Defend Your Grade: Using a Grade Defense Assignment to Improve Reflection

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In the fall of 2021, I was hired to teach University Seminar at Middle Tennessee State University. The course is designed to support freshmen students in their transition to college life, tackling a wide range of topics including: notetaking, time management, networking, goal setting, resume writing, and more. While the class is focused on freshmen, its main demographic is the at-risk, marginalized population. The course has several learning objectives related to student success, but most important are the building of critical and reflective thinking skills. When I started teaching the course, we had a final ePortfolio assignment, in which students were expected to document their progress in the class. While grading the ePortfolio for the first time, I noticed that students were not demonstrating the critical and reflective thinking skills we (faculty) were suggesting were the underpinning of our course. Students often relied on clichés or surface level analysis of their work. This needed to change if we were to continue to see student success in the course. I proposed a curriculum grant to support the restructuring of the online content, and the next year I was appointed as the program coordinator. With this new responsibility, I sought out ways to improve student reflection. My final decision was to implement what I call a grade defense into the assignment. My aim as the new coordinator was to improve students' critical and reflective thinking skills in the ePortfolio. The best option was to select an assessment which encouraged deeper reflection and metacognitive practices. What first came to mind were ungrading or contract grading practices— methodologies which seek to balance out the power dynamic in a classroom and encourage reflective practice. These activities require students to prove their knowledge in the class, and this need for proof forces students to consider how they will apply information in other contexts. The process encourages reflection by asking students to identify their strengths and weaknesses as they move on in college. The purpose of this article is to present my anecdotal findings from using a grade defense assignment as a supplemental aspect of the ePortfolio assignment. This is not a full research study, but I did a few semesters of testing with the assignment before implementing the grade defense in all sections of University Seminar. I was curious to see how ungrading or contract grading practices would fit with University Seminar, a course that I consider a unique experience in relation to more traditional standard classes like science or math. In the research which informed my decision, I had seen multiple examples of instructors in English, History, Math, and Science implement ungrading practices with much success, and I see University Seminar as a course best suited to collaborative grading, as the skills we teach are difficult to assess in terms of exams, essays, or activities. Ultimately, the student is best suited for assessing their comprehension of a topic, so I was encouraged to try ungrading.

The ePortfolio Project

The ePortfolio is an assignment generated in tandem with our university's quality enhancement program MTEngage. The MTEngage program's

two main focuses are on high impact practices and students documenting and reflecting on their learning. The ePortfolio requires students to collect 10 artifacts of their learning and reflect on their experience. We define artifacts as pieces of evidence, which students can pull from any course, activity, or experience, such as notes or tests from any of their semester classes. The original goal and intention of collecting these artifacts was to have students review how far they had come and consider how they have applied their skills from our course to the rest of their college career. When I collected this assignment for the first time back in 2021, I identified a problem, namely that students were struggling to make deep connections between the course and their lives outside of class. Artifacts generally met the definition of a piece of evidence, but ninety percent of student artifacts came from the class itself, namely the course assignments. Students did not seem to see a connection between our class and their other academic classes.Reflections were often woefully short and lacked the hallmarks of good critical thinking skills. Even students who were high achievers struggled to move beyond simplistic or generic reflective pieces to make deeper connections.It is important to note that we do have discussions about how to reflect on their work around two weeks before the ePortfolio is due. These discussions explain to students that they should ask themselves about what went right, what went wrong, and how they can improve the system for the future. We teach Gibb's reflective thinking model to the students and have them perform all the steps of the model on scenarios as practice. I also do freewriting activities asking students to reflect critically on one of the artifacts they already have, along with peer discussions about their ePortfolios and how they plan to complete the project. The purpose of this paper is to present my observational findings from using a grade defense assignment as a supplemental aspect of the ePortfolio assignment. Through student examples and scholarly sources, I plan to explain my reasoning for the grade defense, establish what the practice looks like, and show the change I have seen in student reflection and critical thinking.To demonstrate the type of reflections I was getting before the grade defense, I want to provide two examples of student work which showcase a lack of critical and reflective thinking. Note that I received permission from students to use their work. The first student example says:

> My study practices have changed over the semester because I have learned new skills and techniques from this class like time management, note-taking strategies, and how to read passages and understand them better. I learned all these new skills I didn't know before, that are going to help me become a better student.

