

Developing and Reconceptualizing an Equitable Grading System in Undergraduate Education

Rebecca D. Brown
Ball State University

Kirsten R. Robbins
Ball State University

Abstract

Grading approaches differ in undergraduate higher educational settings, but most often reflect traditional systems that support an unbalanced power dynamic that does not acknowledge or support continuous learning. These practices are then taken up by pre-service teachers and applied within their future classrooms with children. Using Critical Theory and Transformative Learning Theory, we analyzed our own grading practices for the purpose of designing and implementing a more equitable approach to assessment. The process led us to think about what we want grades to represent and what matters most to us as educators. The paper includes our process and the challenges we have faced. We hope it is a valuable resource for educators who are considering adjustments to their grading systems.

Keywords: equity, grading, teacher education

Equitability within grading systems has long been a challenge both in higher education and K-12 schools. While literature exists on different grading methods, there is limited, but increasing research on the development and implementation of equitable (oftentimes, nontraditional) grading practices, specifically in the undergraduate higher education setting of teacher education. Additionally, while pre-service teachers (PSTs) may be exposed to different grading approaches through their university courses, many still experience the traditional 0-100, A-F grading scale as the ultimate measure of their learning, reflecting traditional systems that support an unbalanced power dynamic that does not acknowledge or support continuous learning. This conflicts directly with the current push to create teachers who use more socially

just practices in their own classrooms, as what is being modeled for them in the higher education classroom often does not align with research in the field. The purpose of this paper is to (a) examine the design, implementation, and evaluation of new, more equitable grading practices; and (b) discuss the implications of employing nontraditional grading practices in undergraduate elementary education courses.

Literature Review

The purpose for developing and reconceptualizing grading systems in undergraduate education is a direct result of the prolonged use of historical practices that continue to marginalize specific groups of people and impede their learning. The power dynamic resulting from these practices, and the lack of cultural competence that accompanies them, continues to support a system of distrust and disregard.

Grading in Undergraduate Institutions

Grading has a long history of being a way in which teachers and schools measured students against one another. In higher education, grading practices began at Cambridge University in the 16th century, and those practices were later brought to higher education institutions in the United States (Smith & Smith, 2019). Grading practices at universities varied, and a student's final standing in a class could include things like conduct and chapel attendance in addition to quality of course work (Smith & Smith, 2019). Grading practices moved to K-12 schools with the advent of the common school movement in the 1800s (Feldman, 2018; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Tyack, 1974). Grading practices were used to sort students into classes with others of similar academic ability and to signal future employers about their potential. The design of the grading system (which came from the Prussian model; McClusky, 1920; Tyack,

1974) was not meant to motivate students, and instead taught students that “mistakes are unwanted, unhelpful, and punished” (Feldman, 2018, p. 30).

Traditional grading methods tend to reflect dominant societal thinking, creating an unbalanced power dynamic in the higher education classroom (Costello, 2002; Gair & Mullins, 2002; LeCompte, 1978; Minor, 2020; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This power dynamic is not just limited to the pre-established teacher-student hierarchy; it also includes dominant norms and power structures that lead to implicit bias and lack of cultural competence. Part of this is because, while many teachers and professors may argue that grades represent student learning, studies have found that grades often reflect a student’s adherence to behavioral norms (e.g., Brookhart et al., 2016; Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Giroux, 1978; LeCompte, 1978; McMillan, 2001; Minor, 2020; Zeidner, 1992).

One issue with grades reflecting a student’s adherence to a teacher’s expectations of behavioral norms is that most teachers are white (often women) and middle-class (Schaeffer, 2021). An expectation of white and middle-class ways of knowing and being can mean that students from marginalized populations are unfairly penalized for their ways of being (Costello, 2002; Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Ferguson, 1982; Gair & Mullins, 2002; Minor, 2020), which can mean that their learning is not recognized in their grades. As a result, some scholars argue that grading practices can be both racist and classist (Feldman, 2018; Gair & Mullins, 2002; Minor, 2020).

