

Encouraging Students to Take Responsibility for Their Own Grades: *A Systematic Pedagogical Approach*

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ABSTRACT: *Students often asked, “Can I do extra work to bring my grade up?” If I said “No,” I would wonder, “Where is my redemptive compassion?” But to say “Yes” could be allowing the students to circumnavigate the consequences of not doing their best from the start. So I instituted a system that required the students to earn a preset number of points to achieve a specific grade. Points were assigned to each grading opportunity: pop quizzes; tests; term papers; book reports; etc. And there were minimum scores set to gain certain opportunities. This paper describes the process, and its results.*

INTRODUCTION

The account that follows outlines a “grading system,” and not “grading criteria.” And it is presented without any pretense about its being scholarly. It is not. It is a description of a personal experience that proved to be important and helpful to both my students and me. Those who might want to explore some research that has been done on “grading systems,” and what others have discovered about grading, and its role in one’s teaching pedagogy, might find it beneficial to read one of the following sources: Ebel and Frisbie (1986), Nitko (2004), Hart (1994), Popham (1990).

I now believe, after years of teaching, that I should have been required to pay for the privilege of teaching, it was so enjoyable, but that I should have been paid double for the onerous work of grading. Students have often come to me and asked if they could do extra work to improve their final grade. Many did poorly on their work early in the semester. In truth, I demanded a lot from the students and a number of them fell short of their grade aspirations because of the time it took them to make the adjustments necessary to meet my expectations. I experienced this dilemma for more than 30 years before I concluded that *brains, perseverance,*

and hard work are all valuable, and that perhaps my “right or wrong,” “black or white,” and “that is tough” attitude needed to incorporate a bit of compassion. Christ had certainly been compassionate with me; it was time for me to reciprocate and *help* my students *mature* rather than simply play the roll of an “academic judge.”

So I eventually developed an alternative grading system that (1) provided alternative assignments for credit, and (2) established stated performance standards that allowed points earned to be applied to the semester’s total points provided certain standards of performance were met on specific assignments. For example, a grade below 70 on a book report received *zero* points, and a grade below 75 on the mid-term exam blocked the student from receiving an “A” regardless of the total number of points earned during the semester. And the grading system (3) presented all of the “options” and “constraints” on the first day of class as part of my discussion of the course syllabus.

The results were interesting. I was amazed to observe the number of students who simply chose, from the very start, to only try to earn C’s or B’s. The vast majority had no interest in attempting to earn a higher grade when they saw the effort that would be required to achieve a grade beyond

their historic “grade point average.” With few exceptions, they would commit to do what was necessary to accomplish their personal grade goal, but they often would do no more. And their questions concerning how they might earn a better grade vanished completely. My students did not raise that type of question during the last 10 years of my teaching career. This simply left me with the responsibility of clarifying instructions about the specific performance requirements as the assigned opportunity deadlines began to appear on the syllabus.

The students benefited greatly from the new system. They recognized from a different perspective their personal responsibility for their own grades. They assumed ownership of their responsibility and many acknowledged that their “grade choice” was an “optimization” and not a “maximization” strategy. They openly owned up to the fact that they valued their social, spiritual, and physical experiences as much as they did their academic achievements. They admitted that they consciously weighed them, one against the other. They made “tradeoffs.”

REVIEW OF THE GRADING SYSTEM'S CONTENT

The four illustrations that follow illustrate what I presented the students on the opening day of class. These handouts spelled out my performance expectations for the students. Some of the specific features and benefits of this approach are also described here. I did not include a copy of the entire Course Syllabus because it contains a great deal of detailed information not relevant to the discussion here.

It is item VII. in Illustration 1, “Special Performance Requirements,” that I would like to discuss further here. Please note that *three* of the “Grading Options” are placed under a “grade of 70%” rule. They are Grading Options “3), 4), or any portion of 5)” shown in Illustration 2 below. Unless the students performed at a level sufficient to earn a grade of 70 on each of these options, they received no (zero) points for their effort. I included this provision to prevent students from trying to get 40 points toward the final number of points needed for a “B+” grade. For example, to earn 40 points with a book report the student would only have to get a grade of 10% on a particular book report if this restriction were not in place — **.10 x 400 = 40 points**. (Book reports were worth 400 points each as shown in Illustration 2 below.) The standard was set high enough to require a reasonable effort from every student who selected the particular “grade option.” The importance of establishing a threshold of this type was made clear when a student turned in five book reports and received no points. They failed to reach the required threshold of a grade of 70% on any report.

