What We Talk about When We Talk about Grades: Framing, Intrinsic Motivation, and How to Keep It All about the Learning

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The time is right for faculty to be talking about how we grade and whether we ought to be grading at all. Regardless of whether you see grades as an outdated convention that gets in the way of learning, an effective and efficient way to motivate students to do their best work, or anything in between, the fact remains that grading is where faculty spend a massive amount of their teaching time. Our approach to grading also sets the tone for the rest of our course policies, from how we handle testing to dealing with late work.[1] In the push to make teaching in higher education more inclusive, effective, and transformative, it makes sense to engage in serious critical reflection on the proper role of grades in what we do.

As with most questions having to do with pedagogy, I see the issue through the lens of my academic discipline, cognitive psychology. This is the sub-field dedicated to the study of processes like memory, attention, language, and reasoning—all of which are manifestly relevant to learning at the university level. It's no surprise, then, that the last decade has seen our discipline take off in terms of applications to higher education, with multiple books,[2] groundbreaking articles,[3] and guides for faculty all tracing back to the science of how minds work.[4] In my own advice to faculty, I've anchored my suggestions about what to do and not to do in theories of what goes on in the mind during learning.[5]

But I quickly realized that as useful as these cognitively-based suggestions are, they can't stand on their own without attention to another major facet of psychology: motivation. After all, the best assignments in the world don't work if students don't complete them, and an A in a course means little if students aren't interested in applying what they've learned or in continuing their study in the field. Fortunately, there's a rich and well-developed set of theories that predict the circumstances under which students will engage in doing our assignments, and what will keep their enthusiasm for the field alive long after the last day of class. This is where I think

teaching magic can happen: when we couple cognitively-based approaches with a plan for eliciting the productive effort and authentic engagement that form the basis for all deep learning.

Research on motivation can also help us navigate the treacherous landscape of how to handle grades. For example, most teachers at this point have some familiarity with a key concept from motivation research: intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. On the one hand, this idea might seem to argue in favor of abolishing grades altogether, given the well-known finding that attaching external rewards tends to detract from the inherent value or pleasure we get from an activity.[6] Today, though, motivation research offers a more nuanced picture of how extrinsic and intrinsic motivations work together. Think of a student who comes to a course in, for example, research methods, with little inherent interest in the subject. Extrinsic rewards in the form of points might help this student persist, but so could the intrinsic motivation derived from a longer-term goal, such as the wish to pursue treasured career aspirations via the degree earned after completing the methods course.

Thus, as incentives for learning, grades might not be the poison pill that they are sometimes made out to be. But this positive dynamic hinges on an additional, and fragile, circumstance: keeping learning in the foreground and grades in a purely supporting role.

Sadly, this is one thing that I've seen fall through in my own classes, enough lately to make me wonder whether it's becoming a trend. Especially toward the end of the semester, as time is running short and students start to reckon with where they've underperformed, our discussions increasingly take on a transactional tone, one where assignments, tests, and other classwork are chores to be gotten out of the way in pursuit of that final grade. I know we've entered into this territory when students come to me with checklists of their remaining assignments, stating intentions to whiz through them in what I know will be not nearly enough time to absorb what they're designed to teach.

I don't think that these dispiriting encounters reflect a fundamental disconnection between students and their learning. I believe that, on the whole, most students do care about the knowledge and skills they're supposed to be developing, and most aren't in school just to eke out passing grades in return for as little intellectual engagement as possible. But this is why it's so important for me, as the instructor, to take charge of redirecting the discourse, especially when students' more idealistic goals are obscured by the end of semester frenzy.

