anecdotal records that I keep (e.g., observational notes, dialogue journal entries, records of short-term assignments). In most cases, students and I agree on the grades that they receive. On occasion, I believe that students are earning a higher grade than they credit themselves with. In other, usually more difficult, cases, I believe a student is not earning the grade that s/he suggests. In all cases, both the student and I explain our reasons for generating the grades we do. I listen carefully, look at the evidence, and make the final decision. At one point, I discovered that I was referring to this collaborative venture as a *negotiation*. This seemed to be more problematic than when I used the term *arrive at collaboratively*. Overall, this process has proven to be a less stressful and more meaningful way of addressing grading. Because we begin with self-assessment, the process reinforces students' investment in their own learning.

In a preservice reading/language arts course that I teach, I ask my graduate students to focus on developing their own literacy. I ask students to set reading and writing goals for themselves because I believe that, in order to be an effective teacher of reading and writing, one must be actively engaged in reading and writing. Two years ago, I did not ask students to grade their reading and writing because I thought that to do so would involve assessing the quality of their reading and writing and was afraid

that doing so would undermine their development as readers and writers. However, students were adamant about the need to include this important aspect of the course into the grading system.

Eventually, I realized that the grade could be arrived at by looking at the degree of challenge inherent in the goals, and how successfully students have met their goals. I ask students to set six-week long goals that they are interested in working on and which will challenge them. I then meet with each student in a brief, beginning-of-semester conference during which we discuss the goals, consider alternatives, make changes, and finalize them. The goals are highly idiosyncratic and have included, for example, making time each day to write, reading and writing poetry, writing a children's picture book, completing and sending off a short story to a publisher, and reading six pieces of extended nonfiction.

In preparing for the mid- and end-of-semester conferences, I ask students to comment on several features, including "What have been your major accomplishments?" and "What else would you like to have accomplished?" I have been struck over and over again by the magnitude of their accomplishments, the honesty of their responses, the ability they possess to express developing philosophies of how to teach language and literacy, and the degree to which focusing on developing their own literacy has altered their reading and writing habits (as well as how they view themselves as literate people). The following excerpt from Victoria's self-assessment illustrates these points:

Reading, reading, reading. I've never before done so much reading in this span of time; in fact, I've never even come close. Although I didn't read a few of the articles in their entirety, and I didn't finish the Rigg/Allen book (I got sick when I was half way through and then many projects were pressing on me), I read ten professional journal articles (the last four are still pending), four and a half professional books, many books for young people ... I feel much more informed on books that I would want to include in my class library and also on reference books and articles to turn to for activities and guidance.

I've also become much more comfortable with writing, and have even developed a desire to share some of my writings. This is a big step for me. Before I only asked a friend to proof read a paper, and it was hard enough to ask that much. Now I have shared stories and poems that I have written because I think the reader might relate to them in some way. I've also become much more interested in others' writings. The most challenging writing process I undertook was trying to write

meaningful poems for my mother. I struggled a great deal with this, but the result of sharing these poems made the effort well worth it.

... The group Poetry Project was my biggest disappointment ... I think I had unrealistic expectations about how much time it would take to do this and how much we could accomplish during class workshop time. I've already told you that I didn't communicate as effectively as I would have liked on this project ... I also need to make greater efforts to stay in touch with and to be receptive to others' points of view in a group process. (Victoria, end-of-semester self-assessment)

When I read these comments from Victoria, I was struck by how much more I knew of her as a learner by reading them. I knew that Victoria had become a prolific reader, but I didn't know what and how much she read or the depth of its impact on her. I knew that she had been unsure about the wisdom of selecting the writing goal for herself of writing poems about and for her mother, a person with whom she had a difficult relationship, but I did not know whether she had met her goals and what the impact had been on her as a human being and writer. I also knew that working on her special project had not always been easy, but I wasn't sure what she had learned from the experience. The written self-assessment allowed me to gain insights into Victoria's learning processes, get answers to questions I had. It also offered me an opportunity to assess the degree to which Victoria had set challenging reading and writing goals and had met them. When we met for an end-of-semester conference, during which we collaboratively arrived at her grade for the course, I had read Victoria's self-assessment and was able to explore issues with her that seemed important, for example, why she was now more interested in reading other people's writing and how her special project group had resolved its differences.

