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AN EXPERIMENT IN GRADING

Roger Gilles

You’ve probably heard plenty of students—and teachers—grumble about freshman composition. Many complaints have to do with each different teacher’s “wanting something different” and each class’s having its own “completely subjective” grading scale. According to lore, a student in section D might write six ten-page research papers, sleep four nights a week in the library, and get a C in the course because she once forgot two commas, while a student in section M might write two three-page memoirs and a prose poem, sleep through most classes, and get an A because he once had a pet that died.

I’m pretty sure that neither of these extremes ever happens; still, lore is a difficult thing to overcome, and the truth is that many of us who teach composition really don’t know much about what goes on in sections other than our own. For English 150 at Grand Valley we have a few published course goals, a common library component, and a list of recommended texts—but that’s about it. Most of us rely on our memories of our own freshman year, our experiences as graduate teaching assistants, personnel reviews (when we sometimes get a chance to watch someone else teach freshman comp), and whatever stray remarks we hear in the hallway or restroom to help us construct our courses, design assignments, and evaluate essays.

In the fall of 1993, a group of six Grand Valley composition teachers decided to try something new. Our guiding hope was to develop common goals, evaluation criteria, and grading standards, and to share them with our students. We formed a “portfolio grading group,” in which we’d grade each other’s students rather than our own. Our experiment turned out to be at least successful enough to try again, so we’ve continued experimenting with it ever since. This semester, twenty-one of the twenty-five teachers of English 150 are participating in portfolio grading groups, and we anticipate making it a course requirement next fall.

From the beginning, our idea was to teach our classes pretty much as we always had, but, in addition, to ask our students to save their essays during the semester and then choose three, including one in-class essay, to submit for grading at the end of the term, when we’d distribute the portfolios among ourselves, making sure that none of us graded our own students’ writing. Each portfolio would be read and evaluated by two teachers. If those two teachers disagreed by a full letter-grade or more, a third teacher would grade the portfolio, and the two closest grades would be averaged. We agreed that the portfolio should count for at least 60% of each student’s final grade in the course. We wouldn’t assign any grades during the term itself, except perhaps for quizzes on readings, homework assignments, participation, and the like. We agreed to meet every week or two to discuss sample student
essays and our responses to them and negotiate a common set of expectations, so
that we'd all grade the final portfolios in just about the same way.

Our Procedures and Goals
First, we did not want to force ourselves to change whatever individual
approaches we'd developed and found to be successful. Our original group was a
diverse one: Ron Dwelle, a long-time Grand Valley veteran and an experienced
magazine editor and writer with a very practical bent in the classroom; Roz
Mayberry, also a veteran Grand Valley teacher and one-time Outstanding Teacher of
the Year, who typically asked her students to read Plato, educational
autobiographies, and nature writing; Rob Watson, a visiting professor with a degree
in American literature, who assigned three or four novels per semester; Patricia
Quattrin, also a visiting professor, with a degree in medieval literature, who used a
challenging reader called The World of Ideas, a collection of essays by great
thinkers; Diane Rayor, a third-year assistant professor and classicist who used
Ovid's Metamorphoses as the basis for her writing assignments; and I, a second­
year assistant professor and classicist who used
Our portfolio system encouraged us to take
on the role of coach with our students, helping them and pushing them as they
practiced academic writing in our classes.

Some students did feel uncomfortable with this no-grades approach. My own
students would usually feel better, however, when I compared the old way to this
new way. Previously, I might assign and grade five essays, each counting for 20% of
the final grade. Many students, I explained, would begin the semester rather slowly
with C's and low B's, but then they'd hit their stride and end up with a couple of A's or
high B's. Under the old grading system, such students would average out to a grade
of B- or C+. Our portfolio system, on the other hand, allowed students to revise their
essays right up to the final day of class, so that they could take full advantage of
whatever they'd learned or developed during the semester. There was a nice logic to
it, and again it brought to mind the coaching analogy. As a swimming coach, I would


care about improving my students' racing times in their training sessions so that they could compete well on the day of the first meet. The point of the freshman composition class, after all, is to prepare students to write well in classes after freshman comp.

Our original portfolio group decided that three student essays would be about right for each final portfolio: two regular out-of-class essays and one in-class essay. Most of us assigned three to six out-of-class essays during the term, and we let students select their best work for grading, so that they too would have to think about what constitutes good writing and could make their selections carefully. The system also ensured that at least two of the drafts we'd comment on during the term would undergo thorough revision before final grading—approximating, perhaps, the process a professional writer might go through: starting many projects but completing only the most promising, usually in consultation with a number of editors. The in-class essay would serve as a kind of confirmation of a student's ability. We asked students to place the in-class essay at the end of each portfolio, so that we'd read the two out-of-class essays first. We'd use the in-class essay to confirm our idea about the final grade, since in-class writing is a common form of college writing and a good, practical skill to have in the workplace as well. Most memos, for example, are written in less than two hours.

