

THE TEACHING PROFESSOR

Grading: Alternative Approaches

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Students are very motivated by grades—we all know that. For that reason, it's useful to consider alternative approaches that might affect not just the motivation to get the grade, but the motivation to learn and develop important skills. Here are highlights from two articles that propose these kinds of intriguing alterations.

Math professor Vaden-Goad thought students might be more motivated to study and better able to succeed in introductory math courses if he allowed them to replace early grades with higher ones received subsequently. In one of his courses, students had quizzes every two weeks and a test every six weeks. If the test score was higher than scores on the quizzes, the test score could replace the quiz scores. In another course, students had four exams and a cumulative final. If a student's score on the relevant section of the final was higher than the test score, that section score on the final would replace the previous test score. After using a statistical analysis that teased out how much of the achievement gain was due to the approach as opposed to its positive effect on overall course grades, Vaden-Goad found the effect on achievement was positive but small. However, the effect on course retention was much more dramatic. In the replacement sections, more than 90 percent of the students completed the course, compared with less than 70 percent in the traditionally graded sections.

Vaden-Goad points out that this system does not directly deal with many of the self-defeating attitudes and behaviors that plague students in math courses, especially because this approach delays closure. Students may do poorly on an exam or quiz and they must wait and see if they can improve the outcome. Vaden-Goad says the value of the strategy is that it keeps students in the course and lets the instructor tackle negative attitudes and self-defeating study patterns.

In a marketing course, students participated in what the authors call a group-based assessment. Students were placed in groups by the instructor and were tasked to propose solutions to two different case studies. After writing their reports, the groups submitted them to the instructor for grading. During the next class session, based on those assessments, the instructor matched groups so that groups with a better report were linked with groups with a less impressive report. Using a grading rubric, the groups assessed each other's reports. At the end of the session, groups were given the instructor's feedback so they could benchmark their assessments against it. They were allowed to modify their feedback to the other group. In the next class session, each group received their case report with the instructor and group feedback. Based on that feedback, the groups were allowed to modify their reports and resubmit them for final grading.

These faculty researchers hypothesized that a number of potential positive outcomes would accrue from this peer assessment experience, including increases in autonomy, intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and actual performance in the course. Pre- and posttest data as well as survey results confirmed all their hypotheses. In addition they believe that involving students in the assessment process develops a number of important professional skills.

Both of these approaches are noteworthy for the way they seek to move students beyond just getting a grade. Both tackle attitudes that can prevent or impede learning, and both provide the opportunity to develop skills that will help with learning in other courses as well as in professional contexts.

References: Vaden-Goad, R.E. (2009). Leveraging summative assessment for formative purposes. *College Teaching*, 57 (3), 153-155.

Bicen, P. and Laverie, D.A. (2009). Group-based assessment as a dynamic approach to marketing education. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31 (2), 96-108.