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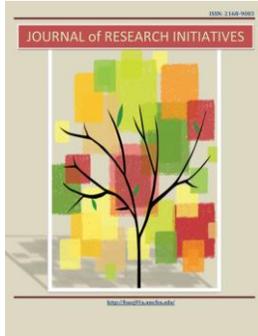
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Cover Page Footnote

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WALKING THE TALK: EMBEDDING STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP COURSE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a model for educational leadership faculty who aspire to walk the talk of effective feedback by embedding standards-based grading (SBG) in their courses. Rather than focusing on learning, points are the currency of K-12 classrooms across the country. Over 100 years of grading research suggests typical grading practices are subjective at best. Some schools are responding by implementing SBG, yet few articles describe how higher education embeds this philosophy in educator preparation coursework. In this essay, the author documents how to design assessments, align rubrics, and provide feedback to aspiring school leaders in line with three tenets of SBG.

Introduction

Too often, students ask their instructors, "How many points is this worth?" Rather than focusing on learning, points are often the currency of classrooms across the country. How might education courses in higher education consider making a shift towards emphasizing learning over points? In K-12 education, over 40 states have adopted common core state standards for classroom use ("Common Core State Standards Initiative," 2018). As such, education faculty members should model this practice by emphasizing their own course standards or outcomes in college and university classrooms. Yet, teaching standards are not enough for emphasizing learning over points if feedback, assessment, and grading practices do not align with and communicate the intended learning outcomes. Rather than informing learning, grades often communicate a hodgepodge of factors (Cross & Frary, 1999). In response to state standards and accountability, standards-based grading (SBG) is a practice some K-12 schools are embracing to provide feedback and grades based upon course or grade-level standards (Muñoz & Guskey, 2015; Spencer, 2012).

Meanwhile, SBG is a practice that seems to be rarely used in higher education (Beatty, 2013). Because K-12 schools are beginning to increase their use of standards-based grading, future school leaders will need to understand this practice and communicate their merits to multiple stakeholder groups (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). As such, current and aspiring school leaders considering a change to SBG may benefit from experiencing these grading practices first hand in their educational leadership courses.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a model for educational leadership faculty who aspire to walk the talk of effective feedback by embedding standards-based grading in their courses. This is especially important for faculty, given the increasing emphasis on assessment practices in higher education (Boud & Falchkov, 2007).

Background

Problems with traditional grading

Researchers have frequently documented cases of poor reliability in instructor grading (e.g., Starch & Elliott, 1912; Brimi, 2011). In fact, over 100 years of research suggests education's most well-accepted grading practices are unreliable and subjective at best (Brookhart et al., 2016). Educators struggle to agree on the factors to be included in grades such as behavior, participation,

and extra credit (Allen, 2005; McMillan, 2001; Reeves, Jung, & O'Connor, 2017; Winger, 2005) which is problematic if an important goal of school is to communicate current levels of learning with pupils and their guardians. Traditional grading has a track record of communicating percentages rather than levels of learning, a problem that can be overcome using a different set of grading principles (Guskey, 2013).

Standards-Based Grading in Higher Education

Aside from the perspectives of students in one educational technology class (Buckmiller, Peters, & Kruse, 2017) and an undergraduate assessment course (Scarlett, 2018), few articles describe the use of SBG in educator preparation program courses. It should be noted faculty in other disciplines have documented the ups and downs of using SBG in higher education classes. For example, Beatty (2013) describes an introductory physics course and recommends building catch-up time into the syllabus because learning is not often a linear process for all students. When teaching an organic chemistry course, Diegelman-Parente (2011) reports a change in grading practices enabled students to take more ownership in their learning. In a chemistry survey course, students appear to benefit from SBG with higher pass rates when compared to previous semesters using traditional grading practices (Boesdorfer, Baldwin, & Lieberum, 2018). While the specific implementation details varied in each documented higher education course, standards-based grading has been used successfully, albeit sparingly, in the preparation of undergraduate and graduate students. Regardless of implementation specifics, instructors using SBG enhance feedback through more detailed communication of students' level of learning based upon course standards or outcomes.

Effective Feedback

Faculty in higher education have expressed frustration regarding the effectiveness of their feedback to students following assessments (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Li & Luca, 2014). Providing learners feedback is most effective when it is goal-referenced, actionable, timely, and ongoing (Wiggins, 2012). Formative assessment, sometimes referred to as assessment for learning, emphasizes feedback over points in order to position students to answer questions such as, "Where am I going?", "Where am I now?", and "How can I close the gap?" (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007). Traditional grading practices appraise students using points and percentages rather than goal-referenced and actionable feedback communicating current strengths and weaknesses relative to course outcomes.

