(UN)MAKING THE GRADE: AN INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE TO MITIGATING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF GRADES WITHIN A NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT. Critics of the neoliberal university argue that grading undermines student learning. In this article, I survey the literature in order to ascertain whether such critiques are supported by pedagogical research. Investigating the relationship between grading and motivation, feedback, and autonomy, respectively, I conclude that grades most often do undercut learning. I explore the implications for instructors at Canadian universities, suggesting that abandoning grades is currently neither feasible nor best for students. I propose pragmatic adaptations to common grading practices that better promote learning and conclude that the implementation of less grade-centric assessment strategies is not only the best way to support student learning but also a way to challenge and mitigate the influences of neoliberal ideology in higher education.

(DÉ) CONSTRUIRE LA NOTE : LE GUIDE D'UN ENSEIGNANT AFIN D'ATTÉNUER LES IMPACTS NÉGATIFS DES NOTES DANS UN SYSTÈME UNIVERSITAIRE NÉOLIBÉRAL

RÉSUMÉ. Les critiques de l'université néolibérale affirment que l'évaluation compromet l'apprentissage. Ici, je complète un survol de la littérature pour déterminer si de telles critiques sont soutenues par des recherches. En étudiant la relation entre l'évaluation, la motivation, les commentaires d'évaluation et l'autonomie, je conclus que les notes ont un impact négatif sur l'apprentissage. J'explore les implications pour les enseignants des universités canadiennes, en suggérant que renoncer aux notes n'est ni faisable ni optimal pour les étudiants. Je propose des adaptations pragmatiques aux pratiques courantes qui favorisent davantage l'apprentissage et je conclus que des stratégies d'évaluation moins centrées sur les notes ne sont pas seulement la meilleure façon de soutenir l'apprentissage des étudiants, mais aussi atténuent l'influence de l'idéologie néolibérale.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt transition to remote teaching for Canadian university instructors, it was not entirely clear what this monumental shift would mean for higher education in the long term. As educators, now that we have the opportunity to reflect back on our collective unplanned experiment, there is widespread discussion about the ways in which our pandemic teaching experiences might compel us to reconsider aspects of undergraduate education that, before the pandemic, were often taken for granted (Champagne & Granja, 2021).

Among the many practices and assumptions that are currently being rethought, the issue of assessment has received considerable attention. Surveying the landscape of Canadian higher education, Champagne and Granja (2021) foreground the issue of student mental health, especially grade anxiety and its implications for academic dishonesty. Taking a broader North American perspective, Berkowitz (2021) highlights the problem of pandemic-driven grade inflation. While these are important reasons to reflect on our grading practices, some took the pandemic disruption as an opportunity to ask whether we should be grading at all. Indeed, two institutions with which I have been affiliated — Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario — organized community reads of Susan Blum's (2020a) *Ungrading* within the first 18 months of the pandemic. The essays in Blum's collected volume argue that students benefit most when grading — that is, assessing the quality of student work by assigning a numerical or letter value — is abandoned altogether.

Even as the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to scrutinize and revise the way we provide undergraduate education, it is important to remember that most of the issues under discussion are not new. On the subject of grading, some of the strongest critiques have traditionally come from those who see current grading practices as a harmful symptom of the long-standing influence of neoliberal ideology on the modern university, which is my main focus in this article. I take the reflective opportunity the pandemic afforded us to reconsider common grading practices in light of critiques of neoliberal influences in the post-secondary sphere.

NEOLIBERALISM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Neoliberalism has been the prevailing political and economic ideology in much of the developed world since the late 1970s and continues to dominate many aspects of modern society. As Harvey (2007) defines it, *neoliberalism* is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Within this capitalistic framework, the role of the university is not to facilitate learning per se but rather to prepare students

to participate in the knowledge economy as skilled workers (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberalism perceives education in economic terms. This conceptualization works in two ways, interpreting students as both resources and consumers. First, according to human capital theory, which is closely aligned with neoliberal theory, students are an economic resource. The expense invested in their education is expected to pay off in the form of skilled workers and economic growth for the society that has furnished them with educational opportunities (Gillies, 2015). Second, neoliberal ideology construes education as a business. In such a system, students are understood as consumers that universities must compete for through careful marketing and by catering to students' individual preferences (Norris, 2011, 2020).