In one case, I felt I was being tested by a particular student. I could imagine him thinking, “He probably doesn’t even read the reports because he has so many of them coming in at the last minute.” This student’s reports were long, but without content. The student showed no real emotional concern when the book reports were returned three days before the close of the semester without any points having been given — the book reports were due for submission two weeks before the end of the semester. I returned them all the next week. I believe that professors must return graded work quickly if the full effect of this kind of grading system is to be useful to the students as they plan and strategize for their desired final grade.

After I provided students with the information in Illustration 2, they could see immediately the entire array of options that were available to them for earning points throughout the semester, along with the posted number of points necessary to earn a specific grade of A, B+, B, etc. The points required for each grade option were clearly stated. This allowed the students to establish a course grade strategy on the first day of class. I informed them that I would grade them on a 0–100 basis. That meant, for example, that a score of 85 on the mid-term exam would earn them 1,700 points to apply toward their total “points goal” — **.85 x 2000 = 1,700**. For example, for quizzes that were worth 150 points each, I would award grade points by mul-

Illustration 1: Course Administration

- I. Professor: Name of Professor, etc.
- II. Grading Options (See separate handout)
- III. Term Paper Options (See separate handout)
- IV. Book Reports (See separate handout)
- V. Textbooks Required for the Course
- VI. Attendance Policy: The university attendance policy, and my “personal expectations” were explained.
- VII. Special Performance Requirements
When selecting “Grading Options” 3), 4), or any portion of 5) — *see separate handout* — a grade of 70% must be earned before any points related to the attempted option will be applied to the student's final grade. In addition, any student earning a grade below 75 on the mid-term exam *will not be* awarded a final grade of “A,” regardless of how many points are earned on all of the other grading options — a B+ will be the highest grade that can be earned.

Illustration 2: Grading Options

<u>Options</u>	<u>Points</u>
1) Mid Term Exam	2000
2) Quizzes: 6 of them @ 150 points each (all prior to mid-term) *	900
3) Personal Term Paper	1000
4) Biblical Application Paper	1000
5) Book Reports: A) Schaeffer (TGWIT).....	400
B) Weber (TPEATSOC)	400
C) Tawney (RATROC)	400
D) Packer (KG)	400
E) Chewning (BP&B:TP)	400
6) Class Participation: Ask Q, 50 points per Q, max of 5 for credit.	250
7) Ethical Issues Papers: 50 points each	250
8) Attendance: 20 points per class attended (24 classes x 20 points per.)	480
9) Final Exam:	400
 Total Possible Points	 8,280
 A @ 6,250 points	
B+ @ 5,750 points	
B @ 5,250 points	
C+ @ 4,850 points	
C @ 4,450 points	
D @ 4,000 points	

* Quizzes are always unannounced, but are always given on the reading assignment that is listed in the syllabus for that particular day.

tipling the score (as a percentage of 100) times the 150 point value for *each* quiz — a 75 on a quiz would generate $.75 \times 150 = 112.5$ points toward the semester's total points earned.

Item number 6) on the “Grading Options” handout, “Class Participation,” was handled by putting the student on the class “Honor System” — they were to turn in at the close of each class period a slip of paper with their name on it if they had asked a question in class that day. That kept me from having to keep track of who had asked questions, and the student “reminders” were in my hand quickly enough so that I could indeed recall that the particular individual had asked a question. There were *no points* given to the students *for answering* the questions asked either by their peers or by me. My purpose here was solely to get the “silent students” to come out of their shells. I had no desire to stimulate the dominant “talkers.”

Illustration 2, item 5, “Book Reports” had next to each author's name (see Illustration 2) a series of letters. These letters were simply the first letters in the words appearing in the title of the author's book. The full title of the books and

names of the authors are in Illustration 3 below.

The librarian who worked with me was very conscientious about letting me know if a student violated the “one week checkout limit” that was written plainly in the *italized* and *underlined* portion of the instructions. I also *stressed* the time limit in my accompanying oral instructions. Still an occasional student would violate the rule and the consequences were allowed to stand. The rule was established because early in my time of using the procedures outlined in this paper, I discovered students checking out books and deliberately keeping them so they would not be available for their classmates whom they seemed to consider their “competitors.”

It was the part B) of the “Book Report” option that caused the students difficulty. “Your *personal appraisal* of the *significance* of the book (Worth 35% of Grade)” component of the grade caused the students unending trouble. Their book report grades reflected this difficulty. The students seemed to lack a historic framework within which to interpret significant writings, events, and potential consequences/possibilities. My teaching could not overcome this

deficiency, yet I persisted in maintaining the requirement for an educated person needs to be able to find significance in a written work when consequential understandings are there to be gleaned.

