

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Volume 1  
Issue 29 *Winter 2020*

Article 6

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February 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Guberman, Dan "Grading Together: Toward a Partnership Approach," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 29 (2020), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss29/6>

## **GRADING TOGETHER: TOWARD A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH**

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My engagement with the literature and theory regarding student-faculty pedagogical partnerships began shortly after I transitioned to a career in faculty development, when I found myself not teaching undergraduates for the first time in a decade. Partnerships seemed magical, as I attended conference sessions, read essays and articles, consulted with instructors, and reflected on my own varied experiences. Partnership promised a pathway toward enacting a model of critical pedagogy described by hooks and Freire that could be practical and comprehensible to my students. Despite this excitement, I also understood that often my best intentions in designing a learning experience for my students never quite materialized in the ways I imagined.

After nearly three years in faculty development, I returned to teaching undergraduates in a new setting: one of numerous sections of an introductory oral presentations course. I had never taught courses specifically focused on communication and/or presentations before, nor had I ever really taught within a system that demanded this level of consistency across so many sections. While I knew that I could borrow and/or design classroom activities centered on practicing a variety of communication and presentation skills, I felt a sense of imposter syndrome when it came to assigning grades and achievement levels to components of speeches that I had not considered before.

Striving to bring to bear the partnership principles I had begun to explore as I returned to teaching, I took steps toward developing a partnership structure for assessment and feedback. While still conforming to the strictures of a shared syllabus, working toward partnership with students allowed me to feel more comfortable assessing student performance outside of my expertise, and to create a learning-focused classroom environment. In this short essay, I share a reflection on the frustrations I had experienced with my traditional approach to offering feedback and grading and my experiment with grading together. I offer this story as an example of moving toward greater partnership with students.

### **Grading was frustrating**

Most of my greatest teaching frustrations involve grading and giving feedback. These frustrations appear in multiple forms. When teaching writing intensive classes, I would create many small writing assignments and write detailed feedback, designed to demonstrate my engagement with students' ideas and to help guide future improvement. I always enjoyed giving feedback as a way of connecting directly with students' ideas, particularly for those students who might not speak up in class. However, from my perspective, students rarely engaged with this feedback in a meaningful way, and the ones who did often had no avenue for communicating this engagement with me (only one or two assignments each semester involved revisions). In the context of these writing classes, my frustration was amplified when I would hear students speaking about their perception of different expectations for writing between my colleagues and myself. While we knew that our expectations did not differ dramatically, the type and nature of feedback that we provided led students to assume we were looking for different things. As a result, students felt that

they should tailor their work to the supposed whims of a particular professor, rather than developing writing skills rooted in our shared discipline that would be valuable in numerous situations. Responding to these frustrations, I experimented with different modes of providing feedback, from filling out rubrics, to writing short paragraphs, making inline comments on text, and even recording videos of myself talking through elements of a paper.

Looking back, I suspect that all of these were flawed in that the vast majority of students focused on the numerical grade they received, and they only paid attention to the feedback or engaged me in discussion when the grade measured meaningfully lower than they expected (and even in these cases the discussions rarely engaged productively with my comments). I don't blame my students for this. They were navigating the teacher-student relationship as best they could in order to be successful in a culture that focuses primarily on grades, which may or may not be directly tied to their learning (or their perception of their learning). There were no real elements of partnership in this dynamic.

### **Teaching in a new context**

When I returned to the classroom, I found myself in a rare position for an instructor, as I was teaching a class outside of my discipline and comfort zone. I volunteered for the opportunity to teach an introductory presentations course required across the campus. Students had regularly delivered presentations in my history courses, and I took them seriously, having meaningful discussions about how to structure effective presentations, how to practice, how to deal with nerves, etc. But, preparing to teach this course made me aware that I always placed sharing class-relevant content above other elements of presentations. I was accustomed to grading student presentations almost entirely on their content (they tended to be very low stakes to minimize stress), and now I was going to be grading high-stakes presentations on structure and style.

