DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF STUDENT AND FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Students today require more than a presentation of the reading materials in a given course. Despite some students not reading and preparing for the class, educators try to create an engaging session that should include an assessment of the material to ensure student learning. An issue may be the lack of understanding about the differences between grading and assessments. Grading presents many opportunities to introduce bias, which makes grading an indirect method of measuring student learning. To ensure student engagement and learning of the material, educators must go beyond grading to assess the learning process. This means that the material must be informative and cause reflection and introspection by the student. To accomplish this, educator must understand the difference between direct and indirect assessment to understand how to effectively measure student response to the material. Further, educator should use co-curricular activities with multiple teaching methods to engage the student and generate the greatest take away of knowledge. This includes the use of case studies, scenarios, discussion, and other assignments to stimulate the learning process.

KEYWORDS: Assessment, Classroom activities, Engaging faculty, Engaging students, Grading

INTRODUCTION

Grading and assessment cover two different aspects of education. Each has their place within academia. However, educators need to understand the difference in order to generate the required learning for students to successfully complete courses and programs. This requires a different view of the education process and how educators present material for future recall by the student. This requires multiple methods of presentation and activities to help the student make the connection between the theory and the application of the material to generate the greatest take away of knowledge. By understanding the differences between grading and assessment, educators can improve student learning and the recall of knowledge to generate the greatest opportunity for success by the student.

GRADING

Grading is the act of assigning a rating to indicate the worth of work completed. In essence, it evaluates student learning based on the perceptions of the educator. This can occur with defined rubrics or scales. However, it will still depend on a subjective view of the work through the expectations created through the prism of the educator’s knowledge. The individual grading the work defines what
constitutes sufficient depth of a subject, which varies based on the educator’s perception. Grading, as perceived by the educator, attempts to measure a student’s proficiency in a given subject through a point based evaluation. The guiding structure for this measurement involves an objective. Is grading a reflection of learning or the ability to meet an objective as defined by the course? Each grader interprets meaning in the answer given based on the interpretation of the objective, but varies by the individual educator. Two individuals reviewing the same assignment will use their individual experience and knowledge to generate a rating or points. Is one better than another or are they simply different perceptions of the same answer? Even with the use of a rubric, the process remains subjective. Moving this subjectivity to objectivity requires work and practice on the part of graders through a process called norming.

Norming requires the graders to evaluate several papers individually, and then collaborate on the grading with the other graders. This establishes a quasi-standard used by the group for specific types of papers. However, this process only generates results for short period. The norming process requires continuous effort to ensure consistency between graders and assignments. What is the quantitative difference between an A and a B or for that matter an A and an F? Is it student knowledge or the proficiency in answering questions on a test or the restatement of facts in a paper? Students learn how to answer questions and generate paragraphs of information through the recall process that exists in short term memory and long term experience. The process involves re-assessment of past events with application to the current situation or question. This process is prone to error as students make incorrect association as the time increases between material presentations and recall. A quite interesting reference to deepen processes ‘recall’ is Human Memory website.

A multiple choice question may further trigger some memory, which could reflect a correct answer, but is the student guessing or does this correct answer reflect learning? Further consideration about grades involve factors outside the written word. Does the grade include a late penalty? How does a late penalty assess the knowledge learned? It is a punitive method to enforce compliance to timeframes or deadlines. This is important in the work environment. Some educators attempt to employ similar requirements in the academic arena to help develop work habits. Additionally, some schools use the concept of an accelerated course and therefore cannot allow for late work. This may be true in courses that continue to build on concepts learned each week, but it does not assess learning. Additionally, does poor grammar reflect a lack of learning in a course? Poor grammar may distract educators when evaluating a written assignment. The grammar could create difficulty in understanding the intent of the material. This could lead to the student receiving a poor grade, but this does not reflect learning. It indicates the inability to present learned material in a written form. How does poor sentence structure and word choice reflect a student’s understanding or a specific concept or objective?

Grading also comes with some inherent problems. Placing a grade based on effort is essentially a generosity gift to the student as it lends itself to leniency. There are times when rewarding effort could stimulate an attempt by the student to learn the material. This could lead to learning or at least gaining some understanding of concepts. However, without making the connection between the theory and the application, any short-term gain will diminish over time resulting in no long-term retention and recall.