The two “Term Papers” assignment (shown in Illustration 4), caused the students more anxiety than any other part of the semester’s work before they actually did the assignment.

The point value was high — 1,000 points per paper. But, when the students first read the assignment, they found it daunting and perceived it as overly challenging. Though they professed their Christian faith, they decried their biblical ignorance.

It was part 4d of the personal term paper that seemed to panic them the most. The requirement to “formally justify” was defined as their having to validate the behavioral illustrations they offered in 4b) and 4c) by the “source texts” under which they professed to be living — the Bible, Koran, writings of some philosopher, or other recognized “cultural leader.” And “document” meant they were to relate their experiences to specific references within the “source text” of their choice in order to show the continuity between the two, or the discontinuity in the case of part 4c). The words “biblical principles” used in I., 4d) required that all illustrations given in parts I., 4b) and I., 4c) be confirmed in **three** different places in the referenced material in the “source text” used to “document” their illustrations —

three references made it a “principle,” by definition. This helped teach the students to seek internal consistency in the materials they choose to use to “justify” their world/life-view.

The students moaned and groaned. They said they felt like they were being thrown into the water before they were given any swimming lessons. But none of them “drowned.” In fact, they did amazingly well and most were excited by their accomplishment when it was behind them. A few did try to “dodge their fear” by opting to have a “basis” for their conduct that was not really their basis: for example, they would try to use a “philosophical” base rather than a biblical base in which they had been raised and, previous to this assignment, professed. Dodging the assignment this way generally resulted in a grade disaster.

The biblical application paper that followed later in the semester caused virtually no problems for the students because they had already accomplished the work required for the personal term paper earlier in the semester.

To understand just how difficult this kind of grading pedagogy is on the students, just assume for a minute you are a student facing this grading system. Assume further that you consistently earn grades of 92 on all your work. What would you need to select from the array of “grading options” in order to get an “A”? You would need to score 92 **on all nine** “grading options,” including doing two book reports from option 5. That demands a lot of high quality,

Illustration 3: Book Reports

The following five books are on reserve in the library:

- 1) The God Who Is There, by Francis Schaeffer
- 2) The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, by Max Weber
- 3) Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, by R.H. Tawney
- 4) Knowing God, by James I. Packer
- 5) Biblical Principles and Business: The Practice, by Richard C. Chewning

There are five (5) copies of each of the books listed above on reserve in the Library. They are my personal copies. Please do no mark in the books. They are restricted to a one-week checkout limit. Anyone violating this one week check-out limit will receive a grade of zero on that book report because your delay prevents a fellow student from having access to the book which creates a major ethical problem. Pick them up at the Reserve Book counter and return them to the same place — they do not have call numbers on them and cannot be handled through book “drop” procedures. The librarian does notify me when books are not returned on time.

Book reports are to contain the following:

- A) A review of the books’ contents, message, and theme. (Worth 65% of grade)
- B) Your personal appraisal of the significance of the book. (Worth 35% of grade)

Illustration 4: Term Papers

I. Personal Term Paper:

- 1) Paper is an informal paper – no bibliography or footnotes required.
- 2) Length: 7-10 pages, double-spaced, typewritten.
- 3) Due: see syllabus
- 4) Content:
 - a) What is at the core of my nature that is so instrumental in the shaping and defining my identity?
 - b) Demonstrate your actual commitment to your answer to part a) by providing five specific, concrete “time-space-historic” case examples from your life experiences. (You choose examples you are comfortable sharing.)
 - c) Provide one specific, concrete example from your life that contradicts what you have said in part a) and *describe how you rationalized it at the time*. (Choose a comfortable example.)
 - d) “Formally justify” and “document” what you have said by relating your Part b) and c) commitments to biblical principles that validate your commitments.

II. Biblical Application Paper:

- 1) Paper is an examination of a current problem, issue, or practice in the world, under the light of Scripture.
- 2) Length: 7-10 pages, double-spaced, typewritten.
- 3) Due: see syllabus
- 4) Select a topic and relate biblical *propositions* and *principles* to it in a manner that reveals a biblical perspective on the matter. (The topic must be approved by your professor.)

consistent work. Not many students made an “A.”

