ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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An opening question…

What are some potential limitations or challenges that arise from traditional grading schema (in which instructors mark student work with a number or letter grade based on the quality of that work)?

What are the limitations of traditional grading?

- Too subjective
- Has proven to result in negative outcomes on student learning
- Emphasizes a single score or letter over the process of learning and growth
- Cannot accurately represent student learning
- Encourages students to think only about scores and GPA (extrinsic motivation)
- Perpetuates hierarchies of supremacy (in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, language, nationality, ability, neurotype, etc.)
- Polices student thinking, learning, and writing through rewards and punishment
- Coerces students into performing rather than learning
- Introduces (and reinforces) the possibility of failure
- Reduces student agency

How to choose an alternative assessment practice?

1. Course goals
2. Logistical and institutional constraints
3. Pedagogical values

There is no perfect assessment system, so what are the affordances and drawbacks of each one?
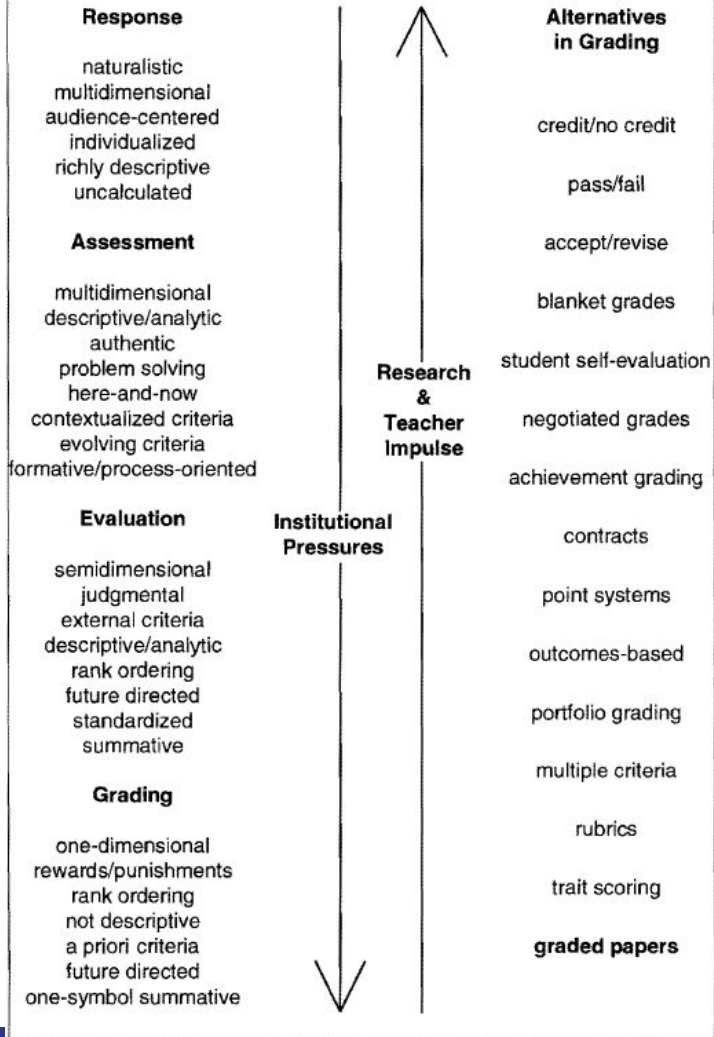
How can we approach experimenting with alternative assessments using curiosity & generosity?

Reflection

1. What are the goals and learning outcomes of your courses?
2. What logistical and/or institutional constraints do you have to consider?
3. What are your pedagogical priorities?

Degrees of Freedom

Alternatives to Grading Student Writing, edited by Stephen Tchudi, National Council of Teachers of English, 1997, p. xiii.

Response

naturalistic
multidimensional
audience-centered
individualized
richly descriptive
uncalculated

Assessment

multidimensional
descriptive/analytic
authentic
problem solving
here-and-now
contextualized criteria
evolving criteria
formative/process-oriented

Evaluation

semidimensional
judgmental
external criteria
descriptive/analytic
rank ordering
future directed
standardized
summative

Grading

one-dimensional
rewards/punishments
rank ordering
not descriptive
a priori criteria
future directed
one-symbol summative

Research & Teacher Impulse

Institutional Pressures

Alternatives in Grading

credit/no credit

pass/fail

accept/revise

blanket grades

student self-evaluation

negotiated grades

achievement grading

contracts

point systems

outcomes-based

portfolio grading

multiple criteria

rubrics

trait scoring

graded papers

Figure 1. Degrees of freedom in assessment, evaluation, and grading
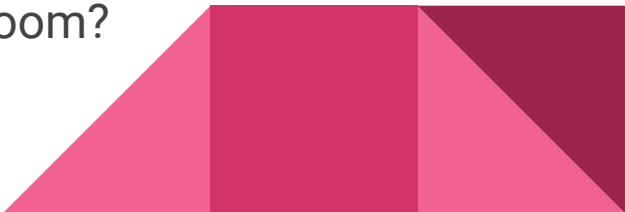
Assessment Ecologies

