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Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment: A Review

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Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment. Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. <www.josseybass.com> 250 pp. softbound.

Review

On my shelf of inspiring books on teaching by teachers, *Teacher* by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, A. S. Neill's *Summerhill*, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, *Ways With Words* from Shirley Brice Heath, some of the "Foxfire" series—these books are engaging, readable memoirs. But Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson's *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*, immediately signals "roll up your sleeves" in its outsized dimensions and workbook format. Far from being a book to curl up with, this is the academic equivalent of my Toyota Corolla repair manual. Co-author Walvoord, professor of English at Notre Dame and director of its Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning, and Anderson, of Towson University in Maryland and a biology professor there, apprentice their readers to a series of effective teachers in various disciplines, including nursing, economics, art history, education, business, mathematics, plus their specialties of biology and writing. The resulting book is a compendium of tested advice, options, actual teaching situations, instruction designs, and resources.

The authors claim that we (professors) must identify what it is that we want students to learn before we can design a course, assign work to demonstrate such learning, and evaluate or grade assignments. It can be difficult for a teacher to explain to students what will succeed. First, the authors recommend, take the preliminary steps of determining criteria or standards, and then evaluate students' work against the criteria. Introduced and modeled here is a device called the *primary trait analysis* (PTA), similar to a rubric. For example, the PTA distributed with the assignment can describe the traits that the teacher requires for a grade of "A" contrasted with those that earn a "B," "C," and lower. Thirteen such trait-based scales appear in Appendix C. Using successful stu-

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dent assignments as guides, as Walvoord and Anderson show, we can identify the traits we value and teach these qualities to students. In one case, the authors show how an education faculty group articulated seven qualities in student writing that demonstrate “reflective practice” (84).

Several other practical features of *Effective Grading* include help on management of time spent on grading assignments and suggestions for development of assignments to enhance learning. For example, in Walvoord’s “gateway” policy regarding mechanical correctness, the teacher refuses to accept substandard written work until students improve it to a standard of no more than two errors per page (77). Also, the authors frankly hope to dissuade us from coverage-centered lecture classes and from classic assignments like term papers, “cut-and-paste pastiches of library sources” (28). Throughout the book and in a generous Appendix, we find alternate assignment-based course outlines and novel types of tests and assignments. I myself am experimenting by replacing one critical essay with a writing assignment that asks English students to compose the diary of a fictional or real historical character (Appendix B, 193).

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Our Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center owns several copies of *Effective Grading*, so I encourage you to explore the book for yourself. Like any radical proposal, this pedagogical approach has drawbacks. One disadvantage is that the teaching in an assignment-centered class may deviate from the sequence of concepts found in a textbook. Yet covering the field, as Parker J. Palmer writes, “unconsciously portrays teaching as the act of drawing a tarp over a field of grass until no one can see what is under it and the grass dies and nothing new can grow” (121). Further, the very sheet of ideal traits may appear forbidding to some students, especially perfectionists, and hinder rather than motivate. Walvoord and Anderson’s response, I believe, would be for us to connect with our students and reinforce our belief that they can succeed; “Lay out for them the specific steps needed for success . . . help them see how their own actions can lead to learning” (46).

In writing of Aristotle, the distinguished scholar, Edward P. J. Corbett, reminded us that “the texts [of *The Rhetoric* and *The Poetics*] that have come down to us represent sets of incomplete, unrefined lecture notes. Many of the statements in both texts that are now puzzling were undoubtedly elaborated on and illustrated in the classroom. Those oral glosses would be invaluable now if they could be recovered” (xiii). The value of *Effective Grading* is precisely that it provides those illustrations and elaborations from present-day professors helping students learn. ✎✎✎

Works Cited

- Corbett, Edward P.J. “Introduction.” Aristotle. *Rhetoric and Poetics*. New York: Modern Library, 1984. v-xxvi.
- Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.