
Opinion & Perspective

Grading From the Wrong Perspective: The Case for Descending Grading

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It was while watching the film *Chelsea Walls* that Kris Kristofferson awoke me from my slumber and drew my attention to the way I had been taught to grade and was now unwittingly bringing to bear on my students. During an otherwise unremarkable film Kristofferson's moody character delivers (in respect of relationships) the following enlightened line: "I give people one-hundred percent, and what they take away is up to them!" What a fantastic idea, I thought, and an even more marvellous personal philosophy. What if, I pondered, I applied that same rationale to my teaching and specifically to the way I grade students?

In stark contrast to Kristofferson's idea, both my schooling in the UK and discussions with university colleagues here in Japan would appear to support the view that when appraised in an educational context, we don't start with one-hundred, but rather we start with zero. Further apply that rationale to grading and you have a system which grades students in an ascending fashion i.e. that everyone starts at zero and works their way upwards towards one-hundred percent. Resultant at least in part from this accumulative methodology it would also appear that many teachers come to feel that they are *giving* grades, which students then accrue. I wonder how many readers have heard teachers say: "I never/seldom give As". But hold on. Let's stop and rewind a moment: "GIVE As!" *Give?* Are we *giving* grades? Why is it we feel we are giving anything? Are students not actually *working for* and *earning* grades? If, at the beginning of term teachers issue students

with a syllabus, on which one's grading policy is clearly established, and if a student meets those criteria (i.e. does not *lose* any points), then surely, at the end of term they should end up with the sum of what they started with and therefore arrive at a grade which reflects their efforts, and not a grade that we are electing or *giving* per se.

In this brief article, I would like to highlight four reasons why the "descending" approach to grading should be adopted for university students. I then conclude by offering a brief note of caution on a recent educational directive concerning grade distribution.

With a descending approach to grading, students understand unequivocally the requirements for obtaining a predefined score

At Japanese high schools the guidelines and grading procedures are arguably more rigid and understandable. Incoming university students have thus far been working within a framework where a perfect score *hyaku ten* is both a realistic and attainable goal. Contrast that, if you will, with the ambiguous grading that often prevails in many English language classes (no negative inference intended), especially in oral communication classes. Hence, it is no wonder that when Japanese students first enter university, they are often confused or overwhelmed by the contrast in grading styles. By starting at one hundred percent, however, they know where they are and what to do to maintain that position. It is much easier to start at the top and maintain that position, than it is to climb up. On the other hand, starting at the bottom and climbing up confuses learners, as they don't know how far up they have climbed. In the case where the teacher assigns a score less than perfect, e.g. ninety percent, the student will categorically understand that their performance was ten percent less than perfect and they can set about addressing that shortfall.

A clear framework for improvement is established

Using the descending grading approach, the disparity between one-hundred percent and the actual grade earned indicates one of two things. Firstly, to lesser or more degrees, it indicates the distance between what a student has been taught and what they should have been taught. If they have not been taught all that they have been subsequently graded or evaluated on, there will naturally be an information-gap and they will thus, be unable to attain a perfect score. Secondly, assuming the above not to be the case, then the disparity would simply highlight the distance that they are “off target”. That is to say, it merely illuminates the knowledge or information which the learner is missing and needs to acquire. In this latter case it is important that the student learner understands this situation to be a positive idea insofar as it now points the way towards further learning in which they should engage to hit the target. It should be clearly understood by the learner, that this score does not imply how *imperfect* they are in the traditional sense of the word, nor does it indicate that they “failed” per se. Rather, it indicates what they can do to improve. As a cautionary note, it should also be reiterated at this juncture, that the above rationale is based upon a working model of a student who is aiming and striving to fulfill the grading criteria illustrated in the syllabus, and not one who is tardy or frequently absent.

