



Beyond Dogma:

Tales of a Grading Heretic

Morgan C. Benton
2011 ISAT Mini-Symposium on
Innovative Teaching Methods
May 13th, 2011

Where this comes from...

- I've spent the last eight years steeped in the theory, philosophy, and research associated with teaching, learning, assessment, and grading
- I also draw deeply upon my own experiences as a student and teacher





Caution!

- This has been a deeply unsettling journey for me
- I expect that others will find it so as well
- My gauntlet: I maintain that as educators these are issues we have a responsibility to address
- Pick up my gauntlet at your own risk! 😊

I've turned many stones...



Had many experiences...

- Teacher (15 years)
- PHD Student
- Madison Fellow
- ETS Intern
- TAP Consultant
- Researcher
- Father
- Student

...and found grades wanting

Core Philosophy

- ◉ Why grade?
 - ◉ Feedback to students?
 - ◉ Comparability of students?
 - ◉ Program assessment?
 - ◉ Help employers/grad schools make decisions?
 - ◉ Expedience?
- ◉ With the possible exception of the last, grades serve none of these functions well

Basic Statistics

- Grades are ordinal data
- As such, the arithmetic mean is **NOT** an available statistic
- An “average” calculated from ordinal data has no reliably meaningful interpretation

Basic Fairness

- Vickers (2000) demonstrates quite convincingly that the more grades added into a GPA the **less** meaningful the interpretations of that GPA
- As he says, “the very opposite of a robust measure”

Psychometric Rigor

- Test questions and the scales constructed from them are, in practice, never validated
- Rules for expert judgments are not followed—subjectivity problem

Motivation

- Grades undermine intrinsic motivation, the very quality that supports lifelong learning
- Some correlations between extrinsic rewards and motivation for college students:
 - Overall: $-0.34, p < 0.05$
 - “A” Students: $-0.15, p < 0.05$
 - Non-A Students: $-0.88, p < 0.05$

Distraction From Learning

- How many times do students come to you in your office or after class to discuss content?
- How about compared to how many times they come to discuss their grades or points on an assignment/test?
- Is this really how we want to spend our time interacting with students?

Power Issues

- ◉ To the extent that students care about their grades, instructors are virtually all-powerful in the context of a course
- ◉ Such imbalance leads to:
 - ◉ Cheating and dishonesty
 - ◉ Obstacles to authentic relationships



...etc., etc., etc.

- ◉ There are more angles from which to look at this issue, and as of yet, I have yet to find even one in which grades seem desirable
- ◉ Which leads to the following conclusion about why we still use grades:

DOGMA

Dogma: n.

The established belief or doctrine held by ... some group or organization. It is authoritative and not to be disputed, doubted, or diverged from, by the practitioner or believers. ... The term "dogmatic" can be used disparagingly to refer to any belief that is held stubbornly, including political and scientific beliefs.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogma> (accessed 4/25/2011)

Becoming a Heretic

- This has been a long, slow process for me
- It took me many years to work up the courage to “go gradeless”
- I’ve felt a lot of pushback from colleagues, but...
- I’ve also received a lot of interest and support from colleagues as well

A Gradeless World is Possible

- I believe there are viable alternatives to grading that:
 - Are more meaningful
 - Engender deep learning by intrinsically motivated students
 - Are more fun and require less work for the faculty that engage in these practices

Some Practices Involve

- Peer and Self-evaluation
- Use of technology to allow faculty and the students themselves to monitor their progress in a course and to identify/triage students who are most “at risk” and require the most attention from us
- More democratic, student-centered course structures

In Conclusion

- There is a wealth of innovative practices out there that can be fitted to a gradeless world
- Thank you for your time and attention
- I look forward to having more in-depth discussions today and in the future
- My dream is that ISAT will be a pioneer and lead JMU and other universities to a richer and more authentic learning experience for all of our students