Consequently, grades are generally a representation of more than just learning. In the past decade, research on grading systems applied in higher education settings has shown the growing variability that results in a standard A-F letter grade. From what grades represent (Randall & Englehard, 2010; Walvoord & Anderson, 2011) to what techniques are used to generate grades

(Brookhart, 1999; Sadler, 2005), researchers have been questioning the appropriateness of grading systems for several decades, arguing that “grades now serve a potpourri of inappropriate purposes” that include behavior, compliance, and participation (Randall & Engelhard, 2010, p. 1372). For this reason, it is important for educators to question their grading practices and define what grading represents in their classroom. It is within this context that we utilized a critical approach to theory and pedagogy to inform our analysis and action discussed in this study.

Defining Grading

One could argue that the term *grading* is applicable to any situation in which an individual is evaluating or assessing another individual, which is why we choose to use the terminology of *nontraditional grading*. In using this term, we expand beyond the typical assignment of points or a letter grade and include the process and dialogue in which we develop an understanding of student learning. Nontraditional grading includes the use of feedback to assist students in acquiring and honing skills, considering individual growth throughout the semester, focusing on student learning, and using what we learn to continue improving our practices. We have been asked why we do not use the term “ungrading,” which is the term used by Susan Blum (2020) in her book on the subject. The reason is that we feel that the term implies a specific set of practices, and we do not want those expectations to be placed on our own application of nontraditional grading.

At the university level, students often consider grades to be the final letter (A-F) that they are assigned for each course at the end of a semester. Scholars have found that many universities require professors to report single letter grades for each course, which creates a situation in which professors have to find a way to take all the information they gain about students learning and combine it into a single letter (one that will stand up to critique; Brookhart, 2011; Lipnevich

et al., 2020). Our own university requires a letter grade to be assigned to each student in each course at the end of the semester. However, we have freedom in how we arrive at that final letter grade, provided we can represent our practices accurately on our course syllabi (to avoid a successful grade appeal).

Critical Approach to Theory and Pedagogy

A critical approach to theory and pedagogy framed our educational choices for several semesters prior to our decision to implement a nontraditional grading system. Initially inspired by Michael Foucault's (1979, 1980) ideals on the power-knowledge and discipline-punish relationships, as well as Henry Giroux's (1988) presentation of transformative intellectuals, we began to critique the ways in which educators evaluate students and the implications of those approaches. Foucault questioned both the physical structures of schools and the intentions of educators, applying a panoptic view of spatial control in which "each pupil ... occupies sometimes one rank, sometimes another," creating conditions in which schools socialize individuals to norms that benefit the controlling group (1977, p. 147). This idea of fluid yet ambiguous ranking caused us to question whether our own grading practices enforced the conformity to dominant values or disrupted patterns of oppression (Apple, 1977; Freire, 1970; Kellner, 2003). This was especially important for us to consider because we are white, cisgender women. We wondered, specifically, how were our students unconsciously ranked within our classes and what part did our grading practices play in creating those ranks?

To embody Giroux's (1988) assertion that "both teachers and students be viewed as transformative intellectuals" (p. 100), one must question the balance of power in the classroom that prizes dominant norms. The power held by (mostly white) educators, even as intellectuals, in determining grades contributes to a socialization of norms that work against the transformative

endeavors that should be taking place in schools. If we view traditional grading systems as “the ultimate discipline instruments by which the teacher imposes his desired values, behavior patterns and beliefs upon students” (Giroux & Penna, 1988, p. 39), it becomes evident that a change towards a more dialogical approach to evaluation is needed in order to avoid the (un)conscious result of reinforcing the normalization of reward and punishment (Foucault, 1979; Freire, 1970; Jardine, 2005). As educators in a teacher education program, we are aware of the impact of our grading practices not only on our students, but also on their future students. In order for our students to be change agents, they need to work toward removing from their teaching any practices that might serve to reinforce dominant norms, as those can work against liberatory aims. If our practices can create a space in which authority is tempered, a greater focus on learning collectively and working against systems of power can occur (Giroux & Penna, 1988; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