Grading to communicate learning: Standards-Based Grading

Standards-based grading (SBG) is a philosophy which includes three main precepts: providing feedback to learners connected to course outcomes, permitting students to provide new evidence of learning when an assessment suggests incomplete understanding, and grade book entries based upon proficiency of course outcomes—not mixed with participation, attendance, or ability to practice well (Beatty, 2013; Iamarino, 2014; O'Connor, 2017). Traditionally, points earned for each assignment are recorded in the grade book. When providing feedback to learners based upon course outcomes, the standards-based grade book becomes a thermometer of sorts documenting current levels of learning at any given point in time. Because SBG permits students to provide new evidence of learning when an assessment suggests incomplete understanding, grade book entries are dynamic rather than static. For example, when a student turns in a revised draft of an essay based upon instructor feedback following the due date, the new level of learning replaces the old in the grade book. Finally, SBG reports current levels of academic learning such as "Identify the qualities of effective teachers" separate from non-academic indicators, i.e. "Turns in assignments on time," a transformation which some K-12 parents prefer over traditional reports (Swan, Guskey, & Jung, 2014). As such, this article provides a model for educational leadership

faculty who aspire to walk the talk of effective feedback and better communicating student learning by embedding standards-based grading in their courses.

Embedding standards-based grading in an educational leadership course

The author's personal experiences with standards-based grading include previously teaching high school math, leading a K-12 district-wide change, providing workshops for teachers and administrators, and teaching three graduate-level education courses using SBG. This paper will describe the preparation and implementation of a face-to-face, three weekend, curriculum leadership course as part of a master's degree in educational leadership. The changes made in this course were part of a program-wide shift to fully-embedding standards-based grading in all educational leadership coursework (see Peters, Grundmeyer, & Buckmiller, 2016). The following sections will describe steps in the process: communicating with students about SBG, designing assessments to discern proficiency of course outcomes, providing feedback to learners on course outcomes, and permitting students to provide new evidence of learning when an assessment suggests incomplete understanding. Figure 1 provides an overview of these implementation steps and key considerations.

<i>Implementation Step</i>	<i>Key Considerations</i>
Communicating with students about standards-based grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document course outcomes on the syllabus. • Clearly describe proficiency levels of course outcomes necessary for each letter grade. • Provide a detailed explanation of SBG to students.
Designing assessment to discern proficiency of course outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align each assessment with one or more course outcomes.
Providing feedback to learners on course outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove point values attached to assessments. • Write a rubric for each course outcome describing various levels of student learning for each course outcome.
Permitting students to provide new evidence of learning when an assessment suggests incomplete understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When inadequate learning has been documented, invite the student to revise and resubmit within an agreed upon timeline. • Assess, monitor, and communicate non-academic behaviors using a separate rubric.

Figure 1. Implementation steps and key considerations for embedding standards-based grading in an educational leadership course.

Communicating with students about SBG

The first step in preparing for a standards-based course for aspiring school leaders was to create a syllabus that clearly described meaningful and assessable course outcomes. Using a backward course design approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2001), the initial step involved creating a living, breathing statements students would conceptualize and later demonstrate learning through course assignments. The course outcomes used were as follows:

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Describe the roles and responsibilities of an instructional leader in the design and articulation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
2. Articulate the role and interdependence between standards, instruction, and assessment.
3. Explain the process for the development and implementation of a school's strategic improvement plan.
4. Work collaboratively with others to develop and monitor effective instructional programs and strategies.
5. Identify how state and federal requirements impact education programming at the school level.

Because university instructors are required to submit end-of-course grades, the next step was to include final grade conversion information on the syllabus. Rather than using points and percentages, university instructors using SBG should create a model for converting proficiency levels on course objectives to a letter grade. Documenting clear criteria for each letter grade can work well, such as the sample outlined in Figure 2.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria</i>
A	Evidence of "prepared leader" on 5-course outcomes.
B	Evidence of "prepared leader" on 4-course outcomes. Evidence of "progressing leader" on the remaining course outcome.
F	Evidence of "novice leader" on one or more course outcomes OR evidence of "progressing leader" on two or more course outcomes.

Figure 2. Sample abridged course outcomes to final grade conversion formula in an educational leadership course.

Instructors should assume students may not be familiar with standards-based grading practices, therefore it is important to provide a detailed explanation during the first week of class.