The standard view of grading within such a model prioritizes quantification and measurement. Grading acts as a kind of quality assurance guarantee, with its implied promise to ready students for the knowledge economy. Universities are expected to certify students' level of learning (Kvale, 2007), standardize outcomes so that students can be ranked (Canally, 2012; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017), and communicate the relative ability of students to potential graduate schools and employers (Kvale, 2007; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Miley & Gonsalves, 2004). At the same time, grades are the primary way in which universities satisfy the desires of their student consumers. Grades and the accompanying credentials are the products that students purchase with their tuition dollars (Brown & Murphy, 2012; Kvale, 2007; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). For their part, students demand a return on their investment in the form of an education whose benefits they can measure in job market success and financial gain; personal growth does not typically feature among the priorities of these students (Norris, 2020).

Critics of the neoliberal model of higher education underscore the negative consequences of grades. They suggest that, rather than promoting learning, grades primarily compare, sort, and rank students while, at the same time, satisfying their consumerist preferences. In such a system, students are less likely to take on challenging classes that might lower their GPA (Brown & Murphy, 2012). They are also more likely to demand unearned high grades (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017), this because they understand themselves to have purchased a degree rather than paying tuition fees for an opportunity to earn one. Furthermore, grades undermine student solidarity, promoting competition and individualism (Canally, 2012; Pulfrey & Butera, 2013). In addition, the pursuit of high grades damages critical thinking and encourages passive submission to authority figures (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Tannock, 2017). Grading also undercuts students' desire to learn for learning's sake and has been tied to increases in cheating behaviours (Pulfrey & Butera, 2013; Tannock, 2017). Had they known about it, these same authors would surely have considered the possibility that the recent proliferation of ChatGPT-based academic dishonesty might, in part, stem from prevailing post-secondary grading practices.

These critiques of grading trouble the status quo of higher education and pose further questions. Do grades exert a uniformly negative influence on the learning of university students? And what does the scholarship of teaching and learning say on this matter? Drawing on evidence primarily from North America and the United Kingdom, and focusing exclusively on undergraduate university practices, I explore the pros and cons of grading through three interrelated pedagogically informed lenses: motivation, feedback, and autonomy. While there may be many possible arguments against grading — and, it is important to mention, the practice of grading long predates the onset of neoliberalism — I ask whether the arguments of those who oppose grading on anti-neoliberal grounds are supported by educational research. I then discuss the implications of my findings for undergraduate instruction in the Canadian university context, exploring the possibility of abolishing grades entirely, even as I consider other, less radical ways to challenge and mitigate the dominant role grades play in our current neoliberal model of higher education.

MOTIVATION

There is an immense body of research focusing on the relationship between grades and motivation, a representative sample of which I discuss here. Almost all of it concludes that, contrary to the common assumption that grades act as rewards to motivate student effort, grades instead undermine student motivation to learn and to work hard. In empirical studies, grades have been shown to decrease intrinsic motivation to learn, that is, motivation to learn for the sake of learning; learning for intrinsic reasons is usually contrasted with learning for some instrumental purpose, such as earning a scholarship or getting into graduate school (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; McMorran et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Furthermore, grades inhibit divergent thinking, that is, approaching a task in multiple, creative ways (Butler & Nisan, 1986). They also undermine the desire to do more than what is strictly required to preserve self-esteem in comparisons with classmates (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009), especially when a student consistently receives low grades (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). And they enhance anxiety and increase challenge avoidance (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Marcus & Tomasi, 2020; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009).

