

In the Classroom 96

How You Can Use the Grade Book to Shape Learning

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Stan Skrabut: Hello, everyone. Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast, it certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me, and I really appreciate it. I feel bad, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, this episode is late. Actually, over the weekend, I got overly involved in this week's topic and simply ran out of time. I ran out of time, so finishing it up tonight. What was I doing? I was grading.

Grading papers and getting everything sent back out and trying to motivate my grad students and just ran out of time. This week, we're going to take a look at grades and your grade book and how you can use your grade book to shape how much time students spend on activities. I'm also going to include some strategies for leveraging this powerful tool. When I first considered this topic, I was going to talk about weighted grades versus point systems and different types of grading systems.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that regardless of the system, you can shape your grade scheme to shape behavior. When I was reviewing an online course where the instructor had placed a lot of wonderful practice exercises in his course. He wanted the students to complete these practice exams as a way to improve on their final exam. However, the practice exams were not counted in the grade scheme.

Because students are so focused on grades, they did not take advantage of this wonderful tool as hoped. In this episode, we're going to look at using grades to shape learning with the assumption that grades matter. I have to let you know that I'm not necessarily a fan of grades, I'm not a fan of a lot of the pieces of the education system, but we have to work within it. I'm just going to leave that maybe for another discussion sometime.

I think the whole grade thing actually does get in the way of learning, lifelong learning, but like I said, we'll talk about that some other day. Let's talk about the grade book. What does a grade book do? A grade book has a number of purposes. First of all, it serves as a record of student achievement. You post a grade, you have a collection of these grades, you have an idea how well the student did in your class.

Grades are also a feedback tool, an evaluative feedback tool. They let them know right away where they stand based on the grade that they receive. It also lets students know what is important in the class, they will set their priorities to meet what is outlined in the grade book. When you're crafting your syllabus, you can have them do a lot of things as long as they're graded.

If you ask them to do a lot of things that are not graded, the odds are they probably won't do it because we've conditioned them so well to respond to grades. A grade book also reflects how well you have designed your course. The big question is, is your grade book aligned with what you want your students to achieve? Which goes back to that first example, where this instructor provided all these practice exams.

He really wanted students to do these practice exams because he knows if they practice, they will do well on the final exam, but he didn't grade it. Therefore, he has this final exam that's worth a whole lot in his course and students are then going to take other strategies, we talked about cheating. If it's a high stakes test, students may go down that path of cheating, which we don't want them to do.

If you want them to practice for the test, then you need to make the practices worth a lot more and the final exam worth less. That way, it molds the behavior that you want. If you're not seeing the results you want to see, you need to start with your grade book and assessment. This will let you hone in on where students are having difficulty. You can then adjust your course by improving content, providing more practice activities or adjusting the assessments.

If you're going to have them do something, especially at a class, it needs to be graded. Let's go back to preparing this grade book. I'm going to recommend that you start with backward design. As I noted in episode ITC41, you should design your course using backward design principles. Which means, as a reminder, you need to start with your goals and objectives.

What do you really want them to be able to do? Next, you develop your assessment so you can measure that goal achievement or that objective achievement. Once you have crafted your assessments, you need to then develop activities so they can practice successfully meeting your assessment thus achieving your goals and objectives. Finally, you bring together the background content that will help students successfully complete the activities and assessment. Objectives, assessments, activities, finally, the content.

Work in that order. Your assessments and activities, they can be formative or summative and there really should be a balance. I would say lean more towards formative than summative, you want them to develop and practice what they are going to be evaluated on. Formative assessments or activities, you typically spread them across the course to help students develop skills and acquire knowledge, and they basically practice. This is an opportunity to practice.

Summative assessments measure how well students meet the objectives. In other words, how well did they learn the lesson? When I was at the Air Force Academy prep school, this was very memorable. Every single night, we had an hour and a half of homework guaranteed for every hour of class. We have four classes, so we had six hours of homework every single night, that homework was graded.

How they did it? I don't know, but they were able to grade the homework and get it back to us. Mostly, it was participatory, they want to make sure that you were doing that. Then every other day, we had a quiz and halfway through the term, we had a

midterm. At the end of the term, we had a final exam, so we were getting a lot of assessments and a lot of practice activities throughout our course.

They were all graded, all of them. We did not do anything that was not graded. As much as students would like to do non-graded activities-- Well, let me rephrase that. As much as we would like students to do non-graded activities, they won't. The education system, we have trained them too well, we have trained them to respond to grades. They will do non-graded activities for their own pleasure.