Using a fine arts analogy can be helpful. For example, a musician who is struggling might ask the director to describe areas of improvement. Nearly all music directors will respond with targeted feedback such as, “You are very good with high notes, but could use some additional practice with the lower end of the scale.” This contrasts with telling the trumpet player he or she is an “85%, B” musician, which is precisely the communication learners most often receive in traditional grading practices. When instructors communicate to educational leadership graduate students that the grading and feedback system used in the course will be like the first music director example, it has the potential to help aspiring school leaders understand how SBG will benefit them as learners as well as make a connection to their future leadership responsibilities.

Designing assessments to discern proficiency of course outcomes

Re-designing course assessments that are aligned to course outcomes is the next step for university instructors utilizing standards-based grading practices. Because the focus of the class is about demonstrating proficiency of the outcomes rather than points, no point values are assigned. Each assignment should clearly be aligned with at least a one-course outcome. In Figure 3 example, the purpose of the assignment is for aspiring school leaders to demonstrate their understanding of state or federal requirements impact on school programming.

Assignment #2 provides cohort members with an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the following course outcome:

5. Identify how state and federal requirements impact education programming at the school level.

Part I: Learn about your state or federal program! (During class, we will select groups and programs)

- Consider starting with the Iowa Department of Education's A-Z Index
- For federal programs, the U.S. Department of Education and professional organizations (Learning Forward, ASCD, NEA, AASA, etc.) may be helpful starting points for policy primers.
- When possible, broaden your horizons to consider multiple resources and perspectives.

Part II: How has this program impacted schools?

- Create a 20-25 minute (interactive?!) presentation *summarizing the main points of the state or federal program*, keeping in mind the areas future principals will need/want to know *and how this program has impacted schools*. Allow 5-10 minutes for final Q&A. (30 minutes maximum).
- Curate three or more electronic resources that might serve as a starting point for new/aspiring principals to have on “file for the future.” Feel free to preview these during the presentation.

Part III: Individual reflection

- Write a 1-2 page (double-spaced) reflection incorporating the following points.
 - How did you play an active role in securing and disseminating information as a part of this group project? In other words, what was your role?
 - What were the 2-3 new/important things you will remember about this program and its impact on schools as a result of completing this assignment?

Figure 3. Sample educational leadership assessment aligned with course outcome.

Feedback to learners connected to course outcomes

In this graduate course, rubrics are the primary means of providing feedback to learners and for determining a mark for the grade book. Using SBG, instead of attaching points to each assignment, professors communicate students' levels of learning for each course outcome. It is most beneficial to base these levels of learning upon a predetermined rubric aligned to course outcomes--and to communicate this with students. A sample rubric is illustrated in Figure 4.

Rubric for Outcome #5

Identify how state and federal requirements impact education programming at the school level.

Novice Leader	Progressing Leader	Prepared Leader
<p>The aspiring principal...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimally participates in securing and disseminating information related to the program. May not clearly identify how state and federal programs impact education programming at the school level. Does not consider multiple resources when sharing about the program. 	<p>The aspiring principal...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participates in securing and disseminating information related to the program. Identifies how state and federal programs impact education programming at the school level. Considers multiple resources when sharing about the program. 	<p>The aspiring principal...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays an active role in securing and disseminating information related to the program. Identifies how state and federal programs impact education programming at the school level. Considers multiple resources when sharing about the program.

Figure 4 - Sample rubric for a course learning outcome

Permitting students to provide new evidence of learning when an assessment suggests incomplete understanding

One of the principles of standards-based grading is providing learners multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding. When feedback for a student indicated anything less than “prepared leader,” he or she was invited to revise and resubmit within an agreed upon timeline.

In order to assess and monitor non-academic behaviors such as timeliness, growth mindset, integrity, and collaboration, the educational leadership graduate program created a Professional Habits Matrix. Program leadership identified several professional habits as being necessary components for aspiring school leaders. While the indicators in this matrix were not directly related to course content or assignments, students were still expected to achieve proficiency. Progress towards these non-academic indicators did not impact the final academic grade, however inadequate progress in this area was addressed through crucial conversations from the instructor or the program coordinator.

Conclusion / Recommendations

SBG is not a perfect system; however, it may be a step forward in providing learners with more effective feedback. It should be noted standards-based grading may require more instructional design time for university instructors in the development of assessments and rubrics. In addition, graduate students may initially resist this shift in assessment and grading practices

(Buckmiller, Peters, & Kruse, 2017). However, if K-12 schools accept the challenge of reforming their assessment and grading systems, an important step will be preparing the next generation of educational leaders by providing first-hand exposure to these practices. The role of an educational leadership professor will be to walk the talk of providing quality feedback to learners by embedding standards-based grading in school leader preparation courses.

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