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ABSTRACT

Since the norm-referenced grading system produces a student-teacher conflict situation, a climate and grading system conducive to supportive interaction seems desirable, especially in an interpersonal communication course. This can be accomplished through contract grading, in which the instructor defines the contract components and the student agrees to achieve a particular grade level. Components should include course objectives, learning methods and tasks, student responsibilities, methods both for demonstrating content learned and for evaluating the mutually developed contract, the time limit, and the quality of work expected for different grade levels. Goals of the interpersonal communication course--greater student acceptance of responsibility for his communication and increased student awareness of others' communication attempts--lend themselves to contract grading with various behavioral objectives on a variety of cognitive levels. Teachers can thus create a threat-free, non-defense arousing environment with a higher degree of motivation for learning. (JM)

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A RATIONALE AND APPLICATION OF CONTRACT GRADING
FOR USE IN THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

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A RATIONALE AND APPLICATION OF CONTRACT GRADING
FOR USE IN THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

Have you ever had the experience of putting money in a vending machine, pushing the button for your selection, and then having nothing come out--not even your money? If you really wanted the item in the vending machine, did you try another dime? nickel? quarter?-- all to no avail? Did you punch another button? Re-check the change return? Hit the side of the machine? Did you get angry? Upset? Frustrated? What happened the next time you encountered that vending machine with coin in hand, desirous of getting a candy bar or coke? Were you somewhat reluctant to chance losing your money again? Did you distrust the machine because you didn't know what behaviors were necessary on your part to get the machine to fulfill its half of the bargain?

This frustrating encounter with a vending machine seems to me to be similar to the experience of the student who submits an assignment to the teacher without knowing exactly what he has to do to get the grade he wants, and who receives a low grade when the assignment is returned. Thinking that he will do better the next time, he submits a second assignment just to find that the criteria has changed or that he again really doesn't know what he has to do to get the higher grade that he desires. In this system, there is no opportunity for the student to improve upon the mistakes he made in the first assignment--or even to learn behaviors from the first that will

help him to improve on the second. In addition, in norm referenced grading systems, the student could have greatly improved on the second assignment and still have received a low grade if everyone else improved too. In these typical grading systems, the frustration can become very great, for no matter what the student tries to do, his efforts are not rewarded. The teacher, like the vending machine, withholds the reward. Thus, it seems to me, the norm-referenced grading system casts the student and teacher into a conflict situation in which the teacher must evaluate the student, but the student cannot be certain of the basis for the evaluation, and the threat of failure--of not receiving the desired outcome--is perpetually imminent.

If teaching is communicating, and evaluation is a form of feedback, it would seem we need to bring our grading procedures in line with the communication principles we teach. In interpersonal communication courses we often teach the desirability of reducing communication barriers by use of supportive communication. It seems hypocritical for us to encourage students to communicate in an open, honest, and supportive manner when, at the same time, we employ defense-arousing evaluation procedures which directly violate the supportive communication principles. It seems desirable for us to seek to create a climate which is conducive to supportive interaction and a grading system which is consistent with these goals.

Contract grading can provide a viable means of alleviating the conflict in our evaluation system and of reducing the element of threat which impedes the use of effective interpersonal communication skills between teacher and student.

Contract grading as explained by Ann Harvey is a

businesslike arrangement whereby the instructor defines the performance required for each grade. The student then identifies the performance level to which he will work and signs a contract in which the instructor is committed to awarding this predetermined grade if the student attains the appropriate performance level.¹

According to James Stewart and Jack Shank, the specific components of the contract should include:

the learning objective, the conditions or methods to be employed in completing it, specific responsibilities of the student, identification of the procedural steps or tasks included in the learning activity, provisions for applying and demonstrating skills or content learned, and the methods that will be employed to evaluate the mutually developed contract.²

In addition, the time limit in which the contract must be met should be indicated. All of these components are specified by the teacher and then are negotiated with the students. Contracts may be standard for a class with grade levels to be achieved agreed upon individually or may be individualized even to the extent that each student writes his own contract.

Different types of contracts may be implemented by instructors depending upon the contracts' applicability to the nature of the course content, method of instruction, and characteristics of the students. A "scout handbook system" as suggested

by Jo Sprague³ may be used when various tasks are identified and the student is required to complete selected tasks, plus a certain number of other tasks to receive a certain grade. For example, a contract may read: for a C do the starred activities and any three others, for a B any six others, for an A any nine others. Point systems are elaborated by Thomas King⁴ and Brian Holleran⁵ which require the student to accumulate a predetermined number of points to receive specific grades. For example, a student must accumulate 100 points for a C, 200 points for a B, 300 points for an A. In this system, the student is allowed to select the grade level for which he wishes to strive and chooses from a smorgasboard of activities, each worth a specified number of points, those activities he wishes to do to meet his grade requirement.

A common complaint rendered against contract grading systems is that higher grades are based on quantity, not quality of the work. David Stern⁶ suggests that contracts should be designed so that C level students achieve tasks on the lower cognitive levels of knowledge, comprehension, and application; B level students accomplish tasks requiring C level cognitions plus analysis; and A level students achieve all cognitive levels including those reached by C and B level students and synthesis and evaluation. In that manner, the quality of the contracts for each grade level is controlled and higher levels of learning are demanded to receive higher grades.