Each portfolio would have at least two graders. If there was strong disagreement about the final grade, we'd consult a third reader. We realized that this process came close to anticipating what would happen to our students once they moved past freshman composition, when they'd write for other teachers, not for us. In preparing our students to write for others now, rather than in the distant future, we found ourselves shifting perspective—again, to that of coaches, or tutors, or facilitators. The point was no longer to satisfy us, but to satisfy the reading requirements of any college-level reader. "One of the teachers in our group," I'd report to my class, "says that he wants an A for the entire semester; Patricia, who used a couple of essays by great writers, a second­writer; Roz, an experienced Teacher of Composition, a third reader. Each teacher brings with him a degree of professional skepticism who used to believe that the student and I, a second-year student having submitted a compilation of his best work, had varied expectations. No matter how well we all felt we clung to a collective hope. Our purpose was to give students a chance to achieve their best work, and we did retain whatever consensus we managed to achieve.

By the end of the semester, we were almost as surprised as we knew it would be. The prize for writing about grading sovereignty, for taking the receiving less seriously, for viewing our grades at your office as guides to future work, and for focusing entirely on the essay's potential to achieve was good enough to cause us to encourage them to take their essays and students to bring them as they would to a professional audience.

The approach we took was the old way to this one: team grading, now counting for 20% of the grade. We asked the student rather slowly to choose and file a couple of A's or B student essays, to show us what they'd selected as a nice logic to getting grades. I'd say, "In the grading coach, I would
our busy academic lives, we rarely get a chance to sit for an hour and talk about student writing. Suddenly, we were doing this ten times a semester. I remember being struck by the wonderful engagement—the joy—evident in the writing of the students of Roz Mayberry. “How do you get your students to care so much about their writing?” I’d ask. And Roz would describe the activities she used to help her students select topics. She would share with us the readings she used to guide and inspire her students. In just one semester, I learned a tremendous amount from Roz Mayberry. Each of us had something different to offer the group. When we discussed poor writing, we’d share our strategies for advising students on their revisions. We’d discuss how to mark usage errors, and when, and to what extent. We’d talk about conferencing techniques and the art of writing clear assignments. And of course we’d talk about the grading scale. If one of us argued that an essay was a B, the rest of us would ask the person to explain why it wasn’t a C. We tried to pinpoint the differences between each grade. We didn’t always agree, of course, but, as the semester wore on, we came closer and closer to consensus. Finally, the meetings felt more like faculty development than anything else. We were learning.

These meetings also helped our students. I’d report on our discussions to my classes. “What do they think of block quotes?” my students would ask. I’d promise to ask at the next meeting, and when I reported back that the entire group agreed that block quotes should be used sparingly, if at all (a couple of us even admitted to skipping block quotes when we read scholarly articles), the students wrote that down—or at least paid close attention.

Our main goals, then, were to create a realistic writing environment for our students, one in which the readers were known to hold common values and expectations, but were not known personally by the writer; to encourage a natural teacher-student relationship in which the teacher took on the role of coach rather than judge; to provide opportunities for students to evaluate their own writing and select the most promising essays for thorough revision; to give composition faculty the chance to learn from one another in a regular but relatively informal schedule of gatherings; and finally, to discover the similarities and differences in our choice of texts, our classroom approaches, our assignments, and our strategies for responding to student writing in the hopes of establishing a common ground—a foundation for this one class that all of us in the English department regularly teach.

Student and Faculty Responses

We expected that some students would feel uncomfortable with this kind of system because, first, they receive no grades on their writing until the end of the semester; and second, their writing is graded by teachers other than their own. In course evaluations of my own classes, these have been the two most common complaints about the portfolio system. “It would be nice to know how you are doing before the end of the class,” is the way one student put it. Another said, “I don’t like the fact that other pros grade our papers. We are writing in a style to make Roger happy. We don’t know what the others want. Roger is teaching us—not them—therefore, he should grade our papers.” With this portfolio system, we are working against the very purpose of the system, some students feel that there is no focus from us in any direction.

Some faculty members, of course, have the responsibility of advising students, working to help our students develop as much as possible. We do our best to help each student realize his or her potential. Some students, of course, are better able to use the portfolio system than others. We used to work with the students in the portfolio system throughout the semester, working with them in small groups and helping them understand how to use the system. We also worked with other faculty members to help them understand how to use the portfolio system.

Nonetheless, both faculty members and students have had negative experiences with the portfolio system. Some faculty members have found it difficult to grade students’ papers, while others have found it difficult to grade their own papers. In addition, some students have found it difficult to write in a style that is different from their own. The portfolio system has been more successful for some students than for others. However, we continue to use the portfolio system because we believe it is the best way to help our students develop as writers. We believe that the portfolio system is a valuable tool for helping students learn how to write.

