

Goal: A Grading System

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Goal: A Grading System that Demands Excellence on the Playing Field

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Abstract

Despite the vast array of educational practices that are present in today's society, grading is one practice that has established a historical foundation and one that will continue to be an important aspect to the profession of education. This small scale study determined that both undergraduate and graduate learners, in one college instructor's educational classes, support a four point grading scale, inclusive of a rubric, when compared to the traditional grading scale (0-100%).

Keywords: rubric, grades, grading, college, undergraduate, graduate

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Imagine a competitive game of soccer in which both teams arrive fully prepared to take home the first place golden trophy. The athletic environment radiates with players who possess unwavering game faces, structured uniforms, and coaches who eagerly pace the sidelines as each team's captain guards watch over the shiny silver coin as it swiftly sails into the ocean blue sky, in hopes that the outcome lands in their team's favor so that the initial starting point begins as an advantage – one of choice and direction. Winning the coin toss provides the team with preliminary control, as does using a four point grading system, combined with a detailed rubric, for learners in the field of higher education.

In the college game of education, the field that one plays on can be likened to the varied percentages of the traditional grading scale (0-100%), the ball reflective of the varied assignments (housing the ability to move up and down the scale based on effort, content, and structure), and the location of the net, within the parameters of the goal box, viewed as the final earned score for the course. Though education is far from a competitive sporty game, if educators do not implement proper support structures for involved participants, failure becomes inevitable or at minimum success becomes a struggle. The same is true for athletic teams in which coaches do not supply the appropriate strategies and resources to guide their teams to individual growth and team wins.

Grading

Coaches look for specific athletic qualities when recruiting players. Educators do the same when determining grades for courses. Grades, like players, serve many different purposes. First and foremost, grades provide insight into how a student is performing (Gross Davis, 1999). As well, grades provide a value associated to the level of accomplished criteria, grades are used

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to help students self-evaluate and improve work if need be, they are used to encourage, grades are used to communicate the instructor's verdict on level of mastery, they are used to gauge what has and has not been learned, and grades are used to select individuals for positive rewards such as scholarships (Gross Davis, 1999). Grades, however, fluctuate based on individual instructor expectations. Abbott (2008) expressed that students trust that professors provide grades based on a certain level of reality. Typically, this is done through the traditional grading scale (0-100%) that results in a final earned letter grade (A-F). After years of accepting the traditional grading method, conversely, non-traditional grading methods are now on the rise. Within the scope of both grading methods it is critical to determine what constitutes effective grading practices.

Reeves (2008), informs educators that the difference between a student failing and academic victory lies at the heart of the teacher's grading system. In essence, educational success begins with the criteria for grading student work. As educators, it becomes imperative to determine how to eliminate personal biases that can be identified in the grading process. For example, ineffective grading practices include the use of zeros for missing assignments (without the opportunity to complete the work), averaging all scores for the semester, and the use of a single assignment that can either make or break a student's overall course grade (Reeves, 2008). To strengthen grading practices educators should grade for mastery, avoid competitive practices, and keep students up-to-date on their personal progress (Gross Davis, 1999).

Grades, like the varied athletic games (to include the important aspect of practice) in the course of a season are part of the overall picture of performance. Solid performance at practice warrants play time on game day just as solid grades warrant personal gratification and possible rewards like scholarships or employment with a top firm. What educators must address though is how traditional grading methods impact achievement for diverse learners. Do traditional grading

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methods mesh with current best practices? The ever popular phenomenon of differentiated instruction stresses meeting students where they are at as individuals (Tomlinson, 2001). Therefore, one concern rests in the fact that traditional grading methods do not allow for a variance of individuality. Further, traditional grading methods may lack motivational factors (Tomlinson, 2001). Most importantly though is the reality of subjectivity when grading. How might educators begin to decrease subjectivity when grading student work?

Personal Grading Saga

After instructing over twenty college courses, in a short period of time, for learners in both undergraduate and graduate courses, in the field of education, it became alarmingly apparent that something radical had to be done with regard to grading assignments using the traditional subjective grading scale (0-100%) if personal biases were to be removed from the grading process. The realization that grades are based upon our personal values, philosophical views, and assumptions (Davis, 1999) provided a starting point from which to construct an implementable plan with future courses in order to decrease subjective scoring.

Though there are a plethora of strategies to decrease instructor grading biases, the focus for this article will address the use of rubrics and a four point grading scale. Thus, an all-encompassing rubric was constructed in which learners were clearly informed about at the on-set of class via the course syllabus, a Blackboard announcement, and by way of email. In addition, learners were tested over grading practices via an introductory quiz to the course so that initial misunderstandings could be addressed and clarified for future success. Such practices fall directly in line with the notion that when faculty clearly communicate expectations and grading rationale to students the grading process becomes more efficient (Tomlinson, 2001) and the number of student complaints likely decreases (Gross Davis, 1999).