The use of a nontraditional grading system models a step toward transformative practices to our learners, promoting that students can and should be part of assessing what learning they have achieved and how they have shown that learning, even when it does not match dominant expectations. Research by Feldman (2018) and Guskey (2020a; 2020b; Guskey & Link, 2019) heavily influenced our work as we pieced together how our practices would be determined and implemented. Embracing the idea that “grading should be something we do with, not to, students” (Jung, 2020), we reviewed findings on various alternative grading systems that focused on student learning and involved students in the evaluation process. In our opinion, this first necessitated the removal of a 0-100 grading scale, ensuring that any student could be successful in our courses by not being mathematically prohibited from success (Feldman, 2019). While we did spend some time researching alternative point-systems, such as the 4-point scale, contract

grading, and standards-based grading, we ultimately decided to remove points and percentages from our practice altogether. While the research provided on those systems (Feldman, 2020; Guskey, 2020b; Guskey & Link, 2019; Katopodis & Davidson, 2020) did demonstrate higher probabilities of achieving better grades, we decided that inclusion of those practices would still stifle student learning through either the rank-ordering of points (4-point scale and, in some cases, standards-based grading) or the miscommunication of what the grade represents. Contract grading tends to represent work ethic and compliance more than quality of work (Katopodis & Davison, 2020), whereas standards-based grading tends to place value only on specific parts of learning rather than the entire process at times assigning points to the achievement level (Feldman, 2019; Guskey, 2020b).

To begin planning, we chose to focus primarily on process, progress, and product (Guskey, 2020a, 2020b; Tomlinson, 2013), which is described in more detail in the next section. It is worth mentioning that we knew this would mean more attention and intention with providing individualized feedback for the purposes of learning and growth (Hope, 2020), which in turn would change not only our approach to evaluation but also the amount of time it would take to do so. However, it was important to us that we implement a system which honored the reality of how learners learn by equalizing the emphasis on summative assessments. Through blurring the lines of process, progress, and product, it is possible to value student achievement even if they remain below grade level.

Holding onto the idea that that “education is not a neutral process,” (Ross, 2018, p. 372) and that the evaluation of student work is often a normalized, biased judgment by the teacher, we concerned ourselves with creating a more equitable approach to grading within the constraints set by our institution (Giroux & Penna, 1988; Jardine, 2005). We wanted to move away from the

idea of grades as discipline or grades as motivation and toward a system that would hopefully do more to honor each student's unique journey in a course. We wanted to avoid rewarding only students who conveyed their learning in ways that align with dominant norms and punishing those whose efforts did not conform to those norms. This aligns directly with our vision to create "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1988) as we help them learn to be more equitable and socially just educators. Since we are required to submit grades for each course we teach, we had to work within that system, rather than doing away with grades entirely. This provided us with the opportunity to model for our students how to work within the barriers of a system and still support transformative approaches. Through this practice, we attempt to spotlight the power dynamic that exists in classrooms and how that mirrors societal power structures and assist our students in developing ways to disrupt it.

Developing an Equitable Grading System

Developing a new grading approach necessitated a year of intentional reflection on our purpose and expected outcomes for the courses selected for this study. Conversations began during the Spring of 2020 during an informal review of our teaching practices for a specific block of courses focused on classroom management, organization, and instruction in the elementary education classroom and reading and language instruction in the elementary classroom. On average, we met two to three times a week to share information on our teaching experiences regarding both the content for that week as well as our interpretations and application of rubrics and other grading practices.

During the Summer of 2020, our focus shifted in our discussion from the theoretical into the practical. This involved an increased focus on reading research both in culturally responsive teaching and equitable grading practices. This work continued through the Fall 2020 semester

with the intent to implement our new approach for the Spring 2021 semester. As we started to formulate our plan, we were informed not only by scholarship from the field, but also by our answers to questions we were asking each other. Some of the questions we pondered were: What does it mean to get an ‘A’? Is it fair if students get ‘A’s who have not all done the same amount and quality of work? What if students do not come to class? What if we do not agree with the grade our students give themselves? We used our discussions about questions to help guide our decision-making to ensure that our grading practices were something we could live with and defend. Our plan for our initial implementation included increasing our intentionality in creating assignments, allowing students unlimited revisions on assignments, and finding a way to work with students on a final grade.