Illustration 1, VII, “Special Performance Requirements,” specified that anybody who scored below a 75 on the Mid-term Exam would be automatically disqualified from being allowed to earn a grade of “A.” This was an effective hedge against grade inflation. The median score on the “Mid-term Exam” was typically between 72 and 78. And the mean score was generally around 74. These values can be varied of course by increasing or reducing the total points needed to earn specific grades, by varying the point value for the individual work options, and by altering the degree of difficulty for the individual options. But in my case, the “score of 75” rule on the mid-term exam typically prevented between 40% and 48% of the class from qualifying for a final grade of “A”.

The final exam was worth only 400 points because it was an “opinion” exam. I always felt very uncomfortable grading students’ opinions. So the students were offered 340 points to not take the exam. (This assumed they would earn a grade of 85 on the exam — $.85 \times 400 = 340$.) The vast majority of the students opted to skip the exam because the additional 60 potential points to be gained by taking it

seemed a far fetched probability to them given their performance up to that point in time. No more than 10% of the students ever took the final exam.

CONCLUSION

The specific illustrations and explanations presented here are not what is really important. What is important is that readers evaluate the concept; that is, the appropriateness of allowing students to assume the responsibility for actually earning a grade within the boundaries of a relatively broad but predetermined set of “point availability alternatives” rather than providing a preset fixed “everyone does the same thing” regimen. Allowing the students to choose from a broad array of options requires a well-thought-out strategy prior to its implementation. If you plan to implement a grading system similar to the one I have described here, you may want to think carefully about a number of important questions such as the following:

- If I do adopt a “variable grading options” approach and allow the students to make choices, how many “total points” should be made available in the plan?

- How many “points” should be required for the student to earn a particular “letter grade”?
- What is the proper relationship between questions A and B? (Too many “total points” offered relative to the points necessary to earn a particular grade skews the design in the students’ favor and can lead to grade inflation.)
- How many grading options should be made available in the plan? (The more “good” options, the broader and deeper the educational experience.)
- What are the *key* options I want to “force” the students to work on? (You “force” them to do some things by assigning higher point values to the selected options. The more points you assigned to a particular option, the students’ likelihood of bypassing the option diminishes proportionally. My model had three heavily weighted options: the mid-term exam and two term papers.)
- What should be the assigned “point value” for each grading option? (Here the professor has an opportunity to tell the student what is really important from the professor’s point of view. In my case the mid-term exam was “*the big thing*.”)
- What kind of materials ought to be included in the “grade options”? (What about: “end of the chapter” problems; cases; book reports; special term papers; pop quizzes; unannounced tests; special library study/reports; assigned outside “workbook” problems; student “design” options; etc? It is only limited by the professor’s imagination.)
- What kinds of grade “threshold” requirements are needed? What “grade options” need to have a minimum grade required before any points can be earned by doing the particular assignment? (Three of my options had thresholds associated with them.)
- Is there one “grade option” that should control the maximum grade a student can earn for the term? (My mid-term exam served this purpose.)
- Are there other “special requirements” needed? (My limited “library check out time” is an example of a special requirement.)
- What kinds of specific instructions are required to make sure the professors’ expectations are very clear? (I utilized “written instructions” and followed these up with periodic verbal explanations.)

Thinking through questions like these may help the reader sort out the potential “pitfalls” before attempting to change what has been historically a very successfully grading

procedure that is already in place. Why tamper with what is not broken? But the particular grading pedagogy presented here forced my students to accept personal responsibility for their grades. The students, in fact, loved the system. They could keep a running account of the points they had earned and knew at all times just how many more points they needed to earn to get the grade they wanted. They could strategize. They soon knew just how many book reports they would need to do in order to get the grade they wanted.

As you might have expected, students would occasionally question the number of points deducted on a particular assignment. Those enquiries were welcomed because they became specific opportunities to engage the particular student and further their comprehension regarding what they “had not done” or had done inadequately. But there were no surprises at the end of the semester. And not a single student ever asked for more points at the end of the semester. But I will confess to the reader that if a student had been extremely diligent in attending class, in getting work in on time, and in participating intelligently in the class discussions, I did on occasion add a few points to a student’s final total points to bump them up a grade — never more than ten points. But I never subtracted a point from a student, no matter how much they may have frustrated me during the semester. But never again did I hear the question “Is there some more work I can do to improve my grade?” And no one ever came and asked me to re-evaluate a final grade. All complaints and whining about final grades disappeared. For the last 10 years of my teaching career, peace reigned regarding final grades. This kind of grading pedagogy is worth considering.

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