Asao B. Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (WAC Clearinghouse, 2015)

- Interconnectedness of people and places/environments
- Dynamic process, always in flux
- Building an equitable, sustainable learning environment
- Multiple moments for potential intervention

Possible interventions in the assessment ecology

- Where can I increase student agency?
  - Determining evaluative criteria
  - Assessing their own work
  - Revising and pursuing growth beyond a single score
- Where can I ensure equity in assessment?
  - What standards am I enforcing, and why?
  - Where am I demanding or coercing student performance?
  - How might I disentangle moral judgements about (and punishments/ rewards for) normative behavior from my classroom?

Reflection

1. What are some of the different elements (people, places, policies, projects, etc.) of your classroom ecology?
2. Where do you see possibilities for intervening in your classroom ecology to improve student agency or equity in the assessment process?

Some helpful terms…

- **Ungrading (AKA "going gradeless"):** an umbrella term for methods of classroom assessment that do not include grades (until the very end)
- **Contract grading:** a system in which students make a "contract" to earn a certain grade for the semester
- **Labor-based grading:** a system in which students are graded on the amount of work rather than the quality of work (measured in tasks or even labor logs)
- **Specifications grading:** a system in which students must meet certain specs to earn a particular grade on an assignment or for the class

Example 1: Ungrading with collaborative assessment

- Students began the semester by reflecting on their personal goals as writers and meeting with me one-on-one to discuss those goals
- Individual assignments were marked based on whether or not they met the core requirements
- Assignments that did not meet the core requirements could be revised
- Students met with me at the midpoint to discuss how they were doing so far
- At the end of the semester, students wrote a reflection on their assignments, participation, and growth/learning
- Students collaborated with me individually to determine their final grades

All assignments for this class will be marked on a scale of 0-3 that assesses not the "quality" of your work but rather whether or not your work meets the assignment guidelines and goals. You will still receive written feedback from me on your work, especially your writing, to help you grow as a writer and to let you know where you stand in terms of meeting the writing outcomes of the course. **Read all feedback carefully** for concrete suggestions on improving or expanding your future work.

    0—Missing (did not turn in any work)
    1—Unsatisfactory (turned in work that **does not** meet the assignment guidelines)
    2—Satisfactory (turned in work that **does** meet the assignment guidelines)
    3—Excellent (turned in work that goes above and beyond assignment guidelines)

Specific rubrics outlining the standards and expectations for each assignment will be provided on Canvas and discussed in class together. Since the assignment guidelines are an expression of the goals of the course, meeting those in your work (i.e. 2's and 3's) means that you are **doing great!**

Affordances & Drawbacks

The good:

- Students felt that they had more control over their learning
- I got to create better personal connections with students and help them achieve their own writing goals
- Lots of room for negotiation

The less good:

- Only worked due to small class size (10-12 students per semester)
- Some students interpreted the scores from 0 to 3 as grades and were still uninterested in reading my feedback

Example 2: Personalized project with collaborative assessment

- Students in upper-level courses designed their own semester-long projects to connect their goals to the course content
- They began the semester by setting career, educational, or personal goals and relating them to skills, knowledge, or projects for the class
- They determined the format, topic, timeline, and evaluative criteria for their projects in a proposal (and one-on-one conference)
- Frequent check-ins and in-class work days throughout the semester
- Each project was evaluated according to the student's personalized criteria by both the student and myself
- Our scores were combined to determine the project grade

Affordances and Drawbacks

The good:

- Some stellar projects that helped students advance their own goals
- Students learn skills of goal-setting, self-evaluation, time management, and metacognition
- Higher student investment in the project and learning outcomes

The less good:

- Sometimes difficult to honor students' self-assessments
- Requires more intervention and direction along the way (can be difficult in larger classes)

Example 3: Student self-assessment

- When introducing a new assignment, students are given access to the rubric and the learning outcomes
- After submitting their assignments, students complete a "reflection and self-assessment" template which includes
  - Programmatic reflection questions
  - The rubric
  - A space to write a short paragraph reflecting on their work and using the rubric to holistically determine a letter grade
- I provide in-depth feedback and, if necessary, adjust the grade

Affordances and Drawbacks

The good:

- Students can rely on their own understanding of the assignment & deploy agency over their learning
- Students practice skills of self-evaluation and reflection
- Can reduce anxiety

The not so good:

- Can run into problems if the assignment or any relevant skills/content have not been fully understood by students
- Some students still don't read my feedback
- Can create anxiety

Up next… Specs?

- GT Writing and Communication Program courses have 3 major "artifacts" (projects), an introductory assignment, and a portfolio
- Set up specifications for each artifact that include submission guidelines, turning in "process assignments" on time, and opportunities to raise or lower that base grade
- Additional specifications for attendance and participation

Questions?

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