While there is considerable evidence that grades are demotivating, it is important to raise one caveat: Motivation also wanes if students receive no information whatsoever about their competence and the quality of their work (Butler & Nisan, 1986). In other words, receiving a grade is better for motivation than receiving nothing at all. In fact, one study (Trotter, 2006) even demonstrated that continual numerical evaluation throughout the term (by comparison with a single high-stakes end-of-term exam) enhanced learning and improved student motivation. This was because it allowed the students to fine-tune their own learning more effectively over time as opposed to only receiving information about their performance after the class had finished.

FEEDBACK

Trotter's (2006) study suggests that intrinsic motivation is not sufficient to ensure high-quality learning. Students learn better when they receive some kind of feedback. Not all feedback, however, is the same. Trotter's work effectively demonstrated the distinction between *summative feedback*, feedback received at the end of a task when there is no opportunity to apply it, and *formative feedback*, feedback that contributes to future work, whether through revising the current assignment or building toward the next. (For a more recent discussion of these two types of feedback, see Winstone & Boud, 2022). While both summative and formative feedback can be accompanied by a grade, Sadler (1989), who wrote a seminal article on the subject of formative learning, notes that "a grade ... may actually be counterproductive for formative purposes" (p. 121). Indeed, students are less likely to attempt to understand or even read the comments when a grade is included (Blum, 2020b), thus undermining any formative benefits of the feedback. In neoliberal terms, once a grade has been assigned, the student perceives the educational transaction as complete, rendering comments irrelevant.

The provision of formative feedback is linked to motivation. While grades usually decrease motivation, a description of the strengths and areas for improvement in a student's work, feedback that typically comes in the form of a written narrative assessment, has been shown to increase motivation to learn. The motivational benefits of comments, however, are primarily tied to feedback unaccompanied by a grade (Blum, 2020b; Chamberlin et al., 2018; Pulfrey et al., 2011). It is noteworthy that comments accompanied by a numerical or letter grade often lose their motivational benefits, as shown in research conducted by Chamberlin et al. (2018). This research suggested that a decrease in motivation might be explained by the fact that the presence of a grade eclipses the narrative feedback. Put differently, students in a neoliberal educational context are socialized to internalize the grade and ignore the comments. The work of Chamberlin et al. supports similar conclusions published by Black and William (1998), Lipnevich and Smith (2008), Pokorny and Pickford (2010), and Pulfrey et al. (2011), each of whom addressed the idea that letter or numerical grades inhibit the intended pedagogical benefits of comments. In short, grades are likely to undermine efforts to motivate student learning even when formative feedback is also provided.

There is much scholarship extoling the benefits of providing regular formative feedback, particularly when the feedback offers clear guidance on how to improve (Ambrose et al., 2010; Chalmers et al., 2018; Nicol, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Petty (2009) even notes that "formative assessment methods have some of the highest effect sizes found in education" (p. 85). At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge the many challenges to implementing formative feedback in a system that requires grades. Instructors and students often do not share a common vocabulary for describing assessment criteria used to generate formative feedback, which means that grades remain the default language used to evaluate performance (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Pokorny &

Pickford, 2010). Research also shows that the concept of formative assessment is not always well understood by instructors, particularly its relationship to the process of generating numbers and letters at the end of a term (Bennett, 2011; Black & William, 1998; Harlen & James, 1997). Again, this suggests that, while formative feedback has the potential to increase student learning, the current grade-oriented system undermines its positive impact.

AUTONOMY

Autonomy, also referred to as self-determination, is equally important for student learning, reinforcing both motivation and feedback (the two of which, in turn, reinforce autonomy). Grades are antithetical to a student's sense of self-determination because, within a system of assessment, they definitively establish the teacher's outsized influence over both classroom activity (Blum, 2020b; Sadler, 1989) and the students' future educational and employment opportunities (Goulden & Griffin, 1997). Grades can lead students to feel as though they have no agency in their own education. This loss of self-determination has been linked to decreased achievement, well-being, and persistence (Chamberlin et al., 2018), which has the potential to lower intrinsic motivation and cause shallow (viz., surface) learning (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). It can also be tied to increased performance avoidance, where students do not strive to achieve greater competence but instead work only to avoid appearing incompetent in comparison to peers (Pulfrey et al., 2011).