Note the lack of evidence and detail in this example. The students said they gained knowledge, but they do not explain how this has been applied or how they plan to use their skills in the future. Also, the student focuses on overcoming instead of how they made changes. While overcoming obstacles is a good thing, if the students are striving to generate an overcoming narrative for the assignment as an attempt to appease me, it can hinder their ability to reflect critically. I see a large difference between overcoming an obstacle and the narrative of overcoming, something I will address after the next student example.

> Here is a second example:

> Of course, college is different than high school and every single freshman must adjust. Not that I've ever had any issues with attendance, but I realized sitting and paying attention in class is how I learn the best in college. Now I still do sit down and look at my notes for studying but paying attention in class very well helps me take in the information I am learning.

Again, there is a generic feeling in this discussion. The student starts off with a cliché comment about the differences between high school and college. They then suggest that the thing which

helps their learning is passive, paying attention in class. Despite discussions about how learning works and the best forms of notetaking and studying, the student is reliant on their auditory memory to retain information. Both students demonstrate a lack of critical and reflective thinking, as they are reluctant to admit how they struggle or focus solely on the positive points in their journey.I connect these short, less detailed writings students supplied in the ePortfolio, to examples that Vidali (2007) notes in her article "Performing the Rhetorical Freakshow: Disability, Student Writing, and College Admissions." Just as disabled students must balance being an "inspiration" in their college admissions essays, namely that they are disabled enough to elicit pity but not so disabled that they cannot overcome their struggles to succeed in college, these reflective pieces in the ePortfolio often felt as if they were trying to prove that the student did not struggle, or if they struggled that they were able to overcome the issue and succeed in the end. As Elbow (1996) suggests, "It is the preoccupation with evaluation and quality that leads students, their parents, and legislators to see writing as merely or inherently an occasion for being judged" (p. 4). In other words, by judging writing based on quality we encourage students to see writing as an evaluative practice only, an activity which lacks value in any context other than to be judged. Even in situations where we expect students to reflect, their understanding of the situation will be a focus on good writing instead of critical thinking. If its sole purpose is as a critique of the student, then instances where they are asked to reflect will have a right and wrong answer; the right often being the overcoming of obstacles, regardless of if they did or did not truthfully overcome.

Literature Review

When researching practices to assist student learning, I started by examining ways to improve critical and reflective thinking skills, along with metacognitive practices. This led me to information about self-regulation. Many scholars have discussed self-regulation in relation to assessment and reflection. Mahlberg (2015) defines self-regulation as "self-regulated students are those that can reflect on their performance and make adjustments to improve that performance," (p. 773). In other words, a student with strong self-regulation skills can take criticism and use it to improve, can handle their emotions, and can be reflective about an experience without being defensive. These are all skills vital to not only college but the job market. These scholars are arguing that self-assessment generates stronger reflective practices and build bonds between instructor and student. By building connections between instructors and students, and by asking students to prove their learning, reflections become more honest; students feel a level of comfort admitting that they continue to struggle or that the act of overcoming is not as linear when they feel the process is being judged, not the narrative.Research into reflective, critical, and metacognitive thinking practices often hold the general consensus that self-assessment practices build critical thinking skills and encourage agency. Students feel more inclined to focus their work and reflect deeply if they are encouraged to assess their own progress. Beumann & Wegrer (2018) found positive correlation between student self-assessment and math knowledge gained. They discovered that students were able, most of the time, to assess their knowledge and weak spots in material, even without instructor guidance. Strommel (2020) notes that conversations about grading can lead to students thinking critically about all of the classes in which they are graded, and how those grades relate or impact them. They can be more conscious about this practice, and what grades actually mean to them instead of blindly accepting that the grade they received signifies something about them as people, students, or scholars. In other words, asking students to assess themselves, or to consider how they would grade themselves, leads to deeper understanding about the material. Students consider what they have gained from

the experience, instead of looking for a number or letter score to tell them how they did.