### **Grading together**

For the first of five presentations, I followed the guidelines for nearly 100 other instructors on my campus. I grade normed with a group, by examining recordings of presentations. I recorded my students' actual presentations so that I could combine real-time notes with reviewing the recording to fill in a detailed rubric. For about half, I collaborated with the lead instructor to help ensure that I was continuing to align with expectations and giving appropriate commentary. Much like my experiences with papers in the past, I received little response from the students. On the one hand, I could interpret this as meaning that my commentary and feedback met my students' needs, but my experience and our discussions led me to believe that they were not really engaging in a meaningful way with the feedback because that assignment was in the past and they had to focus on the work ahead of them. There was still no partnership in the dynamic.

When we approached the second presentation, I decided to change my strategy. Since all of the student presentations were recorded, I could see that they were not watching their presentations to understand their grade and feedback. In my own experience, I learn significantly more from watching videos of my presentations than from feedback or discussions regarding my memory. I

decided that I would build this into the process. Before I provided a grade, students would need to either meet with me to watch the video and fill in the rubric together, or they could watch it on their own and fill out the rubric to submit to me. In both of these cases, I told them that I would follow their lead in terms of their grade. Self-evaluation is not necessarily radical, but giving students meaningful control over the evaluation process and their grade represented a meaningful shift in mindset, especially for first-year students at a large STEM-focused research institution. These presentations accounted for the majority of students' points throughout the semester, so this structure largely put students in control of determining their grade for the course. I intended this to be a step toward providing structure that supported more of a partnership approach.

### **The highs and lows**

For the first presentation that I graded with my students, slightly fewer than half chose to meet with me. Overall, these experiences were very positive from my perspective. The assignment asked them to explain something they were familiar with to a fifth-grade audience. This served a dual purpose in my meetings. It allowed me to learn more about their interests and open possible paths for discussion and building relationships that could inform my teaching. It also meant that we could have meaningful discussions about how the presentation might be received by an audience removed from ourselves. Instead of me pointing out something I didn't understand, I could ask how they think a fifth-grade student might interpret their explanation. While the presentations were approximately 5 minutes, our meetings took about a half hour— a significant, and worthwhile, time commitment. The discussions centered around our common rubric, which asked a series of questions (e.g., How effectively did the opening grab the audience's attention, or how did physical gestures contribute to the audience's understanding) and offered a series of values (poor, average, good, excellent). I realized that framing the discussion around questions and using words rather than points helped students evaluate their work more honestly (I assured them that the total grade was not some addition of points, but holistic based on the 15 questions posed). This approach also put us into dialogue, with me learning from them about their process.

Student grades tended toward homogenization during this process, as many viewed their work as good. They were unwilling to rate themselves excellent when sitting next to me and needing to explain it, except in a few categories where they felt particularly confident (visual aids most commonly). They also seemed unlikely to use "average" (which in the future I would replace with "acceptable" or "sufficient") or "poor" unless it were an area where they felt that they really left something out (e.g., not including verbal citations). At first, I worried about this, but I began to develop effective strategies, such as asking them what would make their presentation excellent in a particular rubric category. Often these discussions revealed insight into how intentions did not align with the final product, enabling us to identify strategies that addressed specific concerns. I also realized that in students' explanations, they often explained their thinking and strategy in a way that I might not have noticed as an observer. At times, I explained why I didn't think that strategy worked or was effective, but other times it enabled me to view the presentation through another lens that challenged my own assumptions about their work. Doing so highlighted nuances I might have overlooked while grading in a traditional mode. What I came to realize at the end is that grades may have been slightly higher in my section due to this practice only because I was engaging with student work in a more meaningful way by developing a deeper understanding of

their work. The students and I were engaged in more of a dialogue; my understanding and evaluation of their work unfolded through an exchange, as opposed to taking the form of two separate processes: their producing their work on their own and my evaluating on it my own.

As the semester progressed and many students participated in these meetings more than once, I could tell that they were trusting me more. Instead of focusing on what went well and ways to improve, we started having more honest discussions about challenges. The fourth of five presentations seemed weaker than I expected from many students, and I was not certain what to make of it at the time. I knew that each presentation increased in difficulty, but I still expected higher-level work. In many of the meetings, I learned that my students, mostly second-semester, first-year students, were dealing with a significant ramp-up in stress and requirements for other courses at the time. In these cases, often they quickly identified the challenges and problems that I might have shared in reviewing their presentation and giving traditional feedback. Our discussions were valuable because we could then talk about strategies for effectively balancing workloads across classes as well as specifics regarding how to effectively prepare for a presentation with limited time (in our focus on excellence, we often overlook helping students with strategies to produce sufficient work efficiently). Through this dialogue, I learned more about students' experiences as those informed their work for my class, enabling me to evaluate their work within a different frame.