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Research indicates that effective teachers provide examples of past assignments so that learners can view what is expected (Wong & Wong, 1998). It is important to note that all online courses were highly organized, to include examples of high quality work from previous learners so that current learners could achieve the same or extend beyond the provided samples. Providing an education that allots for creativity, individuality, and the ability to correct work (for a decrease in score), allows learners to truly enjoy the learning process and actually seek to master each objective throughout the course. This notion is paramount to this article because although grades tend to be higher in my courses, students must truly strive to earn an A.

Grades, in my courses, were not a result of the “inflation” phenomenon (Abbott, 2008). If assignments were not completed to standard it was evident in the scores earned. According to one student, “She has high expectations for her students and even though it’s hard work, that’s how we learn” (Anonymous, 2011). One individual that has taken three classes from me stated, “Dr. Cady’s lessons are not always easy and she expects you to put forth a great deal of effort and I have learned a great deal from all of her classes” (Anonymous, 2011). Yet another stated, “Dr. Cady is the most challenging of any professor I have ever had. I was really nervous when I saw the syllabi for my first class with you, but I would NOT trade my experience for an ‘easier’ teacher any day” (Anonymous, 2011).

Game One

Just as new equipment for a losing team alone will not transform the team into winners, so it is true for implementation of a grading rubric without the addition of a shift in how points are earned. Therefore, after careful reflection on the complexity of assigning a specific score using the traditional range of 0-100%, logic took hold, and it became important to construct a

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simplistic, but well-defined method for assessing student work while ensuring that students were afforded the equal opportunity to strive for excellence or accept the alternative of mediocrity.

Initially, changes in the grading process shifted from the traditional grading scale to the use of a four point grading system (4, 3, 2, 1) in which a rubric was implemented in order to accurately assess where each assignment fell with regard to the varied expectations for each of the numbered columns. Students were given the opportunity to earn a four if assignments exceeded expectations (to include a creative component), a three if assignments met expectations, a two if assignments were below expectations, and a one if assignments were unacceptable due to a drastic need for improvement. According to the rubric, each numbered item was assigned a very detailed bulleted list of how to obtain a specific score. Danielson (2002) specifies that teachers should naturally evaluate written products and performance with the use of a rubric so the addition of a rubric was essential to meeting the standard for best practices.

Through the use of a rubric, student submissions were graded on a continuum in which those scoring a four possessed a “sophisticated” understanding over the content while those scoring below a three possessed a more “naïve” understanding in which improvement was necessary (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 74). Occasionally, if an assignment fell between two different whole numbers, a half point was granted so that the overall grade was not drastically altered. One particular learner described the variance in score as, “She will also allot tenths of points (i.e. 3.5) if she feels that the student has attained somewhere between both levels of grading points” (Anonymous, 2011). After careful consideration, it became apparent that the four point scale was migrating back to the same subjective grading that the traditional system had possessed. This was evident due to the fact that many scores began to earn a grade that fell

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between the established rubric whole numbers. To combat the transition back to the subjective realm changes in both personal beliefs and the rubric took place.

Game Two

Just as a coach goes back to the drawing board, time and again, to strengthen players and the outcome of the game – so must an instructor if continual student growth is the expected result. After careful reflection, and the quick progression of having taught thirty additional undergraduate and graduate educational classes, the rubric was restructured (see Appendix A). First, the pressure of having to go above and beyond to earn a four was removed. Instead, to date, in order to earn a four learners are required to simply meet the outlined expectations. To earn a three, submitted work is deemed just shy of meeting full expectations if all of the expectations are not met as outlined in the rubric. To earn a two, submitted work must drastically fall below expectations, and to earn a one, submitted work must be in need of improvement and deemed unacceptable according to the rubric. As well, a few of the bulleted items located within each numbered category were slightly reworded to remove ambiguity (i.e., titled properly *and* artistically was changed to titled properly).

There currently remains a certain level of subjectivity with the use of a rubric, but it is my belief that it is much less than when scoring without a rubric. Furthermore, there will always be a small percentage of subjectivity when humans score due to the inevitable factor of human nature. Wong and Wong (1998) state that, “Regardless of the method used, grading and reporting remain inherently subjective” (p. 231), but an effective teacher consistently strives to hone in on decreasing subjectivity through best practices.

Season's Commentary

It is not sufficient to merely approach change through one set of eyes. The same is true in sports. If everything were gaged on a single coach's ideas and expectations there would be minimal change in the overall game due to the fact that it is nearly impossible to be able to focus on each specific player and the entire playing field at all times. In order to see the bigger picture, and to ensure that all players are afforded an opportunity to grow, there are often several coaches for various areas on the playing field. The addition of targeted feedback to each player provides a clear foundation from which players can reflect and make needed changes in order to strengthen the game. The same is true for an instructor when seeking success for her students.