Another student, Youngshin, decided to use her reading and writing goal setting to: (a) write about her experiences with racism as an immigrant in a U.S. elementary school, and (b) learn to read in her parents' native language. In preparation for the midsemester conference, she wrote:

I have been keeping up with my goals. I have been writing a collection of reflections and poems on my childhood and the racism I have encountered while growing up in the States. I've gone through a few drafts on some and conferred a couple of times on some as well. It was difficult getting it out and facing those locked up memories. The major difficulty I'm facing though is that I have never really written poems or long narra-

tives except for reports and journals and I am finding it difficult to get a final draft on any of my work.

My reading goal has done me a big favor. It has given me a new look into my culture. I try to read the Korean newspaper every other day. What I cannot read is the ancient Chinese-style writing the articles have ... It is exciting ... I'm learning to read all over again.

Youngshin is a fairly reticent member of the class and I was not quite sure how she was doing. Through this written self-assessment, I was able to understand her much better as a person and as a learner. In the conference, we talked about the influence of audience on one's writing. I asked Youngshin about the extent to which her goals had challenged her and she explained how difficult it was for her to read Korean and how her father had been helping her, including buying books in Korean. She also talked about the emotional difficulty of writing in a sustained way about an era in her life that had been so painful.

Through these self-assessments I have learned about the intellectual and practical accomplishments, stumbling blocks, and future goals of students. Self-assessment is not an easy proposition for many students. They are generally not accustomed to stepping back and consciously reflecting upon what they have done, what they have accomplished, and what they plan on doing in the future. Students are more accustomed to someone else placing value on their efforts and work, and, in some cases, they are reluctant to place their own grade on their work. I originally introduced the written self-assessments as a means for students to become more knowledgeable about their learning, an experience with meta-learning. I have since found it to be a very helpful and less stressful mechanism for arriving at grades. While I am perfectly capable of assessing who is doing A-work or B-work, if that is all that occurs, then assessment will not serve to help students become reflective learners who continually challenge themselves.

As in so many other aspects of my teaching, grading is in a state of flux. I search for a system that is entirely valid, supportive of learners, and manageable for me. Recently, I began to involve students in the development of grading criteria. This began to evolve last summer as I spent hours trying to figure out how to grade students in a language assessment course I was about to teach. I struggled for weeks to develop grading criteria that would be consistent with the goals of the course (e.g., read widely about second language acquisition/teaching and assessment; develop alternative assessment procedures with students acquiring English and analyze the results; become an "expert" in an assessment-related topic and write a document that would be of interest and use to other teachers; and critique exist-

ing tests). It then occurred to me that I should turn over the development of this part of the course to the class—I argued to myself, “This is, after all, an assessment class, and in the United States grading is a key component of assessment.” And that is exactly what I did.

I offered sample grading criteria for them to use as a point of departure. Students selected the component of the class that they wished to work on in a group (participation, evaluation of a standardized test for use with learners acquiring English, and an assessment-related special project). The groups drafted grading criteria, which they brought back to the class for discussion. I had been conducting beginning-of-semester conferences during the group discussions, but stayed in the classroom to listen to the whole class discussion so that I would be better able to understand the grading criteria that I would then be implementing collaboratively with each class member. The discussion was lively, led to important clarification of key elements (e.g., what a minimal level of involvement in the class would look like compared to a superior engagement in the class), generated a very valuable discussion of peer assessment versus self-assessment, and even initiated a new requirement for class members (each person would briefly assess in writing his/her preparation for and participation in class at the end of each meeting and set goals for him/herself for the next week). I listened carefully and spoke only when asked to clarify a point. I met the next day with representatives from each of the groups to finalize the grading criteria. The one issue that required a fair amount of discussion was the elimination of sub-categories and sub-sub-subcategories of grade components, each with their own percentages. I explained that the system was far too convoluted, and I wasn't willing to spend so much time trying to calculate grades. This process of involving the whole class seemed to have a positive effect upon students' willingness to focus more on the content of the class than grades.

A grading-related issue that I am now exploring is the use of portfolio assessment in university graduate classes. I already ask students to put together a course portfolio in which they illustrate and reflect upon their learning during the semester. At the moment, this course portfolio is not designed or used as a formal assessment tool, except that it informs me about students' accomplishments and the development of their knowledge and what they think about this development. I would welcome any suggestions from readers who have had experience with this approach to assessment. ■