If it's learning how to play an instrument, they'll do it, if they're playing a game, they'll do it, they'll go study, they'll learn additional things, they'll do it without a grade, but we haven't necessarily translated this into importance for formal learning. Therefore, we haven't really taught them how to do lifelong learning, learning for the sake of learning, so there's still work there.

There's some strategies that we can work towards, but the bottom line is, is we've conditioned them to respond to grades. Everything that we want students to do, especially outside of class, we need to attach a grade to it. How can we leverage these grades to improve performance and use our grade book? Here's nine ways that I want to recommend that you can use grades and grade books to improve learning.

The first one is redos and drafts. One of the strategies I'm using for a current class is focusing on a single assignment, they have to build a program plan. This is the final product, the final product that is worth more of the grade, they have to turn this in. On the way, they actually have to write two drafts or they write a draft, they improve it, they give me another draft, they improve it and they turn in their final product, and intermix with this, they have peer reviews.

I have students looking at their draft say they're submitting and providing feedback, what they need to do. Each draft is worth 10% of the grade, which means if they turn in nothing, they lose a letter grade. There's an expectation that the first draft will not be as refined as the final draft and so I grade accordingly. I grade more on effort, more on getting it more close to right than wrong, but I tighten up those expectations on every iteration.

The second iteration, I'm a little more strict on my grading. Then the final, it's going to be really strict. When doing this draft, we're using a framework to guide the structure, so there's certain things that I'm expected to see in each draft. The first draft was due six weeks into the course. The expectation was the students would provide content for each of those framework elements, knowing full well that they did not really have the time to fully flesh it out.

I wanted them to put some thought behind each element and put something down. Then that draft was reviewed by me and two of their classmates. Each of the reviews were worth 5% of the grade, and in total, students reviewed four draft so they ended up 20% of their grade was based on drafts. The breakdown for this is each of the drafts was worth 10%, so for a total 20% for the drafts and then each peer review was worth 5%. There's four of them, so that's 20%. Then 30% for the final draft.

Then the last 30% was for discussion. I graded it this way because I wanted them to put time and energy into each assignment. I also provided grades for each of the drafts to recognize the work completed and this was based on a rubric but the grades have to be worth something.

I know one instructor who came to me because she was really frustrated that none of her students completed a web creation assignment and after looking at the assignments, we looked at, basically, the grade or what was in the syllabus and that the assignment was only worth 3%. I told her, I said, "I wouldn't have done the assignment either." The grade has to demonstrate value. If you want students to take on this hard assignment, creating a website, flesh out a whole portfolio and then you only give them 3% percent, they're not going to do it, and so you haven't achieved what you were hoping them to do. In my class, if I want students to do something, I have to make the assignment at least worth a letter grade, 10%. They may not give me all of their best work but I know that they'll at least put some energy into it, so it has to be at least 10%.

Another way to do this- dealing with drafts or redos is the idea of redoing, and one way is through mastery quizzes. I talked about this in episode 40, that you can have students just do this quizzes over and over and over again. I advocate for the use of mastery quizzes as a way for students to practice skills and concepts. They should be graded. Don't just create a quiz and expect them, on their goodwill, to do this. Now, I understand the value of it. They should be doing this, they should be practicing it and they shouldn't need a grade to do it but I also understand human nature. That, even grad students, they're focused on the grade and if you want them to do these practice quizzes, you've got to give them a grade, even if it's participatory.

I do it a little different, if I'm giving a quiz and it's going to count, they can do it as many times as they want but I'm going to have them aim for a 100%. These are typically randomly generated self-grading quizzes, so that shouldn't be asking too much. They need to get a 100% in order for it to count and that gets them to practice what I want them to do in a final exam. Naturally, students should be able to complete the quiz as many times as they want and they should be encouraged to complete these formative assessments as a way to prepare for their summative assessment.

Next strategy, the second strategy that I have lined up is competency-based assessment. In my class, I don't use a lot of summative assignments typically. I try to provide students with ample opportunities to turn in work over and over until they have perfected, so it's really competency-based. It takes a form of short activities where I want students to learn a skill. If students do not pick up the skill, they receive feedback and I provide them with another opportunity to get it right. We will go round and round until they can do it to the satisfaction that I set forth. I talked more about this in episode 31 when I talked about specifications grading, so you can dig a little more into that, but this is the second strategy, competency-based.

Number three, rubrics. Rubrics are away for students to gain control over their assignments and if you stay in alignment with Universal Design for Learning, you

should be able to create a rubric that's generic enough to account for all the different types of submissions that you're going to get. It could be a video, it could be an article, it could be a newsletter, it could be a presentation, it could be a lot of different things but the rubric should not necessarily dictate what type of submission it should be but really the content of that. Is it well-researched? Do they have introductions and conclusions and do they capture, basically, the meat of what you want them to learn?