In contrast to self-assessment, scholars have seen time and again that more punitive forms of grading discourage creativity, create power struggles in the classroom, and cause students to focus on completion instead of comprehension. Strommel (2020) states that "We have created increasingly elaborate assessment mechanisms, all while failing to recognize that students themselves are the best experts in their own learning" (p. 29). The suggestion here is that by focusing on assessment, instructors ignore student learning to instead chase our idealized class of students. We ignore self-regulation to instead teach obedience. The ideal class has a right and wrong narrative of reflection students aim to obtain, instead of focusing on honestly critiquing their study habits.This shows a need to focus on self-reflection and self-regulation practices. Mahlberg (2015) goes on to state that "It is reasoned that teachers who assign self-assessment encourage such self-regulation in students," (p. 774). This shows a connection between self-assessment and self-regulation. This is further encouraged by Meneske (2020). Meneske summarizes Zimmerman and Kitsantas when he says, "Self-regulated learners set goals, organize and use reflective strategies to attain their goals, manage and optimize available resources, monitor progress, and continuously reflect," (p. 184). These skills align with the learning objectives of the University Seminar Course, such as critical and reflective thinking, metacognition, and identifying and using campus we should be seeking out ways to encourage self-regulation. While this is the end goal of the course, I believe we were not encouraging these skills with the ePortfolio as it stood in the past. We were teaching students to be reflective; we were not bridging the gap between being reflective about our class and reflection about their college careers. We needed something to expand and deepen the scope of student reflection. Ultimately, I decided that using

ungrading practices would help facilitate deeper critical and reflective thinking practices.

I had previously delved deep into the world of contract and ungrading practices from the works of Inoue (2022) and Elbow (1996), so my natural inclination was to ask students to do their own assessment of their work. Elbow argues that

> *I'd rather put my effort into trying to figure out which actual activities or behaviors I want from [students] rather than trying to figure out the exact degree of quality of writing they turn in and hope that my grades will lead them to the right activities.* (p. 4)

I felt the same way about the ePortfolio project; the previous assignment was asking students to complete tasks, not encouraging reflection. It was at this time that I was introduced to Susan Blum's (2020) book *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead).* In this collection multiple authors make suggestions about, asking students to give themselves a grade. In every instance where the author has students determine their grades, the author notes improvements in motivation, metacognition, connections with out of class experiences, and better understandings of student learning. All instructors in the book who have students assess their learning include portfolios as a way to gather the students work for review, similar to the ePortfolio, but with the added benefit of giving each assignment purpose: the purpose of proving mastery of a skill. For instance, Schultz-Bergin asks students to do a goal setting like exercise in their portfolio, along with having them point to evidence of work which signifies mastery. While none of these authors called their assignments a grade defense, their observations were exactly what I felt had been missing from the University Seminar ePortfolio.

The implementation of the grade defense went in stages, as I refined the assignment to best meet the needs of my course. As I made changes,

I kept in mind the learning objectives of the course, including,

> Use critical thinking to analyze students own and their peers' assumptions about class content, leverage information to support success strategies, and provide logical informed plans for success; use critical, reflective, integrative thinking across multiple contexts and educational experiences; and employ reflective thinking strategies to learn from academic successes and failures.

The results of this work have been fruitful, and I therefore wanted to share my experience with others in the hope of encouraging more instruction in this manner.