By contrast, instructional methods that emphasize student agency and de-emphasize the instructor's power to assign a number or letter to any given piece of work can have a positive effect on learning, even when the instructor will ultimately evaluate students' work. Examples of such methods include allowing students to choose the topic and format of a project, or having them engage in self-reflection and self-assessment. Activities like these help students to derive motivation from within themselves rather than relying on instructors to impose tasks and determine the value of those tasks. Such approaches can result in increased task interest, creativity, and psychological well-being (Chamberlin et al., 2018; Pulfrey et al., 2013). Whether or not a grade will eventually be assigned, instructors should provide information that enhances students' sense of competence — for example, through clearly written rubrics — thus locating the source of achievement and improvement within the student rather than with the instructor (Ambrose et al., 2010; Chamberlin et al., 2018; Pulfrey et al., 2013; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). In order to learn deeply, students must develop the capacity to monitor and evaluate the quality of their own work and, eventually, to regulate their own learning (Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 1989). Grades are most often antithetical to these goals.

In conclusion, a review of the educational literature on motivation, feedback, and autonomy demonstrates clearly that the detrimental effects of assigning letter

and number grades typically outweigh any potential benefits. The scholarship of teaching and learning broadly supports the critique of the influence of neoliberal ideologies on current grading practices. In the remainder of this article, I consider the implications of this consensus in the literature for the practices of instructors teaching undergraduate courses at Canadian universities.

SHOULD WE ABOLISH GRADING?

If grades are typically harmful and rarely considered helpful to student learning, the question arises: Should we abandon grading altogether? More than a decade ago, Culum Canally, then an instructor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, made an impassioned plea for faculty to do precisely this. In his 2012 anti-neoliberal opinion piece, Canally argued that even the most vocal critics of the neoliberal system are complicit through their continued use of grading. He went on to suggest that instructors "can use grading, or more specifically not grading, as an enormously powerful tool to resist the further imposition of neoliberal practices on public higher education" (Canally, 2012, para. 2). He urged instructors to promote a more cooperative classroom community, which could free them to focus on facilitating learning and undermine an unjust system wherein grades — which, he argued, "gauge students' obedience to a neoliberal curriculum" (Canally, 2012, para. 10) — determine employability.

In 2007 and 2008, in a well-known case, a tenured faculty member at the University of Ottawa, Denis Rancourt, did exactly what Canally would later advocate. Employing what he called "student-centred evaluation" in several physics courses, he awarded every student an A+ (Foisy, 2014, p. 10). In his own words:

> I explained that … it was necessary to remove the coercive and ranking aspects of grades, in order to create an optimized learning environment. I explained that, under these conditions, I fully expected that every student who commits to this method would experience exceptional results and that, therefore, I expected everyone to obtain A+. (Rancourt, as quoted in Foisy, 2014, p. 11).

Rancourt was dismissed by his employer for his failure to grade students objectively in accordance with the university senate's academic standards and marking scales. When the matter came before an arbitrator in 2013, the arbitration ultimately upheld the dismissal as well as the university's right to compel its instructors to grade in a certain way. According to the arbitrator (Claude Foisy), grading methodology did not fall under the umbrella of academic freedom (Foisy, 2014). The arbitrator's final decision endorsed the neoliberal function of grading (Tannock, 2017), emphasizing that it "differentiates the students and sets them apart one from the other and permits them to obtain bursaries, grants and in many cases, admission to post-graduate studies" (Foisy, 2014, p. 24). Here, the university's duty to sort, rank, and certify students in anticipation of their participation in the knowledge economy was unquestioningly upheld.