To do this, I find myself drawing on another set of concepts from my academic field: framing, metaphors, and the interplay between thought and

expression. Psycholinguistics, the focus of much of my early-career research, is a rich source of practical insights about communication. George Lakoff's work on political discourse is a superb example. His book *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* builds on a lifetime of academic work on how people use conceptual frames and metaphors to understand the world, and how those internal cognitive processes come across through the language we use to talk about different subjects.[7]

A key theme that Lakoff and collaborators explore is how activating a particular conceptual frame can drastically shift one's perspective and interpretation. For example, when thinking about romantic relationships, people commonly use the concrete metaphor of a journey or trip. This deep metaphor comes through in expressions like, "I'm not sure where we're headed," or, "We hit some rough spots last year, but we made it through." It's useful shorthand, but it biases us to think of relationships in particular ways, highlighting certain aspects (e.g., defined starting and end points) and suppressing others. The flip side of this dynamic is that trying out a new metaphor can trigger the process of re-evaluating our assumptions, suggesting brand new possibilities as we do. When I teach Lakoff's work, I challenge my students to think of another metaphor for relationships, and when they do (love is a flower, a dance, a game), right away they start to see that what they assumed was true—such as that relationships are successful or unsuccessful based on an outcome—might not have to be true at all.

Metaphors and frames are powerful. And so, it is worth asking yourself: What are the subtle or even unconscious ways in which you think about grades? What is your conceptual framework for making sense of what grades are and what they mean, and how are you transmitting that frame to your students?

Take an experience we all have sooner or later: dealing with the student who arrives at your office to discuss a grade. That grade—the number you assigned or that popped out of the learning management system—is the starting point for the discussion, but where does it go from there? You could let the grade drive the conversation, running on the assumption that the student just wants to push the number as high as they can. This would naturally lead you to leap to the defense of the original score that you assigned (and perhaps, by extension, your competence as an instructor). This push-and-defend dynamic, though it may seem natural, will probably conclude with everyone feeling a bit bruised and not exactly intrinsically motivated by the joy of learning.

Reframe the discussion, though, and it could instead be about the student's future success, about the big goals that move them, and about how your coursework will help get them there. This doesn't mean simply re-

solving to be positive or upbeat in conversation. It means rejecting the fundamental conceptual assumption driving an adversarial response: that grades are tokens to be exchanged for work completed. In this piecework metaphor, you the instructor want and need the work your students have done, and you're willing to pay for it using course points as currency.

But in reality, you don't actually need or want that work product for its own sake, do you? Your real reasons for requesting it almost certainly involve some combination of other objectives: to create an opportunity for challenging and realistic practice, to elicit the student's creativity, to push them to master foundational knowledge they'll need for future work in the field. Or, perhaps the work is something that the students themselves will want to keep—think of writing samples for graduate school applications, or top-quality creative work for a professional portfolio.

There may not be a single ready metaphor or concept that encompasses all of these different goals. However, reflection might reveal your own unique take on the purpose of assigning and grading student work. Exploring this alternative narrative for yourself is one healthy step toward expunging the flawed piecework metaphor. It sharpens your understanding of what those grades represent in the context of your course and your discipline, and reveals assumptions that run counter to your values and to students' best interests.

Focusing on purpose—why you give grades and what they are supposed to accomplish—also taps into a principle that corporate communications experts have effused about for a long time: namely, that people are maximally motivated when they're presented with a reason for action rather than merely a list of consequences. Books like *Start with Why* and *Drive* have emphatically argued for framing any persuasive communication—be it with sales prospects, customers, or workplace teams—in terms of reasons first.[8] Our communications with students should work the same way, especially when grades are in the mix. Every point we award should ultimately trace back to what we want students to know or be able to do at the end of the course, and this chain of reasoning should not just be implicit, but should be what we lead with when we do talk about grades.

What might such an approach look like in practice? First of all, there would be no place for phrases like "giving points for: ___," or "I can offer you ___ grade if you do ___." It's fine to say something like "I need this work by X date," as long as you follow it right away with a compelling learning-based reason: "so I can have time to give you feedback," "so that you'll be able to turn in the revision by ___," or "so that you can be prepared to contribute to the discussion we're having on ___." For students who come armed with the checklist of points-bearing assignments, a good approach is

first to compliment them on their initiative and organizational prowess. Then, emphasize how the sequence of work builds into success, pointing out what they need to do first and how much time is ideal to spend on those early steps in order to succeed at later and more challenging steps (the final exam, the next class, the big presentation at the research symposium).