The Grade Defense

I am including the directions for the grade defense portion of the ePortfolio with this article. Students are still expected to collect 10 artifacts of their learning, but in an ideal iteration of an ePortfolio, they will leverage their artifacts as proof that the grade they feel they should have is the one they deserve. The grade defense is meant to encourage students to review their work critically. Students should ask themselves "What did I learn from this artifact? What did I use from this class? What is this evidence of, and what am I taking away from University Seminar?" While students are not always highly skilled at using their assignments as evidence, I have seen an improvement in critical and reflective thinking demonstrated in the ePortfolio. We have a large amount of content to push through in a semester, often making it difficult to revisit previous work or ask students to be recursive about their practice. The ePortfolio provides an option for this, as students revisit previous work to use it in their artifacts, and then critically analyze their learning with these artifacts in the grade defense. If a student is working on the project as we encourage, they are collecting artifacts throughout the semester, storing them based on their use as an example of student learning. The grade defense

seemed the strongest option for encouraging students to leverage their semester's work to prove their learning.The change in student reflection was slight but immediate. At first, I was bombarded by statements like, "I had perfect attendance," or "I turned in all my assignments;" a completionist view of college curriculum I can only attribute to the system of K-12 education they were coming in from. But as I refined how I introduced the assignment, as well as explained what comprehension of a skill looked like, the answers became stronger. I discussed with my students how perfect attendance or completing all assignments did not prove mastery of the learning objectives. Students can, after all, complete all assignments but score poorly on them, or attend every class but not apply the knowledge gained to their lives. Instead, we talk about how memory works and the different levels of Bloom's taxonomy, so students see that there are different levels of understanding. We discuss the necessity for systems or routines instead of planners or alarms. We discuss what quizzes and exams are meant to measure in contrast to projects and essays, so students understand why they are given the assignments they are in specific courses. As I implemented this discussion at the beginning of the semester when I first introduce the ePortfolio, I have seen improvement in student responses. I have two exemplary defenses to share from among many examples my students created.

Student Example 1

> As briefly mentioned in my reflection, I had a large accident in which I still have not recovered from. Ever since the snowball downward, I have been put behind on assignments. This is no excuse, I understand, which is why I do not deserve an A or B. However, I do want to argue that I have learned the essential information this course offers. With my artifacts, I wanted to display that I am able to use the concepts and learning outcomes in multiple parts of my life too. From in other classes, like artifact 5, to real life experiences,

artifact 8. Every artifact includes a major part of either a learning outcome or unit learned in UNIV 1010. For this reason, I respectfully ask that I can pass this class with a C.

I want to emphasize here that the student actively referenced the learning objectives of the course and careful selection of artifacts specifically to support the grade defense. For example, the students 5th artifact are two math tests, comparing the difference between one score and another. The student references our 4th learning objective, "Employ reflective thinking strategies to learn from academic successes and failures." The student learned from their previous failure to improve their score. The student identified their own mastery of a learning objective in the grade defense.

Student Example 2

I believe I deserve an A in this class. As stated in the Fall 2022 University 1010 syllabus, 'this course exists to help meet the challenge of transitioning to college and enable you to be successful throughout the remainder of your college career.' As demonstrated in my note-taking artifact, I had struggled to develop a note system that worked for my teacher's lecture style. However, after learning about the Cornell method in University 1010, my notes had greatly improved in that class. By going out of my way, to implement what I have learned from this class, I have shown a successful application of this course material. I could easily be considered a 'good student' on the basis that I have completed all my work on time and have good attendance, but I show this example to prove that, not only am I attentive in class, but I represent a successful student of this class by actually applying what I have learned to overcome the challenges of my college career.

Again, this student references an artifact from the ePortfolio, as well as a situation which was not part of the University Seminar course. The notes they struggled to take were in a different class, meaning they learned to apply their University Seminar learning to outside classes and contexts. In comparison to the reflections I was getting when I first graded this assignment, the implementation of the grade defense shifted students' perspective and got them to think critically about their learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by implementing the grade defense I saw an improvement in reflection across all my sections of University Seminar. Students seemed to think about their artifacts more than just work they needed to complete but as lessons they can apply to other classes. I saw a new depth of critical thinking from students, as they considered how they could carry their work into their future courses. I saw honesty from my students about their engagement and investment in the class. I believe many instructors fear upgrading practice because they believe that allowing students to support the grade they believe they deserve will mean all students will give themselves an A. What I have seen is that many of the students in my classes deserve the A, their ePortfolios do demonstrate a commitment to exploring the content of the course and implementing the skills which best suit their learning style and needs as a student. I have also had some students be honest about how invested they were with the course, and they may grade themselves at a B or C level if they believe they either slacked off or had tribulations which disrupted their education. Something else to consider is that all ungrading practices involve having a dialogue with the student. All instructors contributing to Blum's (2020) book talk extensively about end of semester conferences where instructors have students further explain their portfolios. Before switching to a portfolio system of grading, I wish to further trial such a system