Rancourt's case set a sobering precedent for those inclined to heed Canally's call to reject the imposed necessity of grading in Canadian higher education. A handful of US colleges have implemented some form of gradeless assessment (Blum, 2020b), but as yet, to the best of my knowledge, no Canadian schools have abandoned grading entirely at the undergraduate level. Rancourt's example, along with other Canadian and US precedents mentioned in Foisy's decision, suggests that even tenured faculty, not to mention untenured or adjunct / sessional instructors, risk their job security when they completely ignore the grading guidelines established by their institutions. Advocacy for a gradeless system is certainly possible, especially for those with tenure, but simply refusing to hand in grades or, alternatively, assigning A+ to everyone in the class, is not a realistic course of action. Beyond questions of job security, we cannot ignore Foisy's reminder that students still require grades to be eligible for scholarships and apply to graduate programs, among other things. Doing away with grades does students no favours in the short term as it would impede their ability to navigate educational obstacles and pursue careers in our existing neoliberal reality.

It is also important to consider the impact of abandoning grading on student learning. In the Rancourt case, we do not know whether a guaranteed A+ helped, harmed, or had no impact on students' understanding of solid-state physics. Foisy's arbitration considered only the neoliberal imperative to rank and sort students and did not broach the question of educational outcomes (Tannock, 2017). Rancourt's own reasons for implementing his grading scheme — namely, to foster "genuine self-motivation"; accommodate students' individual abilities, interests, and aptitudes; reduce academic dishonesty; reward effort and creative engagement; and mitigate the typically uneven power dynamics between grader and graded (Foisy, 2014, p. 10) — are all laudable and certainly dovetail with research on the role of motivation and autonomy in student learning, as explored above. However, in light of the same research, it does not seem likely that awarding an A+ to all students in a course — "automatically without any possibility of getting a lower grade than that," as the arbitration decision describes (Foisy, 2014, p. 18) — is the best way to promote engaged learning in all students.

In short, avoiding grading altogether is not a feasible course of action in the current Canadian context. What path lies open, then, to somebody concerned about the negative impacts of grades on student learning? The remainder of this article is offered as practical guidance for the instructor seeking to balance the pedagogical imperative to support student learning with the neoliberal imperative to submit grades at the end of every term. Given that letter and number grades are, at least for now, a necessary part of university teaching, the principles of motivation, feedback, and autonomy offer practical guidance to instructors in designing assessments and feedback mechanisms to mitigate the negative impacts of grades.

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF GRADING

Research clearly indicates the importance of motivation, feedback, and autonomy for student learning and, at the same time, demonstrates that grades typically undermine all three. How best to support student learning in a system that requires grades? In consonance with the research, the simple answer is that instructors should withhold number or letter grades during the term even though they are required to submit them to the university (and reveal them to the students) at the end of the semester. A fuller answer adds that instructors must simultaneously provide frequent, timely, and thoughtfully detailed formative feedback that gives students an accurate sense of their strengths and weaknesses along with a set of strategies that empower them to improve. Moving progressively from small tweaks to completely restructured course assessments, I suggest several possible strategies that undergraduate instructors might use to incorporate these three principles into their classroom practices so as to support student learning.

One of the easiest ways to enhance student learning, even when a grade will ultimately be assigned, is to offer detailed narrative feedback that is initially unaccompanied by a grade. As I have already discussed, comments without a letter or a numerical grade tend to increase student motivation. Narrative feedback also supports autonomy by generating feelings of competence, helping students understand their own strengths and offering support in addressing areas of weakness (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Chamberlin et al., 2018). As I will outline, there are several ways in which instructors can ensure that students are able to do the work of internalizing feedback before they experience the potentially negative psychological impact of the grade itself. For example, even delaying the numerical or letter grade by a day or two, and distributing comments first, can increase the likelihood that students will benefit from narrative feedback (Chamberlin et al., 2018).

Beyond merely separating comments and grades chronologically, instructors can also create opportunities for students to reflect on the comments they receive and, in this way, increase their impact. Indeed, guided metacognitive reflection is an effective way to help students internalize and ultimately use comments to improve their work (Katapodis & Davidson, 2020). As Bowen (2017) explains, one way to encourage such reflection is by having students complete a "cognitive wrapper" before distributing grades (p. 113). This activity guides students in reflecting on their preparation and the feedback they received, with a view to articulating a strategy for future improvement. Importantly, students complete the cognitive wrapper before an assigned grade potentially skews their perception of their own performance. This also discourages comparison with classmates and focuses students' attention on the power they have over their own improvement.