The nice thing about rubrics is you can hand them out ahead of time and students can use them to assess their own work and they could also be used as part of a peer review exercise. I was using this as we are doing this program plans and students were using the rubric to assess their fellow students.

A part of your grades, you should also have descriptive feedback. That's number four. That your grade is considered evaluative feedback and it's certainly an important communication tool but research has shown that just getting a grade does not necessarily improve performance but if it is accompanied by descriptive feedback, that's where you certainly get value and more value comes if students have to do something with the feedback. Like in my case, I provided feedback for the next draft or I give students a no-go, provide feedback and have them redo an activity. I'm always trying to get them to do something with the feedback that I provide and not just have a one-and-done type of assignment that nothing is building on it.

Another strategy is participation and effort grades. Just giving grades for having them participate. According to an article by Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner called *Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)*, they reported that constructing a grade system that reward students for participation and effort has been shown to stimulate student interest and improvement. In a way, you can achieve this with mastery grading. That you just have them just go, no-go, have them do it over and over until they get it or have success but you can also just having them do this quizzing. You may not want them necessarily get to a 100% but maybe you lined up three quizzes and if they do all three quizzes, that you'd give them credit if they achieve a certain threshold.

Another strategy dealing with participation and effort grades is for focusing students on the importance of effort and practicing learning is to provide student opportunities to earn credit in a course for simply doing the work, completing the assigned task and engaging with the material. It could be, looking back at my Air Force Academy Prep School days, just turning in our homework everyday, we got credit for that. Now, naturally, they took a look at it to see if we're on track and they gave us points, or deducted points if we didn't get it right, but we certainly got a lot more credit than if we didn't do it. If we didn't turn our assignments in, we got, basically, detention or study hall, so we got something out of it.

Peer review. That's another strategy. Peer review provides an opportunity to provide feedback without the formal grades. I'm using this strategy in the graduate class. In my graduate class, students have to provide feedback on their fellow students on their program plans and they get credit for providing that feedback. I'm not making

any commentary on their feedback other than if it-- If they mailed it in, I have a rubric, they probably got some points taken off but, really, it's more participatory, that they put the effort in to provide feedback to their fellow student.

Another strategy is additive up grading. In episode 74, I talked about additive grading. Additive grading is a strategy where all students start at zero and then work towards the grade they want. They can stop anytime but that's the grade they'll get. This would basically be a collection of formative and summative activities and ideally, you provide more activities than needed.

For example, in one class that I teach, students need to earn 1500 points with activities. However, I have about 2500 worth of points in activities available, so they can pick and choose. I've never had two students follow the same path. They've always built their-- Kind of like a buffet. They built their instruction by choosing the assignments that they wanted to work on, and this has worked out well. So far, all the students have really strived to get that 1500 points by the time the class was done. I did not have any deadlines other than the last day of class but I kept reminding them where they were at and I used some other strategies to do that.

Another strategy. Just providing timely detailed actionable feedback. I have been in classes where I have not received one bit of feedback on anything I've-- This is really frustrating because I don't know where to improve. Students need regular feedback to help with their development, and so this is a way that you can provide that.

Another way to provide support to students and emphasize where the importance is in your grading, as well as identify the importance to yourself, is using a pie graph of your grading scheme in your syllabus. I'm going to recommend that you put a pie chart showing how your grades are distributed, what the weights are. This visual representation brings a lot of attention to the grades and it will let students know where you want to place attention, but it also lets you know if you see this really thin sliver, you can probably bet students are not going to do that. Scenario where you can also beef up your grades and grade books.

That's the nine strategies that I have for you real quick is redo's and drafts. Give them opportunity to either do things over and over again, or have tiered approach to a final product. Competency-based assessments go, no-go, providing rubrics, descriptive feedback, participation and effort grades. Doing peer reviews, additive grading, provide timely detailed and actual feedback and include a pie chart in your grading scheme for your syllabus. Those are the nine different strategies that I'm sharing with you this time to help guide- use your grade book as a tool to guide learning. This really is built upon good design. Designing your course where you're giving ample weight to the different activities and making it meaningful, taking into consideration that we have conditioned students to respond to grades.

As I said, I am not a fan of grades. I'm not a fan of a lot of things that we do in education, but this is what we have right now. I think these things get in the way of learning, but these are different strategies that can help improve that and get them involved in the activities that will help them actually learn. Focus more on the

formative, less on the summative, try to put proper balances. That's what I have for you on grading. Before I let you go. Here's a quick plug for my book.