What if you're stuck in a classic grade-grubbing conversation with a student who truly doesn't buy in to your learning-first framing? What if they really do just want to extract from you as many points as possible without putting in any extra effort? That's bound to happen sometimes. But I believe that we're still the better for having tried to change the frame.

I'd also note that it's easy to jump to conclusions about why a student is coming to talk to you about a grade. In these conversations, I've made it a practice to wait as long as possible before launching into my explanation of why I assigned a given grade and why I don't intend to change it. In the meantime, I get them talking about why they're there, holding space instead of putting words into their mouths. In return, I've been surprised to find that many students do have other reasons for approaching me that have nothing to do with grades: to form a connection, to share thoughts they didn't feel comfortable conveying in class, to understand why they went wrong, and yes, to actually learn and get better at what I'm trying to teach them. It's a humbling reminder that it might be me, and not the students, whose preoccupation with points is blocking a more learning-focused conversation.

Other opportunities to convey the learning-first focus include the syllabus. Lately there's been a blossoming of work inviting us to see the syllabus as more than a mere contract or list of rules and more as an opportunity to build intrinsic interest and convey a sense of your own values as the instructor.[9] In this same spirit, you can review the nuances of your wording throughout the document, asking whether purpose—the "why" of an assignment, class, or entire discipline—shines through clearly enough. There might even be creative ways to name assignments that harken back to their learning purpose: for example, Library Research Skills Demonstration, Pre-Exam Preparation Quiz, or Revision Practice Paper. Start small, and you may find one opportunity after another to erase all traces of the piecework frame and prominently install, instead, learning and purpose.

The ungrading conversation will continue to develop, and it should. Eventually, we may begin to see it result in institutional and systemic change, hopefully in the direction of diluting the overgrown influence of grades on teachers and students alike. But in the meantime, examining our framing and communication is one step we can take as individuals to make

real progress against the toxic, points-focused mentality that we know is undermining our students' motivation and learning.

Recommendations for Further Reading:

Blum, Susan D., ed. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2020.

Bowman, Jennifer Davis. "3 Ways to Talk about Grading with Your Students." Edutopia. George Lucas Educational Foundation, March 8, 2022. https://www.edutopia.org/article/3-ways-talk-about-grading-your-students/.

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"Why Focusing on Grades Is a Barrier to Learning." *Harvard Business Publishing Education*. https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/why-focusing-on-grades-is-a-barrier-to-learning.

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[1] Michelle D. Miller, "One Big Thing I'll Keep from My Remote-Redesigned Courses This Year," *Michelle Miller PhD* (blog), January 27, 2021. https://www.michellemillerphd.com/one-big-thing-to-keep-from-remote-redesigned-courses/.

[2] Examples include: Joshua Eyler, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories behind Effective College Teaching* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2018); James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2021).

[3] Jeffrey D. Karpicke and Henry L. Roediger, "The Critical Importance of Retrieval for Learning," *Science* 319/5865 (2008): 966–968.

[4] Michelle D. Miller, "How to Make Smart Choices about Tech for Your Course," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 14, 2022. https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-make-smart-choices-about-tech-for-your-course/.

[5] Michelle D. Miller, *Minds Online: Teaching Effectively with Technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Michelle D. Miller, "How to Make Smart Choices about Tech for Your Course," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June

14, 2022, https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-make-smart-choices-about-tech-for-your-course/; Michelle D. Miller, *Remembering and Forgetting in the Age of Technology: Teaching, Learning, and the Science of Memory in a Wired World* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2022).

[6] Edward L. Deci, "Effects of Externally Mediated Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 18/1 (1971): 105–115.

[7] George Lakoff, *The All New Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014).

[8] See Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2019) and Daniel H. Pink, *Drive* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

[9] Kevin Gannon, "How to Create a Syllabus," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 15, 2022, https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-create-a-syllabus/.