In conclusion, the portfolio system has been a valuable tool for helping students learn how to write. It is a system that is designed to help students develop as writers, and it is a system that is designed to help faculty members develop as teachers. We believe that the portfolio system is a valuable tool for helping students learn how to write.
I can't help but deluge into the writing of the course, I have been so much about the use of help her to guide and used to help her used to guide and amount from Roz when we discussed their revisions. We'd talk about it, We'd talk about it, and of course we'd talk about it, A, B, the rest of us talked to pin point the course, but, as the normally, the meetings were teaching.

I'd discuss to my task. I'd promise to my group agreed that they've even admitted to students that that.

Environment for our common values and encourage a natural focus of coach rather than own writing and own composition faculty formal schedule of our choice of the defenses for responding the foundation for.

With this kind of the end of the plan their own. In the most common you are doing, I said, "I don't like us. Not them—what we are working against the very teacher-centered focus of most instruction, so it's not surprising that some students resist. But we feel confident that in encouraging students to shift their focus from us individually to academic readers in general, we are moving in the right direction.

Some faculty have also resisted. We are trained to accept and take seriously the responsibility of assigning course grades. We spend over fifty hours in class with our students, working with them, watching them work, so it makes sense that we'd know best how well they've done in the course. It seems wrong somehow to pass the responsibility on to others—a breach of some student-teacher contract that we're used to working under.

Nonetheless, I would have to say that the positives have outweighed the negatives, both for students and faculty. The same student who complained about having other teachers grade his or her writing, for example, later wrote this: "I like how first you turn in a response draft. He doesn't grade it, but he tells you what to improve and at the end of the semester you turn it in after you have fixed it. . . ." Of the 67 course evaluations from my three semesters using the portfolio system, just twelve had explicit negative comments about the system—and the number of negative comments has been decreasing, from six in fall, 1993, to four in winter, 1994, to just two in winter, 1995. Part of that trend probably has to do with my increasing confidence in the system, and part of it may have to do with my increasing ability to sell it to students.

I actually like the tension that's created in the "no grades" writing class. I can understand why students might prefer to know exactly where they stand, as writers, each week through the semester. But I prefer a classroom in which the students are simply looking to improve, regardless of where they happen to be standing. Without grades to fall back on, my responses to student writing must be detailed and forward-looking, always based on the assumption that the student will rework the piece, try to make it better. If my students don't know where they stand, perhaps it's because I haven't clearly explained my response to their writing. In other words, I think both we and our students can understand and evaluate writing without a grade's being attached to it. That's what people do, every day, outside of the academy. The portfolio system challenges us to respond to writing in the same way.

Students and teachers who are bothered by the team-grading approach, it seems to me, are missing something essential about freshman composition. It is, at heart, a service course—which is to say that it "serves" the larger university community. My student who strove to learn what made me happy either misunderstood me or overestimated my importance in the world. My happiness with a student paper is important only insofar as I am able to represent or embody the expectations of the college-level community in general. Indeed, if my expectations are at odds with those of the larger community, I may actually be hurting my students by encouraging them to make me happy. The portfolio-grading groups are an attempt to represent the multitude of viewpoints and expectations that our students will be facing after they leave our ENG 150 classrooms. Someday, I hope we can include non-English faculty.
in the teaching of composition. Non-English teachers, with their own disciplinary perspectives, would certainly enrich our portfolio groups.

Overall, the response to the portfolio system has been positive. Over thirty teachers have taken part in our three-year experiment, and many of those have cited the positive effects it has had on their role in the classroom, on their marking of papers, on teacher-student conferences, on peer conferences, and on student attention to revision. Students, too, have enjoyed having their teachers focus entirely on the content and style of their essays rather than on their grades. One wrote on my course evaluation, "My papers were read and I was given suggestions rather than a grade. This helped me learn what I needed to become a better writer. I like the fact that papers are not given a grade until the end of the semester."

What We've Learned

I think of the portfolio-grading experience as a win-win situation. From the teachers' perspective, the worst that can happen is that we fail to reach consensus about the characteristics of effective and ineffective writing. This would be bad, but it would also be an indication that we need to work out our differences. So even a bad portfolio experience justifies the attempt. The best that can happen, of course, is that we do reach full consensus, in which case we've more than justified the attempt.

From the students' perspective, the worst that can happen is that they might receive a lower grade than the one their own teacher would have given them. But if there had been no portfolio system, those lower graders would still be out there lurking, and the students would be none the wiser. At least we're letting students know about the range of reader responses they are likely to get in college. We are helping students see the university as a reading and writing community, not as a series of isolated and eccentric readers and writers.

Through this experiment in grading, we've learned to separate teaching from grading, to coach our students for fourteen weeks and to judge them for just one week. We've found a way to be proud of our successes: a high class GPA now reflects well on us as teachers—after all, other teachers assigned the grades—whereas before it might have implied that we were easy graders. And best of all, for us as well as for the school and for our students, we've learned a lot about one another—about how each of us teaches this very important and challenging course.