

There is a Difference between Grading and Assessment

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff has undertaken an ambitious approach to assessment of student learning. In the past 18 months, we have revised our Student Assessment Plan, adopted University-wide and School-wide student learning outcomes, adopted an assessment management system (LiveText), used LiveText for rubric-based assessments, incorporated co-curricular programs in our Student Assessment Plan, and strategically planned future assessment efforts using department curriculum maps. These efforts contributed to a favorable HLC visit in October 2016. However, we are not finished with assessment. We use it for *continuous* improvement of student learning outcomes.

We moved so far, so fast, that some of the concepts surrounding rubric-based assessments might not have been thoroughly understood. One such concept is the outward similarity between assessment and grading. We want to explain some **fundamental differences between grading and assessment**, so instructors understand why a rubric score is not necessarily a good basis for a grade.

To begin, the goals of grading and assessment are not the same. The Eberly Center at Carnegie Mellon University explains the difference this way...

“Generally, the goal of *grading* is to evaluate individual students’ learning and performance. Although grades are sometimes treated as a proxy for student learning, they are not always a reliable measure. Moreover, they may incorporate criteria – such as attendance, participation, and effort – that are not direct measures of learning.

The goal of *assessment* is to improve student learning. Although grading can play a role in assessment, assessment also involves many ungraded measures of student learning (such as concept maps and CATS). Moreover, assessment goes beyond grading by systematically examining patterns of student learning across courses and programs and using this information to improve educational practices.”¹

Secondly, grading schemes and assessment rubrics are often scaled differently. Grading reflects a student’s satisfaction of specific criteria outlined for a specific assignment that considers the student’s classification (freshman, sophomore, etc.) and point in the progression through a specific curriculum. An assessment rubric is constructed, such that, the highest level of achievement (i.e. “Capstone” level in AAC&U Value Rubrics) is defined by what we expect from a student ready to graduate. Hence, a grading scheme and an assessment rubric are constructed and applied in different ways. Grading is within the purview of an individual instructor, while all instructors should objectively use assessment rubrics similarly. Would you penalize a freshman because they do not write like a graduating senior? A freshman might receive a grade of 90% on a writing assignment, but the written communication rubric score might be 2. A grade of 90% on a senior-level writing assignment might translate to a rubric score of 4. If instructors use a rubric score as the grade for an assignment, this could penalize underclassmen. When a rubric score is the grade for an assignment, instructors might be inclined to inflate aspects of a rubric-based assessment so students do better on the assignment. This assessment inflation would defeat the purpose of an assessment.

Thirdly, assessments reveal more about patterns of learning than grades. Columbia University - Portland has articulated the difference between grading and assessment as follows...

”Grading is a way for educators to evaluate each individual student’s performance and learning. Grading can include letter grades, percentages, and even a simple pass/fail...

Grades should be a ‘major source of data’ when evaluating student progress; however, assessment goes beyond grades. A teacher might, for example, look past grade averages and examine individual areas of strength and weakness. If a child consistently gets B’s in math, the grading model would tell that child’s teacher that the student is learning successfully. If, however, that child always misses all the math problems that concern weights and measures, then there is a deficit in his or her education. Assessment would identify that deficit, while a system of evaluation based purely on grades would not.”²

There are other differences between grading and assessment. However, the differences outlined above should convince instructors that assessment rubric scores and grades are like apples and oranges. They are both important, but there are different. The Office of Assessment is not attempting to influence how you grade students in your class. You have the right to academic freedom in your classroom. Rather, the Office of Assessment is using rubric-based assessment data to elucidate patterns of learning that inform plans to improve student learning outcomes. Students and instructors become part of this process when they use LiveText for rubric-based assessments.

¹<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/basics/grading-assessment.html>

²<http://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/curriculum-instruction/grading-vs-assessment-whats-the-difference>