The question is whether the educator consistently applies a grade to effort for all students. Limiting the application to one or a few students could create an atmosphere of preferential treatment or favouritism. These could be destructive for some students as the action could lead to resentment or self-esteem issues. Consistency in grading becomes critical for the students and the educator. One example of favouritism is the halo effect, which is a type of cognitive bias (Thorndike, 1920). Do to specific traits or abilities, an educator views all work produced by a student in a favourable light based on the generalization, not necessarily actual work produced. The underlying theme is leniency without merit. Opposite to the halo effect is the horn(s) effect. This is also a type of cognitive bias based on specific traits or abilities. However, the focus is from a negative perspective. Despite the best efforts of the student, the educator exhibits criticism of the work produced based on preconceived assumptions. This could result from something the student said or did in a course or simply be a response to physical characteristics of the student. Perhaps the student has a different viewpoint than the educator on a topic that has now tainted all work produced, as the educator is over critical. Rater drift is another concept that has a direct impact on grading. As educators grade assignments, there is a natural tendency to drift along a continuum that goes from lenient to strict or vice versa. The educator may initially start in what they consider a neutral point based on a rubric. As the educator begins grading papers, the expectations can shift in either direction to a point of leniency or being over critical. The shift could be so subtle that the grader does not realize what has occurred. The result though is a drift from the neutral position thereby creating inconsistent grading.

Another concept to consider with grading is contrast bias, which falls under cognitive bias. This occurs when an educator grades one to a few papers and makes assumptions and applies this to the remaining papers. This could result in being too lenient or over critical when grading the remaining papers, which leads to differences in criteria and expectation. Like it or not, students will discuss and share papers. This means that those differences in grading criteria become apparent and a point of contention for the students and then the educator. Improving the Grading Process

Overcoming these problems in grading requires some effort and action by the educator. The first method involves time management. Educators do themselves and the students a disservice when they conduct marathon grading sessions as fatigue can alter perception of the material, which leads to variations in grading. Procrastination is one of the greatest time management issues, which could lead to compromise in the grading process. Educators could skim a paper instead of reading the entire paper. This is a disservice to the student. They took the time to write and present the assignment. Avoid waiting to the required deadline to grade. If there are many papers, do a few at a time to minimize fatigue. Some papers may be exceptionally difficult to grade due to grammar or other factors. After
grading one of these papers, stop and take a break. Find a distraction that can clear the mind to avoid applying the frustration to the next paper. Otherwise, the next few papers may receive the brunt of the frustration with one of the grading issues presented. A good practice when grading is to go back over the first few papers graded to ensure addressing any grading drift or bias. Another good practice is to use a rubric that clearly presents the differentiation in a score. For example, the rubric may present an objective with a level 0 through 3. A zero would indicate a lack of discussion on a topic. A one could indicate a general presentation of the topic. A two would indicate that the topic presentation included some analysis without support. A three would indicate analysis with current literature support. This scoring would apply to each of the objectives in the rubric. Ensure the separation of grammar from content to prevent the grammar from being the focus of the overall score. Sample scoring by educators teaching the same subjects or within a program ensure some consistency in how grading occurs. This is the process called normalizing mentioned previously. This process should be on going. Every month or quarter, the group should review a few papers individually, and then discuss the result as a group. Each member explains their scoring rational to the group. The result should be an increase in grading consistency with these graders.

**Grades do not reflect all learning experiences**

Students come to the classroom with prior knowledge, skills, and preconceived notions that affect how they will process the material presented in a specific course. This affects the take away from the material as they attempt to apply the theory and concepts to their knowledge base and experience. Only through this reflection, can a student view the current knowledge through the prism of their experience to gain the greatest understanding and application. A lack of reflection decreases the meaning of the material presented and therefore leads to no significant recall later. Student learning begins outside the classroom with personal and professional experiences. These create a perspective for comparison of the course material. As life for the student changes based on different circumstances, the perspective will change, which causes constant modification of how the material is accepted and applied. Add to this, the interactions with peers and any co-curricular programs or activities. This provides the needed knowledge to help with the assimilation of the course material and future recall.