Students feel empowered and also encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and the consequences of those actions

This next argument is that descending grading is more in line with the quasi-Buddhist belief system of Japan, and is therefore a more culturally appropriate approach and one which the Japanese learner should find easier to grasp. That is to say a Judaeo-Christian or “God-centric” approach to grading would have the student starting at the

bottom with nothing and effectively appealing for consideration. One could easily correlate this with the notion of a being born a sinner and appealing to some supreme being who sits in “judgement”. In stark contrast, the Buddhist (student-centric) approach with its notable absence of an external deity sitting in judgement, precludes the learner from the necessity of having to engage in any kind of *appealing*. In this scenario, one would see the individual accepting their own ultimate responsibility and not seeking an external body to which one may appeal for mercy or understanding (or higher grades!).

This notion really acts to re-enforce the idea of individual accountability and responsibility, which is an important step in the transition from childhood to adulthood. A transition in which, for the average student, university should be playing a key part. If, therefore, from the outset in April, a student fully understands what is required, and they understand that they are beginning the new term with a one hundred percent A grade, then that student knows that they (and only they) are ultimately responsible for the final grade they receive. That is to say, when you grade from the bottom up, if a student attains a poor grade, they may well feel recourse to complain and you might well here these words “You failed me”. And technically you did, because in awarding insufficient points in an ascending format, the instructor does in actuality fail the student. Of course, the student may not have met the requirements, but the learner may well find it hard to see such logic. By grading in the descending format a student clearly understands that they had it, and lost it; because they started with one hundred percent. In that regard, one’s correct response to the above complaint would simply be to point out the obvious, “No, you failed yourself” because they are ultimately responsible for their own actions (and lack thereof). This seems an altogether more reasonable working model than the converse, and helps the student make the transition from childhood (primary and secondary schooling) to adulthood (university) and then on into society.

Not only is marking easier, but the final calculation of grades easier too

Finally, because the grading works in “reverse” to the formula typically adopted, rather than sum up the constituent parts of the grade, all one has to do it to calculate how far from the target, or the “ideal” a student was and subtract any points accordingly. The teacher, having established a clear ideal and the route to meeting that ideal, simply compares and weighs what they have against what they would like and subtracts any points as appropriate. If a student has met the criteria throughout the term, then their grade requires no calculation whatsoever because the natural outcome of such performance would be one hundred percent, and an “A”. So, at the term’s end when grading, one would first simply draw out from the register (and the accumulated grades), those students who have attained that which was set out in the syllabus as being required. From there one simply established a sliding scale, eventually moving further and further away from the target.

I hope that the arguments presented here will encourage debate on this subject and stimulate those who are not following the descending approach to adopt its use with their future university classes. To conclude this article, however, I would briefly like to comment on a couple of other aspects relating to grading policy: how some universities are offering grading *guidelines* to instructors pertaining to the number of each grade (e.g. A,B,C) that should be assigned and how the highest grades should be not be given to low proficiency students.

Usually associated with the overall hierarchy of class levels based upon the prevailing rank of the classes across the board, a grading “quota” is often advised. This grade “fixing” is clearly an unacceptable practice that can neither be substantiated or rationalised by any sound pedagogical principles and should be rejected as such. Unless the educational establishment offers standardised syllabi, then they have no idea what each particular instructor is looking for or grading on.

Thus, it can be reasonably assumed that to ask for a specific number of each grade to be assimilated is both unwise and impractical. Also, as the quality of the students and the work they produce naturally varies from class to class, this alone would render the standardisation of grades as an utter fallacy.

Lastly, to say that only students from higher proficiency classes are *eligible* for perfect scores is a very sad state of affairs indeed, for it not only indirectly states that students who are not in the upper band are not worthy of being awarded a higher grade, but it effectively renders such students efforts entirely worthless. By adopting this approach, any college is effectively telling students not to strive for the best score they can reach, because if they are in a lower class they will never achieve that goal. They will never earn a grade which truly reflects their efforts, only a grade which is predetermined before they start, and that seems entirely unjust.

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