Another way to increase student learning, even when assigning grades, is to emphasize the dialogic nature of assessment. In other words, if instructors construct a feedback environment that is conversational rather than unidirectional

(instructor → student), students are likely to feel more motivated and enjoy a greater sense of autonomy. Dialogic feedback typically creates an opportunity for students to respond to the feedback they receive, explain or justify their intellectual choices, and seek clarification from the instructor. As Nicol (2010) discusses in detail (see also Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), dialogue is the best way to ensure that both instructor and students are operating within the same frame of reference, as opposed to leaving grading criteria vague or unspoken. Nicol also explains that dialogic feedback allows students to request feedback in a certain format or on particular aspects of their work, which increases feelings of autonomy and deepens learning. One effective way to provide this type of feedback is in a face-to-face feedback conference, which has been shown to increase student understanding of feedback, especially qualitative criteria, and to increase their trust and engagement in the feedback process (Chalmers et al., 2018). These conferences can be done one-on-one or, in larger classes, with small groups of students.

Dialogue in assessment can also be generated through peer review (providing open-ended feedback) or peer assessment (determining whether work has met certain criteria or not). This is another way to provide feedback without assigning a numerical or letter grade while, at the same time, reducing the controlling influence of the instructor (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). For example, Katopodis and Davidson (2020) discuss their use of peer evaluation in class and explain how asking students to adopt the role of assessor improves their understanding of the course evaluation criteria and, by extension, their ability to apply it to their own work. Katopodis and Davidson use the evidence of their own experience to suggest that engaging in the assessment of peer work leads to both self-discovery and a more cohesive and supportive classroom community. While the competition encouraged by the grade-based neoliberal system has the potential to affect students' relationships with their peers negatively (Chamberlin et al., 2018), well-designed peer assessment activities are one way to circumvent this problem. Such alternatives place control firmly with students, increasing both intrinsic motivation and autonomy.

A more radical approach to "ungrading" is for instructors to decline to give students any grades until the very end of the course, using instead a system of contract or mastery grading (see Armacost & Pet-Armacost, 2003; Bergmann, 2013; Blum, 2020b; Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; Katopodis & Davidson, 2020; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Nilson, 2015). In both contract and mastery grading, the instructor lays out clear criteria for success on any given piece of work. Students pass if they meet all criteria and receive no credit if they fail to meet one or more. A contract grading system allows students just one attempt at each assessment (they typically have some ability to decide how many tasks to attempt and/or at what level of difficulty) and the final grade is calculated based on how many assessments were successfully completed. By contrast, a mastery grading system compels the student to attempt each assessment as many times as necessary to

succeed before moving on to the next. The final grade is calculated based on how far the student progresses in their learning. Hybrid combinations of contract and mastery grading also exist, allowing students the opportunity to resubmit only some assignments, or to resubmit all assignments a limited number of times.

Both systems have the potential to increase learning by focusing student attention on meeting learning objectives rather than obtaining a particular grade because there is no partial credit for work that does not meet all standards at a basic level. They also address motivation, feedback, and autonomy. They motivate students by providing small, achievable objectives with clear instructions about how to succeed. They offer regular, detailed feedback as to where the student sits in relation to learning goals. Finally, they promote self-determination, as students have the ability to set the pace of their own learning and, in many cases, the freedom to decide which objectives they will strive to meet (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; Katopodis & Davidson, 2020). For all of these reasons, a contract or mastery grading system allows instructors to prioritize learning and decentre grades while still satisfying the requirements of the university's existing administrative framework.

The alternative assessment strategies I have explored are summarized below (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. *Assessment strategies emphasizing motivation, feedback, and autonomy*

Strategy	Examples / Options
Narrative Feedback	No Grade
	Delayed Grade
	Delayed Grade with Metacognitive Reflection
Dialogic Feedback	Feedback Conference
	Peer Review
	Peer Assessment
No In-Term Grades	Contract Grading
	Mastery Grading

NOTE. The organization of this table is not meant to imply that these strategies are mutually exclusive. For example, initial narrative feedback could lay the groundwork for a subsequent feedback conference.