To begin, we reviewed course assignments and learning outcomes, both verifying the necessity of the assignment and assuring students could adequately demonstrate their learning through the requirements (Table 1). Informed by Guskey (2020a, 2020b), we then took the course assignments and categorized them into three classifications – process, progress, and product (Table 2) – allowing each student to demonstrate learning in their own unique ways by choosing the presentation format. The selection of these categories stemmed from our desire to expand the representation of the final letter grade required by the university to include other measures of student learning. Rather than just reflecting snapshots of learned content (one and done grading), we tracked process and progress for our students as they regularly received and applied feedback from assignments (Goodwin & Rouleau, 2020). This allowed us to better understand our students’ approaches to work and learning, resulting in more individualized and accurate reflections of their knowledge (Brookhart et al., 2016). Additionally, our students maintained a weekly conceptual map reflecting on their learning and providing information on

how they were connecting ideas and applying it to the field. None of these categories received a grade but tracking them and the students' responses to feedback helped us acquire a larger picture of the students as learners. Using this information, we were able to help students set goals in the course and push their learning further.

Table 1

Example of Assignment Alignment to Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome	Assignments
Investigate the various roles and relationships required of a teacher.	Classroom management observation Determining Teacher Response assignment social comprehension lesson & activities self-assessments
Demonstrate knowledge of instructional strategies.	Lesson plans practicum experience teaching videos teaching reflections

Table 2

Example of Assignment Alignment to Grading Policy

Process	Progress	Product
first drafts of lesson plans	lesson plan revisions	final drafts of lesson plans
practice teaching videos	teaching video annotations	final teaching videos
creation of teaching module	response to feedback	final teaching module
teaching observations	teaching reflections	reflection course artifact
seminar participation	application of learning	discipline philosophy artifact

Throughout the semester, we gave extensive feedback on assignments, with the expectation that students would address the feedback and resubmit the assignment as many times as needed to ensure high quality work and demonstrated learning of course outcomes. Within Canvas (our LMS), we marked assignments as complete or incomplete. Once an assignment was submitted that met the criteria, it would receive a mark of complete. If an assignment were listed as incomplete, students could revise and resubmit until the assignment was marked as complete. An example of how this was communicated to students can be found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Example of Syllabus Statement on Grading Policy

Grading Policy:

This is an integrated experience, and there are several components to the work we will complete throughout the semester. Assignments will be categorized and evaluated by 3 criteria and will carry equal weight. This approach includes multiple grades that are intended to provide a broader, more complete demonstration of student learning. It also provides a more equitable approach to grading.

Process Criteria	Progress Criteria	Product Criteria
<i>describes student behaviors that facilitate or broaden learning</i>	<i>shows how much student have gained or improved over time</i>	<i>shows how well students have achieved specific learning goals, standards, or competencies</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>enable learning:</i> formative assessments, homework, quality class participation • <i>extended learning:</i> collaboration, responsibility, communication, perseverance, peer-evaluations • <i>compliance:</i> attendance, completion of work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assignment revisions • teaching adjustments in real-time • reflections • self-assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • summative assessments • clinical/field performance

Assignments for this course will receive ample feedback and either a grade of complete or incomplete. An incomplete grade on an assignment indicates that revisions are necessary and must be addressed until both the instructor and the student agree that the assignment has met the expectations. At that time, the grade will be changed to complete.

During the first few weeks of class, students will engage in discussions to finalize the grading criteria for the course and individual assignments. Students will engage in self-assessment, peer conferencing, and instructor conferencing to monitor progress through the course. Course artifacts, which have established rubrics, cannot be edited.

At the start of the semester, we explain the grading system to students and, as a class, we talk through what different grades might look like in action. At the midpoint of the semester, we met with each student individually to talk about how they felt they were doing and set goals for the remainder of the semester. In subsequent semesters, we increased the number of individual meetings based on student feedback. At the end of the semester, we had individual conferences with each student in which we asked them to share evidence of their learning and tell us what grade they felt they earned. Prior to those meetings, we had numerous class discussions about what earning each grade might entail. For example, in one class there was a discussion about whether someone who had some incompletes could still argue that they had earned an 'A'.