in subsequent semesters. This means that currently we still have a point system in place, and I am clear about the fact that I cannot change the points they have earned. When I switch to a full portfolio system, I will schedule conferences to discuss the portfolio and its success. No one is advocating for giving out undeserved grades, instead the goal is to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and demonstrate it. It is key to remember in this context that students are being asked to defend or argue for the grade they are giving themselves, and while the power of an A and its 4.0 status does make it appealing to all students, they will often dig deep to find the evidence for why they deserve the A in the first place, justifying their grade to you, and therefore for you. Finally, students have moved from a completionist view of grading with the old ePortfolio, to a learner's view of their skills with the grade defense. Students who used to think in terms of completion generally now think in terms of acquisition. Statements like, "I did all the homework," tend to be replaced with "I implemented," or "I learned." This shift to me signals a stronger reflection and deeper critical thinking, which are the hallmarks of what the ePortfolio and University Seminar is meant to do as a whole. While my exploration of this assignment is not complete, this is a chance to share my experience and to encourage those who may be on the fence about implementing upgrading practices in a course. We still grade on a point system, something I wrestle with constantly as I am pulled between the practices which will encourage student autonomy, of taking control of their education, and my position as introducing students to academia where they will face constant assessment in the form of point systems and letter grades. For the moment, the grade defense is my compromise, my chance to push students into self-assessment, while still replicating the grading that other instructors will use. In the future, this will be a strong grounded theory research project, but for now, I encourage instructors to ask students,

"What do you think your grade should be, and can you prove why you deserve that grade?"

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Appendix

Directions for the Grade Defense

You will write at least a paragraph stating the grade you feel you should earn in this class and a defense of why you deserve it. Use your artifacts and the course learning objectives as evidence for the learning you have done and the improvements you have made. Be honest about the work you have done, and critically analyze your accomplishments and trouble spots.

Types of Submissions

1. Research articles
2. Learning support program profiles
3. Best practices in teaching, advising, retention, student support, etc.
4. Reviews of books, articles, textbooks, educational resources (computerized and print)

General Guidelines

1. Send submission as an email attachment to jossronline@gmail.com.
2. Submission document should include the following: title of the article, abstract (maximum of 120 words), a set of 5-10 keywords for indexing the article, and the text of the article. Documents should be typed in Microsoft Word, 12 point font, double-spaced, one-inch margins. Articles should not exceed 6,000 words, excluding references. Reviews should not exceed 1,000 words. Multimodal submissions are also welcome; please contact the editor for information.
3. Authors' names should not appear on any of the pages of the article, but please submit a separate cover sheet that lists the title of the article, along with name, institutional affiliation, title, mailing address, email address, and telephone number for each author.
4. Acceptable documentation style is APA.
5. Articles should be original, unpublished works that are not under consideration for publication elsewhere.
6. Once your article has been accepted for publication and you are making your final submission, you should use a sample article to help in this formatting (except for the header).

Eric Niemi, Editor
Chattanooga State Community College

(Updated: 7/12/2022)

Journal example IMPROVING-STUDENT-RETENTION_article.pdf

Journal Example Case_Study_Getting_Lost_Along_The_Way.pdf

Respecting the Linguistic Diversity of Students

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Included in the discourse on equity and multicultural education is linguistic diversity. The United States is a country of immigrants who have brought their unique cultures, languages, and dialects. Banks and Banks (2016) contend that "immigration continues to be the primary form of linguistic diversity in the United States" (p. 189). The use of regional and cultural English dialects manifests an additional form of linguistic diversity. Banks and Banks (2016) reference