While my overall experience was highly positive, both for myself and my students, there were still problems and challenges. I vividly remember one meeting, the first such meeting with this particular student. It seemed as if every suggestion or inquiry I made was met with a need to defend assigning themselves an exceptionally high grade. After the first five minutes of this meeting, I could tell that my approaches to engaging in a meaningful discussion were not really impacting the student's perspective, and rather than escalate into a significantly larger conflict, I chose to de-escalate and only try to nudge where able or where I could point to very precise elements. I left this meeting deflated, questioning if the whole endeavor was a failure. Certainly in this case, the student both did not learn the lessons I had hoped (at least as far as I could tell), and they received a higher grade than deserved (although not so much that it would meaningfully affect an end-of-semester grade). Since this experience, I have written and practiced short speeches for these types of situations, with the hope of turning them around at the moment to be more productive.

I also struggled at the end of the semester. One of the things I felt really good about in my discussions was a sense that we really focused on learning and improving presentations. We would be able to talk about changes between different presentations and goals for future presentations, and the actual numerical grade seemed less important (thanks to a well-structured rubric). While other instructors discussed problems with students frequently complaining about grades, this never happened in my section. This changed at the end of the semester, when I started to receive emails focused solely on points. Partly, I felt sympathetic with many of these students. I had seen them make significant strides, and if grades were designed to really reflect learning they deserved top grades, but ultimately, grades were based on points accumulated throughout the semester, and some of these students demonstrated significant growth, after struggling early. Others fell slightly short of grading barriers (the class had no +s or -s, so the line between an A and a B felt particularly harsh). This meant that while I felt very good about the discussions we had about

learning and development throughout the semester, at the end these discussions felt undermined by the imposition of a traditional grading schema. Unfortunately, these discussions about grades were the last discussions I had with some of my students. These experiences highlighted how traditional structures prevent us from moving toward more of a partnership approach.

## **The future**

Ultimately, I think that this approach offered a strong initial experiment, but some significant limitations in the shared course structure hindered some of the possible benefits and ultimately made the co-grading structure less effective and meaningful for those students whose grades ended up below the cutoff from an A to a B. It also made clear how challenging it is to work toward partnership within a structure that does not readily accommodate or support it. Going forward, I see three primary ways to enhance this practice and move it further toward a partnership approach.

First, planning from the beginning and laying out clear frameworks and goals for our discussions would help to ensure that these conversations are more fruitful. If students were involved from this beginning point, we would have a better chance of creating a partnership dynamic and structures that support it. This approach would also help me address those situations where I feel that the student has entered the meeting with an attitude that is not conducive to learning through our discussion because we would have agreed from the outset on frameworks and goals.

Second, I do not have time to meet with everyone, nor do I want to compel students to meet with me. In each case, I gave students the option of filling out the rubric on their own (including comments for each prompt). In one case I asked them to answer a series of broader reflective questions, which was not as successful, but I think has promise. I need to refine alternate options for showing meaningful engagement and reflection on their presentations, as well as think about whether any particular type of engagement should be required. Developing these options in collaboration with students would also move this practice more toward partnership.

Third, and more broadly, this whole process remains undermined by the overall grading system based on points at the end. Moving entirely to an ungraded structure, in which students more directly determine their final grade for the course, would allow for more opportunities for direct reflection on growth and development throughout the semester. Developing a clear rubric with students and ensuring that we all understand the criteria for achievement would be key here.

Overall, I need to find ways to gather and integrate student voices and perspectives more directly throughout the process at multiple stages. We had discussions about our feedback meetings, but I did not systematically capture shared thoughts. My end-of-semester evaluations indicated that students found these discussions helpful, but only through open-ended questions, so many voices were not represented.

Finally, I should have constructed and articulated a plan for following up directly with students after the semester to track their thoughts throughout and after their engagement in this process. Then the reflection on the experience could also have enacted more of a partnership approach, with all of us analyzing the experience we had co-created.