
Grades versus Assessment

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The relationship between grades and assessment is not as straightforward as it might first appear. Typically, completion of a course, or receipt of a grade, does not in itself provide evidence of learning or meeting a learning outcome. The fact that a student obtains an “A” in a course does not mean that he or she has gained understanding or knowledge as a result of the course. For instance, the student may have entered the course with the understanding or knowledge required to earn an “A”.

Grades do not necessarily measure how much students know, value, or are able to do; how much they have learned due to a course; or, if learning has occurred, what elements impacted their learning most. Furthermore, because the way grades are determined can vary greatly among instructors and colleges, they usually cannot be used for comparison purposes.

An effective grading process can serve several purposes. It can enhance evaluation of student learning, can extend communication between the instructor and student, can motivate students to learn, can organize course concepts, and can be used to improve teaching. Grading, however, is a complex process, is never totally objective, and can greatly affect student learning, both positively and negatively. It is a “socially constructed, context-dependent process” that, at its best, “can be a powerful tool for learning.”

If the grading process is approached using rubrics (see Table I), where individual criteria are made explicit, are evaluated using a scale, and are used to foster improvement, then “the grading process is an excellent basis for direct assessment of learning”. Rubrics articulate criteria that instructors use to evaluate a specific assignment and these results can be used to communicate and compare aggregate results. As a result, instructors can determine specifically where students are having the most difficulty and whether, after adjusting teaching strategies, students improve on a specific criteria over quarters. Moreover, in terms of assessment, rubrics make grading public and analyzable.

Table I

A Simple Rubric for Evaluating Writing Mechanics

Criteria	Description	Score (1: <i>strongly disagree</i> to 5: <i>strongly agree</i>)				
1. Sentences and paragraphs	✓ Sophisticated sentence patterns are used. ✓ Paragraphs indicate shift in thought and are used to make sequence of events clear.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Word choice	✓ Words are used correctly and precisely.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Spelling	✓ Spelling is correct, including complex and irregular words.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Punctuation	✓ A range of punctuation including commas, apostrophes, colons, and semicolons is used accurately and effectively.	1	2	3	4	5

In order to use the grading process for the direct assessment of learning, Walvoord (2004) advises instructors to ensure that the assessment tool actually measures the learning outcomes. It must

state explicitly in writing the criteria for evaluating student work in sufficient detail to identify students' strengths and weaknesses; develop systematic ways of feeding information about student strengths and weaknesses back to decision makers...and using that information for programmatic improvement.

Using the grading process for the direct assessment of learning can be accomplished in a number of ways. For example, in a supportive faculty meeting environment, instructors can present their students' assignment, the written criteria (rubric) (see Table I), and the class's aggregate scores compared to previous quarters (see Table II), for feedback. Faculty can then make recommendations for improving student learning, and someone can take minutes of the meeting to record the exchange. The instructional changes that result from these sessions can later be documented.

Table II

Example Mean Aggregate Scores from an Assignment in a Writing Class

Criteria	Fall quarter 2004	Winter quarter 2005	Spring quarter 2005
1. Sentences and paragraphs	4	3	3.75
2. Word choice	2	3	3
3. Spelling	3	4	5
4. Punctuation	3	4	4

The example above illustrates how the grading process may be used for assessment purposes. Of course, grades also serve a purpose in evaluating individual student performance in a course because they summarize the level of the student's achievement of a set of outcomes. Grades inform students about how well they perform in a class compared to other students, yet without clear and detailed rubrics they do not indicate in which areas the student is strong or weak. For instance, in Table III, although all four students varied significantly on their final grades, all were successful in demonstrating criteria #3.

Table III

Relationship between Individual Student Grading and Assessment

Criteria	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Average of criteria
1. Sentences and paragraphs	5	3	4	3	3.75
2. Word choice	5	2	2	3	3
3. Spelling	5	5	5	5	5
4. Punctuation	5	3	4	4	4
Total	20	13	15	15	
Grade	A	C	B	B	

Therefore, if we want to understand student achievement of a certain learning outcome, we need to gather information specific to that learning outcome, repeatedly, over time. Finally, as a side note, at the program level, although only a few relevant learning outcomes are generally assessed, they are likely to be assessed in different courses at different stages of program completion.