**Assessment**

Assessment, as stated in Suskie (2009) is non-empirical research into student learning. Assessment attempts to improve student learning through evaluation of what students learn in a course and a program. Patterns will develop as assessments occur that allow for improvement of the educational process. The idea is to assess learning with tasks and activities throughout the course and program to determine what material students understand and can apply. The process of learning requires the introduction of material, followed by reinforcement, which leads to mastery. Assessment provides the opportunity to measure the learning process at each of these stages. The important point is that at a designated course in a program, the student dis to demonstrates mastery of the concepts through application. Assessing the learning process through each of the stages allows for modification of courses to adjust the method and speed of material delivery to ensure the greatest take away by the student and achieve the desired level of mastery. Therefore, the education process requires constant learning and reinforcement by the student and assessment by the educator to ensure success of the program. Educators should not treat each course as a solo event as the course is part of a program. Concepts from previous courses should be a part of the current course as reinforcement and connections between the past and present concepts. This helps the student make the connection between the materials as they move towards the capstone or end of the program. Likewise, the introduction of future course concepts helps to build connections and generate engagement by creating the continuum of material by the student. This strengthens the assessment of learning and meeting the program objectives. The point is that all educators need to understand that they are teaching in a program, not just a course. Fulfilling course objectives is only part of the educator’s job. The program objectives are just as important as the student does not get a degree for a given course. Therefore, assessments include the whole program as well as each course to ensure the greatest learning opportunities for the student in preparation for future application of the knowledge.

**Grading and assessment criteria may differ**

Grading is behaviour and activity based, while assessment is knowledge and learning based. There can be overlap of these two principles as grades review outcomes related to objectives while assessment relates to knowledge and skills gained in a course and a program. Grades may include points for attendance, participation, and effort, which may not be a direct reflection of learning. However, they are a reflection of school policy and accreditation. Think about co-curricular activities that complement the learning process. These involve learning experiences outside the classroom that may present additional perspective on a topic or concept. For example, attending a conference or seminar on a course topic provides additional perspective from the work environment. Likewise, field trips could generate real world perspective that helps to generate the connection between theory and application. This leads to long-term retention and future recall. Therefore, grading and assessment each have their place in the academic arena. However, grading is a reflection of short-term retention, while assessment relates to long-term recall. The activity educators use to generate student learning should be more towards assessment than grading when evaluating active learning.
**DIRECT AND INDIRECT EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING**

Direct evidence of learning involves clear and compelling indications of knowledge gained. These could include scores on national exams, student portfolios, simulations, scores gained between the start of a course and the end of the course, and observations of student behaviour, case studies, and student reflection. The key is that they provide a direct evaluation of student learning and understanding based on the objectives.

A good example of this involves an exam that asks questions about expected knowledge. The student completes the same exam at the end of the course. Assessing the difference in score could indicate increased knowledge. However, if the educator focuses on the questions asked on the test, the increased score would be a poor learning indicator. Therefore, aligning the construction of this pre and post test to the objectives of the course is critical. The material should involve concepts usually presented in the course to ensure reliability of the result.

Indirect evidence may not be as compelling and includes grades, graduation rate, self-reflection, and a list of others similar functions. It does provide some value to improving learning and the education process, but this is limited to subjective evaluation by the educator. There is no direct link to student learning. The educator must speculate on the extent to which the student gained knowledge about the concepts and material presented in the course. Consider that some students do well on exams while others may struggle. Likewise, some students struggle with public discussion while others do well. The key is providing multiple methods to determine student learning.

**WHAT MAKES A GOOD ASSESSMENT?**

A good assessment involves direct evidence of learning. It shows that a student understands the connection between the material and the application. This is a key indicator of learning. First, there is no perfect assessment in existence. The point of assessment is to ensure that the student achieved the learning goals. The goals must be clear and specific to ensure conveying the importance of the goals to the student. These also help the students learn more effectively.

The next point is to ensure the student showed growth and progress in their knowledge. Have the student express what they find most valuable as this will help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the material and methods used to help the student achieve the desired goal. This adds accountability and validation for the educator, which leads to improved teaching.

The learning process begins for the educator by presenting material and identifying the connections from which the student will build on to make their own connection. The student does not have the same life experiences as the educator. This may limit the connection to the material by the student. Think about the connections of theory to application and course to program. The educator provides examples that may generate a link to the students past experience, but the student still needs to complete the connection that links theory to application, which generates the student’s take away. This should be the learning outcome.

**DIRECT AND INDIRECT EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING**

When assessing the student, the educators should assess themselves. Ask the following questions:

- Are the students learning the most important points?
- Does a culture of learning exist in the course?
- Is the educator creating or removing obstacles to learning?

Sometimes answers to these questions come from the students past experiences. Prior knowledge assessments provide an opportunity to glimpse the past knowledge of a student. This provides a gauge for the relevance of that knowledge in the form of preparedness for the current course. Does the student present weak areas that may require adjustment in the material and pace of delivery?

One of the greatest challenges for educators is to assume students have acquired the necessary prerequisite knowledge for the current course. Previous courses and life experiences affected how students assimilate the presented material. Assessing identifies weaknesses in existing knowledge and skills.