Because the components of contracts must be clearly defined,

the use of behavioral objectives and criterion-referenced measures are useful. Use of contracts makes it easier for the teacher to determine, in a more objective manner, if the student has successfully completed the objective or not. By reducing the subjectivity in grading and by allowing the student to know specifically what will be required of him before he does the task, the teacher need not induce the fear of failure. In fact, the emphasis should be on achievement of competency rather than on grades since the students are to redo any unsatisfactory assignments until they are acceptable.

Let's return for a minute to the analogy of the vending machine and grading. Now when your coin is accepted by the machine, your coke or candy bar appears, for the acts of submitting money and following the instructions designated on the machine are rewarded. If you use a slug nickel or in some other way do not satisfy the requirements of the contract set up by the vending machine, and your money is rejected, you are given another opportunity to improve upon your behaviors. Similarly, in the contract grading method, the student who fulfills his contract is rewarded with the grade for which he bargained. If his work is unsatisfactory or doesn't fulfill the contract, it is returned and he is allowed to improve upon his behaviors.

By placing the student and teacher in a business arrangement in which both parties negotiate for the contract each feels best fulfills his needs, the relationship between student and

teacher becomes more symmetrical. Since both participants have an agreement they must maintain, control of the relationship is more equally shared. As Stewart and Shank indicated, in a contract grading system,

Student and teacher are working to beat that evaluative device. It is NOT the student striving to pass the teacher's test... No longer is there the subtle but powerful pressure that [students] are working for grades or for the approval of the instructor.?

Therefore, the very nature of the contract arrangement allows for supportive communication as it implements climates of equality, provisionalism, description, objectivity, personal involvement, and problem orientation.

A course or unit in interpersonal communication which has such goals as the student will better understand himself as a communicator, will accept responsibility for his communication, will become aware and sensitive to the communication attempts of others and will strengthen or modify his communication behaviors, lends itself to the use of contract grading. If we are asking students to analyze, experiment with and possibly alter their own communication behaviors, it would seem most desirable to allow each student to individually create a contract which would allow him to work on those skills which are of concern to him. Communication behaviors may not change during the span of a unit or even a semester course, but through the use of contracts, students may be able to demonstrate approach behaviors on the lower levels of affective domains and may negotiate to be graded on essays, activities, interviews, or other behaviors

which show evidence of this change.

Another approach to contracting in the interpersonal communication course is to create a set of behavioral objectives in such a manner that a student may contract to complete a certain number of them for a desired grade. The behavioral objectives should cover the various aspects of the content of the interpersonal communication course and should include activities which range from observing and analyzing examples of interpersonal communication behaviors of other people to experimenting with and reporting the effects of one's own interpersonal communication skills. The contracts may be written so that the student must complete behavioral objectives in a variety of areas, on a variety of cognitive levels.

If part of the goal of an interpersonal communication course is to aid students in developing desirable and effective interpersonal communication skills, then contract grading seems to be an evaluative tool which is consistent with that objective. Often norm-referenced grading arouses defensiveness of students who retaliate by aggressive communication behavior directed at the teacher with the hope of intimidating him into changing the grade. Sometimes norm-referenced grading creates a sense of defeat in students because they feel they can never be competitive with other so-called better students, thus leading to loss of self-confidence. Communication skills are personal behaviors on which self-concepts are, in part, dependent. As teachers of interpersonal communication, it would appear we have a

responsibility for creating opportunities in which the student can develop his communication skills in a threat-free, non-defense arousing environment. Instead of arousing defensive communication via grading, it seems more appropriate to employ contract grading as a means of allowing the student to demonstrate competencies, and receive grades determined by that for which he contracts.

We teach Carl Rogers principle that evaluation is the cause of most interpersonal communication breakdowns; we have students find examples of supportive and defensive climates according to Jack Gibb's definition; we study the transactional analyst's Thomas Harris' book, I'm OK, You're OK--and yet, we violate the very essence of these principles when we induce threat and conflict by grading procedures. Instead of creating defense-arousing situations in which anxiety and discouragement are perpetual outgrowths, contract grading should be considered as a viable alternative which can motivate students out of a desire for accomplishment and success rather than out of fear of the threat of failure.

Footnotes

¹Ann Harvey, "Student Contracts: A Break in the Grading Game," Education Canada, 11-12 (September, 1972), 41.

²James Stewart and Jack Shank, "Student-Teacher Contracting: A Vehicle for Individualizing Instruction," Audiovisual Instruction, 18 (January, 1973), 32.

³Jo Sprague, "Evaluation: Problems in Evaluating Speech Communication Performance." Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, California, December, 1971.

⁴Thomas King, "A Contract Approach to a Public Speaking Course," Speech Teacher, 21, (March, 1972), 143-144.

⁵Briar Holleran, "The Use of Performance Options in Speech Courses," Today's Speech, 20 (Winter, 1972), 27-29.

⁶David Stern, "A Flow-Chart Approach to Public Speaking On the Contract Plan," Today's Speech, 20, (Winter, 1972), 25-26.

⁷James Stewart and Jack Shank, "Student-Teacher Contracting: A Vehicle for Individualizing Instruction," Audiovisual Instruction, 18, (January, 1973), 32-34.