Our primary focus during the Spring 2021 semester was maintaining transparency with our students regarding our own process and progress, as well as developing a learning environment focused on student learning, not on earning a particular grade. As such, we eliminated assigning points, percentages, and letter grades to assignments and focused instead of providing targeted feedback to each student as necessitated by the assignment. We talked openly about expectations and students' experiences with and expectations of grading in the past, involved students in decision-making, and engaged students through individual conferences. We also talked about the problems with reinforcing dominant norms in schools and the ways in which that inhibits social justice efforts.

We have continued each semester to engage in nontraditional grading practices with our courses due to the overall positive feedback provided by our students. While some have mentioned experiencing some anxiety in the beginning over the absence of grades, there is a shared understanding between the students and us of why we engage in a nontraditional grading approach. Students have expressed the removal of grades provides them with the freedom to fail

forward, changing their focus from achieving a particular grade to allowing themselves to take creative risks with their planning and push beyond the unspoken boundaries of traditional ways of teaching and assessing. One student shared,

the grading method you use has been a huge proponent of my engagement. It has taken a huge amount of stress off to know that as long as I am completing the work well, I will get credit. I have been able to better focus on the quality of my work, than worrying about whether or not I'll score well. It was an adjustment at first since I had never had a class graded this way, but I'm feeling more intrinsically motivated than I've ever had before.

Another offered this perspective:

I wish all of my classes were nontraditional grading. I honestly know like a lot of my professors don't give like structured rubrics as like, detailed as [author] did. So it's very like, okay, I know that you're grading this, but you're not telling me what you want. So it's very stressful, very frustrating.

Providing unlimited opportunities to revise and resubmit also confirms for students that we value the progression of knowledge – that their understandings are not defined by a single assignment or moment in time. The trust that develops from this practice is essential to their learning and productivity. At the end of the semester, some students admitted that they did not trust initially that things would go the way we said they would (lots of feedback and unlimited revisions), but that with each round of feedback, they felt more comfortable with the process. Questions like “can we really fix this and turn it in again?” stop, and questions that are asked are related to the best ways to tackle feedback.

This is not to say that every student has loved the non-traditional grading. A few students remain convinced that we actually are keeping grades somewhere and just not sharing them. One commented “why are you hiding the grades instead of keeping them on Canvas?” Another student complained that she uses grades as a way of measuring her self-worth and that the absence of grades left her without a sense of value. These are problems to consider as we move forward. But the negative comments are very few in comparison to the number of students who have positive things to say after the experience.

Evolution of Our Practice

Although we have only been implementing our nontraditional grading practices for four semesters, we have experienced an evolution in our practice. Each semester brings us a new group of students and changing course loads. This impacts not only the challenges we encounter but also how we adapt to new situations. Questions that we ask ourselves revolve around the content of the course and what the final grade should represent. We also decide how to present our practice to each class and involve students in the process. It is important to us that students understand our reasoning but also recognize their ability to impact the responsiveness of our approach in real time.

Challenges We Encountered

We confronted a few tensions as we struggled to think through what grading meant to each of us. While there were many areas in which we were aligned, there were some questions for which we have different viewpoints. For example, there was disagreement over the extent to which objectivity is possible and/or desirable when deciding on end of the semester grades. One of us believes it is not possible to rid grading practices of subjectivity, while the other desires more objective boundaries. We also have continued conversations regarding if it is possible to

remove the power dynamic of the traditional teacher-student hierarchy. While we both agree that you cannot remove the power dynamic entirely, the level at which we are each worried about this differs. We have really had to push ourselves and our commitment to not enforcing dominant norms. It has taken us out of our comfort zone, and it is easy to slip back into bias toward traditional white ways of knowing and being. For example, we struggle with letting go of the desire for students to complete every assignment because it is our assumption that it is necessary for students to meet the objectives for the course. But it may not be. Recently, we have been discussing the depth of engagement within a single assignment. In this discussion, one of us has embraced the idea that you cannot make people learn, you can only present the information. The other struggles with a minimum expectation of what constitutes a demonstration of learning. A lack of philosophical agreement can create difficulties when trying to work with colleagues on a system for grading.

