

MODELS OF INNOVATION & BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHING & LEARNING AT UND

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STRATEGY: Flexible Grading

CLASS(ES) AND CLASS(ES) SIZE WHERE UTILIZED SUCCESSFULLY:

Mostly, I only use this in Geology 103: *Introduction to Environmental Issues*. Enrolment is 80-100 each semester. I have done this on a smaller scale in a few other classes.

STRATEGY'S APPLICABILITY: WHAT KINDS OF STUDENTS (FRESHMEN/ MAJORS/ GRADS, ETC.), COURSES, LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS, ETC.?

This approach can be used in any class at any level. I think, however, it has the greatest impact on students who have yet to really figure out why they are at a University and how much they are responsible for their own learning.

ABSTRACT OR SYNOPSIS OF STRATEGY YOU ARE SUBMITTING:

I have developed a method I call flexible grading. Students decide what they are going to do to earn credit. They select from exams, papers, essay assignments, etc. So, they are responsible – not me – for how much effort they put in and the kinds of learning activities they undertake. They must make decisions and decide how hard they wish to work, and what grade they wish to receive. Flexible grading is different from contract grading, because students do not have to commit ahead of time to doing certain things.

Introduction

Our classrooms should be learning communities where students, helped by the instructors, work together to learn. More important, they should be places where students develop holistic skills that will aid them after they leave college. We can teach them to appreciate Chaucer or name the planets in our solar system. Such things are not, in themselves, of great value. If we are clever, however, we design our classes so students learn to think and reason – improve their intellectual skills – as they read the *Knight's Tale* or debate whether Pluto is indeed a planet. Still, we may not be giving our students all they need.

Many recent studies have shown the overarching importance of student commitment, effort and involvement during their college academic experience. These are, perhaps, the most important keys to positive student outcomes. Yet, most of us do not plan our classes, or teach in ways designed to promote these attributes. Rather, we decide, *often arbitrarily*, what students will learn or do to be successful in our classes. We decide how hard they are going to work and how they will be evaluated. In essence, we make what are, perhaps, the most important decisions instead of making students

decide for themselves.

It would be good if institutional policies and practices were aimed at promoting student commitment, effort, responsibility, motivation, involvement, etc. Unfortunately, that is not usually the case at the University, College or Departmental level. Making significant changes in these institutions is difficult. However, individual instructors do have the power to make changes in their classrooms. Flexible grading is one option, open to all of us, that can make a big difference.

There are a number of different approaches to “flexible grading” used by different instructors. In my classes, flexible grading means that students select from among different options, how they are going to be evaluated. Some instructors use a variant on flexible grading called “contract grading.” Using this scheme, students decide at the beginning of the class how they wish to be graded. That is their commitment, and they are expected to follow through. In my classes, they do not have to make a commitment ahead of time. They can do whatever they wish and can change their mind about what to do as the semester goes on.

In my *Environmental Issues* class, the only class where I have gone 100% to flexible grading, options include:

- 4 hour exams
- a final exam
- in-class quizzes
- weekly essays
- one or more book reviews
- journaling and life-styles projects

Students are free to select to do all, or some subset, of the above. For example, in principle, they can skip all the exams if they wish. (In practice no one has ever done this.) Of course, if they do little or nothing, they will fail the class. At the other extreme, students who only do mediocre work may elect to do more, so that their grade improves. So, students decide what they are going to do, when they are going to do it, what grade they wish to receive, and how hard they are going to work.

To aid students, I give them an overview and describe what my minimal expectations are if they wish to receive an A in the class, but I also tell them that they are free to substitute different activities as they wish. It is up to them. On purpose, I keep the grading scheme a bit vague because I do not want students to count points. Instead, I want them to feel that they can always do more and work harder, and that they will be rewarded if they do.

Students cite many reasons for liking flexible grading. For example:

- Students say they learn to identify the most important activities in the course
 - Students come to a better understanding of their own learning styles
 - Students feel that they are in control and are being treated as responsible
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adults

- Students may opt to “take a break” when necessary
- Students feel they are collaborating with the instructor
- Students are not competing with each other for grades

From my perspective, some benefits of flexible grading include:

- I am not responsible for making students do work; I simply offer opportunities
- Students are forced to make decisions for themselves
- Students become “excited” about what they are doing
- If students have out-of-town commitments, they can skip assignments, so I don’t have to deal with any make-ups, etc.
- Students are happy and appreciate having options

Besides the things listed above, there is one other huge benefit of using flexible grading:

- Students do much more work and work harder than they would in a class that is graded in a more conventional way

The list of exams, papers, etc. that I offer my *Environmental Issues* students is quite lengthy. I am not sure just how much work we can ask students to do for a class, but the list of options I offer in *Environmental Issues* is much greater than students would consider reasonable. If all the activities were required, all the students would drop the class. Yet, because everything is optional, many students complete nearly all of the assignments. There is no question that the quantity of student work increases. The quality, too, is better. In large part, I think this is because students do lots of work and get lots of quick feedback, thus helping them make changes and improvements. The improved quality is especially evident in their weekly essays – after writing 10 or more essays their writing and thinking are always much improved.

I am now into my fifth year of flexible grading. Things were a bit chaotic during the initial years but now I have a model that works quite well. I have found several things to be key:

- It is absolutely necessary to discuss “why” I use flexible grading with the students, and to make it clear just how much responsibility they have for their learning
- As the semester goes on, I must remind students that they have choices, but one choice they don’t have (if they wish to succeed), is to do nothing
- All assignments/activities must have absolute due dates; no late assignments are accepted
- Grading and providing students with feedback must be rapid
- Students need to know where they stand at all times so they don’t get to the end of the semester and find themselves unhappy

Because communicating expectations and grades is so important, I have a “living” syllabus on the web. I modify it and update it weekly, sometimes more often. It helps students keep track of all the different assignments and provides them access to their

class grade as the semester progresses. So, they know what deadlines are coming up, and they can see where they sit at any time.

Summary: Flexible grading is a powerful way to motivate students and to help them develop skills that will serve them for the rest of their lives. I believe all classes should be graded this way, but there are some problems with implementation that must be overcome.