Professional input from additional instructors was not a factor in determining the new grading process. However, at the onset of transitioning from the traditional grading method to the four point grading system the Director of Education requested an explanation as to how the system tied into the college's overall grading system. It was explained that all assignments were graded equally, on a four point scale, with the use of a rubric and that final scores were merely converted to the traditional A-F scale (0-100%). The Director of Education accepted this response and there was no additional follow up on his behalf.

Research has determined that surveys provide "valuable insights into a teacher's performance, and they can provide feedback to teachers that is unavailable from any other source" (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 51). For the purpose of this article, a survey was conducted in order to gather specific data on how the four point grading system has in fact impacted the learners in the various undergraduate and graduate educational classes (see Appendix B). Surveys were distributed to current and past learners via electronic outlets.

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Nineteen surveys were returned. Of the eight question survey, four particular questions were analyzed to determine whether or not the students felt that the four point grading system was fair.

When surveying how learners felt at the onset of learning about the four point grading scale, fifty-eight percent of the learners felt that the four point grading system was a fair way to assess. However, 21% felt that it was an unfair way to assess finished products, and 21% responded in a manner that was undetermined. Considering that the learners were presented the four point scale at the onset of each class, via a rubric, one individual stated that it was a fair way to assess because it mimicked the same idea that teachers will be expected to use rubrics once in the real-world classroom. Another respondent indicated that it was fair because it was evident that many factors played into the correction of assignments. Others felt that it was fair because it expressed that all assignments were of equal importance and that there was not a focus on one particular assignment that could make or break the final outcome of the course grade. One individual felt that it was unfair because the same weight was given to all assignments despite the time it took to complete each assignment. Two individuals had been exposed to similar grading scales through the state of Washington and in art school.

When analyzing how learners felt after courses had been underway for a few weeks, 68% felt that the four point scale was a fair process for assigning grades. This reflected a 10% increase from initial thoughts. Twenty-six percent provided a response that was undetermined. This was evident in those that had not taken my courses before and were currently only a few weeks into their first course with me as the instructor. The largest impact was evident in the fact that there was a 16% decrease for those that believed it was an unfair system of grading. According to the results of Q4, there was a reoccurring theme that learners liked the fact that there was not the usual pressure on one or two big assignments. One specific learner liked that if

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a student failed one assignment it did not necessarily mean the class would be failed. Yet another student shared that having all assignments of equal value taught students to focus on each assignment and not just the exams or one cumulative assignment.

When assessing if learners felt that the instructor graded fairly, 95% indicated yes, 5% provided a response that did not establish a clear-cut answer, and 0% felt that the instructor did not grade fairly. Specifically, one learner indicated that if a test question was written poorly, and the instructor was notified, that upon verification the test score would be adjusted accordingly. Another learner stated that she appreciated the specific feedback and the grace provided to redo an assignment to obtain mastery. It was also noted by a learner that although lessons are not always easy, instructor help is available to those in need. Learners also felt that deadlines were set, followed, and that the feedback provided was constructive.

When analyzing Q5, 63% felt that there was not a difference in the final grades earned in my courses vs. their final grades in other courses. Twenty-six percent provided responses that warranted an undetermined outcome due to factors such as currently working towards completion of their first course with me. Eleven percent felt there was a difference. Learners indicated that my grading methods were more detailed, provided a motivational factor, made them want to try harder, but one individual stated that the difference appeared to be in the fact that it was more work for the instructor.

Out of the returned surveys, one individual felt an overwhelming sense of pressure with the initial four point rubric. She stressed that she felt that she had to always go above and beyond to earn the grades she was accustomed to. She was a student in my course during the implementation of the first rubric. Given the fact that I had changed the rubric before obtaining the survey feedback I feel comfortable knowing that this same pressure is no longer a factor in

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earning grades. According to the new rubric, to earn a four, learners simply have to meet all expectations, but not exceed them. This change was articulated to this particular individual because I feel it is imperative to ensure continual growth in our practices. By expressing the change, her ideas were validated and appreciation for her participation in the survey process was confirmed.

Next Season

Success in sports stems from a devoted coach, zealous players, and the on-going ability to revisit the drawing board, time and again, to seek continual growth. Like a coach, as an instructor, I attack educational goals from a personal model approach in that I continually strive to guide students to success via: an increased self-confidence that ultimately impacts others through empathy; a partnership based on outcomes that will blossom individual strengths while embracing diversity in learning styles; and personal expression through creativity (Joyce & Calhoun, 1996). To reiterate, one particular learner who clearly indicated that she deemed herself more of a traditional learner stated that, “Dr. Cady introduced me to more free thinking which I believe is good in education as a whole” (Anonymous, 2011).