Reflection and Change

Because the university requires grades to be submitted for each student, we had to figure out how to translate the choices we were making into grades that we could justify at the end of the semester. This may have undermined somewhat our attempt to move away from such a system. We recognize that each semester will require additional reflection and work, so that we can remain responsive to our students and their needs.

Over the course of several semesters, based on conversations with each other, feedback from students, and additional readings that we have done on equity and grading practices, we have made slight changes to our practices. One thing that we have learned in attempting non-traditional grading in different courses is that a one size fits all approach does not work. What

worked well in a methods class was not appreciated in the same way in a Social Justice in Education class. So, we have adjusted over time depending on who and what we are teaching.

Discussion

Designing and implementing a new assessment system is a process that cannot and should not be rushed. Intentionality and frequent reflection are needed to ensure alignment with learning outcomes and responsiveness to student learning. This is especially important when you are trying to implement a system that works against dominant norms. Transparency of the process and actively seeking student feedback are both essential to successful implementation. It is important to note, however, that transparency is limited to what is known at that time and must incorporate some vulnerability on the part of the instructor.

Our research suggests that this works best if the students have trust in the instructor and the process, which can be difficult in the beginning as relationships are not yet established. As educators, we found that the best way to build trust was to be open about our process and to do the things we said we were going to do, even when it was difficult. Giving extensive feedback, accepting revisions, and then giving more feedback is a lot of work. If we were unable to give students feedback on the pre-established timeline, it was important to apologize, explain why, and adjust other deadlines accordingly.

Instructors must be confident in their grading decisions based in a commitment to social justice, while remaining open to questions and being honest with responses. This honesty helps to build further trust. It also opens the door to conversations around beliefs and values and what that means for teaching. This helps within the class, but it also provides opportunities for our preservice teacher students to consider how their own beliefs might inform their future practices.

In using equitable grading practices, it is our hope that our students will consider taking up non-traditional grading practices in their own future classrooms. None of the students who experienced our non-traditional grading practices have their own classrooms yet, so we do not have any data related to whether our former students are trying to use equitable grading practices themselves. However, when we have asked our students whether they might use similar practices in their own future classrooms, many say that they would definitely allow endless revisions, but they do not think an administrator would allow them to take up any other alternative grading practices. We have encouraged them to advocate for more just practices, but only time will tell if they will be change agents in their future schools.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

There is no perfect grading system, and educators cannot apply a “one size fits all” approach. Likewise, what works for one teacher may not work for another. In designing and implementing a nontraditional approach together, we have found that our continuous discourse aids us in progressing our attempts at bias-resistant grading. Asking each other difficult questions and disagreeing about some of the answers has helped us to interrogate our beliefs and motivations more fully. Including our students in this journey provides us with the opportunity to hear different perspectives and engage in collaboration with real-time results. This is important because it helps to understand if we are being sufficiently transparent when we talk about our practices (and if the impact our practices are having are the ones we are hoping for). It also provides a check for us that we are not reverting to an insistence on white ways of knowing and being. For education to be liberatory, it must end practices of prizing dominant norms, which traditional grading practices generally do.

It is also important to note that we teach courses that include 25-30 students. We have not tried to implement nontraditional grading practices in larger, lecture-style courses. We recognize that the intensive feedback model might be too much to maintain with a large class. More research needs to be done to understand how to translate the practices we have taken up for use in large, lecture-style classes.

Another area of our work that needs further study is the impact of our practices on students of Color and students from other marginalized groups. Most students in our classes are white, cisgender, and female. While we talked to all our students about our grading practices during our class discussions, the students who attend our focus group sessions after the semester have all been white. It is important for more targeted research to be done to assess the responses of students from marginalized groups. Our arguments for the liberatory nature of our practices are still largely theoretical as we do not have data beyond classroom discussions about the response to our practices from BIPOC students or students from other marginalized groups. It is possible that what we see as a departure from a focus on white ways of knowing and being is not enough of a move away from dominant norms to make a difference to students. As white educators, that is always going to be our struggle.

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