

1-1-1996

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### Recommended Citation

Gilles, Roger (1996) "An Experiment in Grading," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 26.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol14/iss1/26>

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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 with a degree in composition, who used a compilation of former students' essays as the central text for the course. Clearly, we had varied degrees of experience and varied academic specialties, and although we all felt comfortable in the composition classroom, we all felt we could improve. Our purpose was not to change any of our texts or assignments, but to see if we could achieve common goals and develop common standards, as well as retain whatever uniqueness we brought to our classes.

We asked our students to submit their portfolios at the end of the semester, rather than grading individual essays throughout the term, because we knew it would be nice to read and comment on our students' drafts without worrying about grading them—and as you know, it *is* a worry when you know that everyone receiving less than a B+ will either storm out of the classroom or knock teary-eyed at your office door the next morning. As responders to student writing, we could focus entirely on suggestions for improvement and on treating every draft as a potential portfolio submission. We never felt justified in telling a student that a paper was good enough as it was. *Every* draft could be improved. 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 he likes to know what the point of an essay is before he turns the first page." My students would scribble this in their notebooks. "Another says that she wants an A paper to take *risks* with the material, to *challenge* her ideas about the world." More scribbling. These were many of the same guidelines I'd always given to my students, but suddenly they seemed much more real, more relevant, because the students knew that these other people would be looking for them.

I remember once explaining to a colleague that before we had portfolio groups, *all* students in a class would be graded by a single teacher. That teacher might be hard or easy. She might prefer a thesis in the first paragraph, or she might take off half a grade per comma splice. Now, with team grading, each student was graded by at least two teachers—both with their own preferences, to be sure, but both having to agree about the final grade. If they didn't, a third teacher would be consulted. It seemed a much fairer system to me because, simultaneously, it encouraged students to write for as broad a range of readers as possible and teachers to move toward consensus on their own expectations as readers.

Perhaps the most important part of our process was the regular meetings we held, during which we'd discuss student essays and share our grading tendencies. In

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 profs 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 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.