One insightful response, provided by a male student, stated that, “Dr. Cady provides you with situations that allow you to think outside the box and outside the textbook. She uses different mediums to enhance our learning experience.” The respondent further indicated:

I cannot stand when an instructor reads and lectures you and does not give you time to reflect, to put yourself in that situation and handle it, to make sure that you are reaching children with their individual personalities and learning curves and quirks. Some students quit because teachers fail them and Dr. Cady always asks us to think about that child that is in a class every

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day and not learning, how do we reach that child, how do we push children to realize their potential, and most of all how do we deliver a quality education and make it fun. (Anonymous, 2011)

The survey provided a great deal of positive feedback and a clear vision from which to continue to meet student needs. Moreover, it solidified that my current practices are in line with what works well for students in the field of education. However, because continual growth is critical in education I am always thoughtful of how I can better the on-line and on-ground learning environments for college students. Thus, after recently attending two state training sessions and grading over thirty teacher portfolios for the state, with a detailed rubric, I am now better prepared to hone in on my four point grading rubric to ensure that students transition smoothly from college course work to the established state expectations for their final state portfolio projects. It is my goal to alter my current grading system to mimic the state's three point rubric system in which a three represents Criteria Met, a two indicates Criteria Partially Met, and a one represents Criteria Not Met. The rubric will continue to include detailed descriptions over the assignment expectations so that the playing field begins on an even ground for all students.

Education can be equated to a sport in which highly qualified instructors will continue to implement needed change to ensure solid wins for *all* students, game after game. Though there will be the inevitable losses from time to time, the score board, resembling the grade book, should more often than not reveal student victory! It has been and will continue to be my goal to educate using methods that create positive growth for students. To reiterate this, one learner indicated that, "At the end of Dr. Cady's classes I sometimes feel exhausted but it is a feeling of

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great accomplishment because I succeeded” (Anonymous, 2011). Through the implementation of a four point grading system, in conjunction with rubrics, learners will continue to make MVP.

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Appendix A. Dr. Cady's Grading Scale Survey

This is strictly voluntary. I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how my grading scale has impacted you as a learner. If you would be willing to assist me in this, so that I can provide results via an article I am working on, I would truly appreciate it. I will not include names unless you specifically request to have your name included. ☺

1. What course(s) have you taken with Dr. Cady?
2. When you first saw her 4 point grading scale what were your thoughts?
3. Did you initially feel like the 4 point grading scale was going to be a fair way to assess your work? Why or why not.
4. Once the course got going and you began receiving grades, via the 4 point scale, what were your thoughts of the grading system?
5. When comparing your final grade for the course(s) (traditional percentage 0-100%) with the 4 point scale – How did/does it differ from your final grades in other courses that use a traditional grading method throughout the grading process?
6. Do you feel Dr. Cady grades fairly? Why or why not?
7. Overall, what are your thoughts on how you are assessed in Dr. Cady's course(s)? Do you feel as though you are/were learning? And, how does/did that learning compare to your past learning experiences?

THANK YOU so much for your time! ☺

Appendix B. Dr. Jennifer Cady’s Grading Expectations

4	3	2	1
Meets Expectations	Just Shy of Meeting Full Expectations	Below Expectations	Unacceptable/ Needs Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turned in Early or by Deadline (All Components Included) • Titled Properly • Proper APA Format • Highest Level of Thinking Evident (e.g., critical, analytical, rational, logical, insightful) • Creative and/or Highly Structured • Proper Use of Professional Vocabulary • Proper Grammar/ Spelling • Integration of Solid Resource(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turned in by Deadline or Late (All Components Included) • Titled Properly • Attempted APA Format Evident • Critical Thinking Evident • Creative and/or Organized Format • Professional Vocabulary • Proper Grammar/ Spelling (Minor Errors) • Attempted Integration of Course Resource(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turned in by Deadline/Late (Possibly Missing Components) • Titled • APA Format Attempted (Not Understood) • Lack of Critical Thinking • Format is Too Basic • Professional Vocabulary Not Used • Proper Grammar/ Spelling (Major Errors) • No Integration of Course Resource(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deadline/Late (Possibly Missing Components) • Not Titled • APA Format Not Attempted • Lack of Critical Thinking • Format is Not Logical • Professional Vocabulary Not Used • Proper Grammar/Spelling (Major Errors) • No Integration of Course Resource(s)

Although many of you will disagree with this system, as it makes it harder to earn an A, it also sets the bar higher for expectations. Too often grades are merely handed out in education and/or learners figure out how to do one higher point assignment and leave several of the lower point assignments unfinished. This method holds everything of equal weight/value. The stress is on the journey of every lesson along the path...not just on assessments or one big assignment. After having taught fifty courses (and counting) this grading system works wonderfully. Periodically, I will grant a 4.5 for exceptional work – though this is rare.