LIMITATIONS

While the suggestions I have just reviewed are likely to increase student motivation and autonomy through feedback and, therefore, deepen learning, none are panaceas, and each has potential drawbacks that instructors will have to consider. For example, narrative feedback and feedback conferences are time-consuming and not easily scalable for large classes. Peer feedback can vary in quality, especially if a student has not accurately understood the learning objectives or assessment criteria. As for contract and mastery grading, if not implemented carefully, they can introduce new forms of instructor control, undermining autonomy. Moreover, this bird's-eye view of different assessment strategies does not address potential discipline-specific challenges. For example, while not impossible, it is more difficult to give narrative feedback in a math course or to apply the concept of mastery in theatre arts. Instructors would have to adapt these strategies to their own subject matter and comfort level in ways that I have not discussed here. Nonetheless, all of these approaches have the potential to mitigate the harmful effects of grading described by critics of the neoliberal university and in the pedagogical literature.

POSSIBILITIES

In the long run, decentring numerical and letter grades in the classroom has the potential to create students, and eventually citizens, who possess the capacity to push back against the neoliberal forces that currently dominate the Canadian higher education landscape. Miley and Gonsalves (2004) discuss how the student obsession with grades represents a response to societal pressures. They contend that grades are the shorthand that allows students to communicate their worth to those outside academia, and to achieve socially sanctioned life objectives, typically economic ones. I argue that a shift away from grades and toward instructional strategies that centre motivation and autonomy through feedback can give students the ability to envisage goals beyond the ones a neoliberal view of education espouses. Less emphasis on grades can help students articulate a broader set of skills and aptitudes gained through scholastic pursuits that have value not just within the job market but also beyond it.

By fostering intrinsic motivation in the classroom, instructors can show students that they need not choose goals in response to extrinsic neoliberal economic pressures. In such an environment, students are empowered to assign their own values to education rather than tacitly accepting only those values society imposes. Similarly, by emphasizing student autonomy, instructors shift the focus away from comparison and competition, undermining the neoliberal compulsion to rank and sort. Greater autonomy also allows students to understand their own agency better both in the classroom and, hopefully, outside of it. Thoughtful, generous feedback promotes both motivation and autonomy and is key in supporting students in the process of becoming independent, self-directed

learners in their lives after university. Rather than relying on an instructor or a transcript to dictate personal worth in competition with others, students gain the tools to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. The student's sense of accomplishment and success is individual rather than relative, decoupled from the letter or the number the instructor assigns. In such a system, individual achievement is derived from meaningful learning; it is never simply the product the university offers to satisfy the desires of student consumers.

Drastic social change will not happen immediately, of course, and most of us will continue to assign grades in our classes. However, there is good reason to believe that attempts to challenge and mitigate the negative impacts of dominant models of assessment — those that resist an exclusive emphasis on numerical and letter grades — are part of an ongoing process that will eventually allow us to reconceptualize higher education and its role in society (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). Indeed, it is clear that the widespread disruption caused by the pandemic has already provoked changes in grading practices in higher education. For example, many Canadian universities allowed undergraduates to opt for pass / fail notation instead of grades on their transcripts (essentially, a simplified version of contract / mastery grading) as a response to the unique pressures and challenges that were created by the COVID-19 pandemic (Friesen, 2020; University Affairs, 2021).

Whether teaching in pandemic conditions or in our current post-pandemic reality, in choosing to resist the dictates of neoliberal ideology, each instructor has the power to change the ways in which they assess students that best align with their positioning within their institution and their own philosophical commitments. Even small (but significant and thoughtful) changes to assessment practices can help shift the university away from a paradigm whose social purpose is to sort and rank students-as-consumers and, instead, towards a paradigm whose highest ideal is to truly foster learning.[1]

NOTES

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