**MULTIPLE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE RETENTION**

All students learn differently and at a varied pace. This requires educators to present material in different formats to help students grasp the concepts. There are many methods to deliver content that include reading from a text, lectures, discussions, scenarios, videos, writing papers, playing games, and other innovative ways. Each would have a different appeal and helps to engage the student. Using several of these to assess a learning objective provides the students with opportunities to express the knowledge gained. Further, it allows variation of student expression to get past any fear or anxiety.

Knowledge without application limits future recall, thereby relegating the information to short-term memory only. Perez-Sabater, Montero-Fleta, Perez-Sabater, and Rising found significant difference in long-term retention with active learning. Balluck (2006) was more specific about active learning to include simulations that include application of learned material. Dale presented a significant increase in long-term retention as a student moves from simply reading a text to performing a task that is purposeful and related to the material. People only retain 50% of what they see and hear; but 90% if they are involved in a task related to the learning (Dale, 1969). The frequency by which a student makes a connection of the material presented to multiple tasks, the greater the recall. This indicates the importance of the educator to provide multiple learning opportunities to benefit the student. A program requires retention of material from each course to generate the required knowledge for the program.

Student retention improves from learning when the material is from a personal perspective instead of a one size fits all methodology (Lindsey, Shroyer, Pashier, Mozer, 2014). This challenges educators to present material in a manner that stimulates individual student’s application. Given
the differences of experience, the educator needs to use multiple methods of presentation and activities to generate learning and retention of the material.

**CONVINCING STUDENTS AND APPEALING TO THEIR SELF INTEREST**

All students are not eager to complete an activity and may require coxing. The reason for this resistance or reluctance may have several factors. One possibility appears to be a fear of failure or not being able to meet the requirements. Other issues could be a lack of self-confidence. If an activity requires speaking or presenting in front of peers or others, anxiety can develop. This could affect the potential learning by the student.

Some students cling to their fear because it is part of who they are and the fear reflects their self-perceptions. What the educator sees in the actions of a student may not seem like fear. The student may present one or some of the following:

- Aggression/anger towards the educator or a peer
- Testing educator/boundaries
- Not listening
- Tardiness/Absenteeism from class
- Insensitivity to others

Proper classroom management dictates the need to address these behaviours. However, more important is to address the underlying cause and appeal to the student's self-interest. Dealing with these issues can become time consuming on the part of the educator, but helping a student to get past an issue can change their long-term learning and perspective.

- Provide encouragement and reflection on the importance of the activity or assignment to help generate interest and engagement
- Promote the importance of fulfilling the student’s long-term goals. Education is a stepping-stone to that success

Unfortunately, many students may not understand or recognize the connection that may limit their participation in the course activities

Participation is necessary for learning. Make participation mandatory. Keep the activity short and clear. Provide encouragement and get the students involved with the planning and implementation of activities. This will help to create a passion for the material, as the students become a part of the teaching process. Most importantly, the educator needs to remain flexible and recognize the expertise brought by the students. They are not blank slates. Embrace their experiences and readiness to learn, as this will help them to make the needed connections between theory and application. This builds on Knowles (1984) concept about embracing the different backgrounds and creating self-directed tasks and activities that appeal to the student’s self-concept. This helps to make the material interesting and relevant, which then triggers learning. Though Knowles focused on the adult student, this concept applies to all that seek to learn.

Provide exposure to stimulate learning through readings, case studies, and videos. Enhance this during the class. Then finish with additional exercises after the class to cement application of the new concepts. Remember to focus on the goals with the assignments. Vagueness in the requirement could lead to broad research that misses the goal. In addition, being too specific would generate limited learning in that the students will only find the specific information. Allowing some latitude will help the students to locate information and critically evaluate it for validity and appropriateness. This adds to group learning as each student may have different material and analysis.

**CLASS ACTIVITIES**

The educator’s imagination is the only limitations of class activities to enhance learning. Motivating and stimulating engagement varies by the students in the class. However, think about how to re-purpose class time to drive inquiry, application, and assessment of learning. Below is a list of examples that an educator can use to engage students. These are active learning opportunities:

- **Debate** – Divide the class into teams that take a pro or con approach to a topic. The educator selects a topic that leads towards the desired outcome. Set the rules and view the results of the student’s analysis and arguments. As an added opportunity to learning, have the students take the opposite side to their current belief system. This forces research against the students perceived view to broaden their understanding.
- **Client reports** – Assign the students a client and have them investigate and complete a report for the client. The investigation should identify the current issues the client faces. The students would provide an analysis and recommendations that help the client. A side benefit is that this activity could strengthen the relationship with the school and allow for future placement of the students. The educator needs to ensure the students view all possible perspectives. An initial presentation could occur to several educators and students to receive feedback before presenting to the client.
- **Brochures/pamphlets/posters** – The students create something to address an issue. These could be public service announcements that provide details about an issue and appropriate actions the intended audience could take. This allows for creativity on the part of the student.
- **Current events** – The students find an article or report on a topic relevant to the course. The student presents an analysis of the event and the ramifications. This requires analysis and validation of the issue by the student.
- **Solve a problem** – Assign the students a problem at the beginning of the class. The educator presents material throughout the class or several classes. The students analyse the problem and apply the material presented in the class in
addition to research material. The concept is to identify the correct problem, explain why it is a problem, and come up with solutions to solve the problem. The educator must ensure the problem is solvable by the level of the students.

- Create video – Today’s technology provides great opportunities that can translate into the work environment. Build on these opportunities by having the students create a video to present a topic and possible solution or public service. The activity stimulates creativity by the students. The students find a subject that meets the objectives of the class and creates an interactive video that helps to educate the audience about the topic.

- Role-playing – Assign students roles that allow presentation of an issue and solution. They are to respond to a situation or issue, as the role would require. This can be challenging as the students’ needs to research and understand the role in addition to the issue. The educator needs to be familiar with the various roles to provide feedback to enhance the learning opportunities. Following the role-play, the class could engage in a discussion about the choices made and how they would change with different decisions.

- Scenarios – Present a real scenario that requires the students to work through issues. The scenario can come from a current local, national, or international incident that is currently in the news. The students could research the issue from various perspectives and generate a recommendation. Interesting to note is that the various perspectives could change the opinions of the students, as news agencies do not always present all the facts.

- Simulations – Technology provides opportunities to present simulations that respond to student decisions. The result of each decision generates complications or solutions to the issue. The advantage is that the students see the result of decisions, which help the learning process. An effective means of helping learning is to have the students write a short report about why they made the decision. Then run the simulation to gain a result of the choice and have the student compare result to the decision process.

- Chapter reviews – Courses generally have texts to start the learning process. Students do not always read the material or may have difficulty understanding it. Have teams of students present a review of the assigned readings to help with understanding. The method of the presentation can be creative to include games, discussions, or any method that engages the class. The idea is that they will review the material from a similar perspective of the students in the class. The educator becomes a research for the presenting students to ensure the accuracy and relevance of the presentation.

- Interpretive exercises – This can be similar to scenarios and simulations. The idea is to have students do this exercise individually or in small teams. Present a situation that the students have to interpret and analyse with the goal of generating inferences. By understanding the similarity of potential issues, students generate a set of skills that could apply to similar issues in the future. This builds on long-term skills, but ensure students understand that the only constant in life is change. Therefore, the skills need adjustment over time.

- Reflections – This is a quick assessment to help the students vocalize to the educator what the students learned from the material presented and what needs additional clarification. Students create a short paper at the end of a class session in which they explain the main concepts presented. This includes the greatest take away and how the material can be applied in the student’s life immediately or long-term, and any areas needing more information. Students give these to the educator and become part of the review in the next class session to improve the learning and retention process.

- Questions – Start the class with a question, problem, or mystery. This stimulates the desire to learn as the students anticipate the start of class. Further, it probes students understanding and assumptions. Build on these during the class period with multiple learning opportunities. Most importantly, ask, listen, and respond to the student’s questions. This provides validation for the student’s thought process and teaches critical thinking and problem solving.

These are just a sampling of the different types of active learning activities and educator can use to stimulate the learning process. Using several of these in a class session creates multiple learning opportunities to generate the connection between the material and application to generate the greatest take away. Learning requires recall of material. This means generating enough interest to place information into the student’s long-term memory. Further, activities make learning fun, exciting, and engaging. An educator is only as good as the students learn and gain success in a program and in their life.

Grading and assessment are both required in academia. Each has a specific purpose, but differ in focus. Grading generates scores as to the value of work based on the educator’s perspective. It can include non-learning components like late penalties and has some shortcomings that need to be recognized. Assessment focuses on student learning as represented by objectives within a course and a program. How well a student makes the connection between theoretical constructs and application as a direct correlation to knowledge take away and long-term recall. The educator must engage in active learning activities to help students make the needed connections for the demonstration of critical thinking and desired skills. The key for a successful educator is to make the material fun, interesting, and engaging to help the student make the connection between their experiences and the generation of the needed skills to not only be successful in the program, but being able to apply the knowledge to their daily life.

**Conclusion**
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