

The Case for Motivational Grading

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Abstract: Is it legitimate to use grades for the purpose of motivating students to do things that will improve their learning (such as attending class) or is the only valid purpose of grades to evaluate student mastery of course skills and content? Daryl Close and others contend that using grades as motivators is either unfair or counterproductive. This article argues that there is a legitimate use for “motivational grading,” which is the practice of using some grades solely or primarily for the purpose of encouraging student behaviors that are likely to improve learning.

In his award-winning essay, “Fair Grades,” Daryl Close forces us to re-examine many common but questionable grading practices.¹ One of his main points is that the only valid purpose of academic grades is to provide information “concerning mastery of course content,” especially to external audiences such as employers and graduate schools. Any other purpose for grading, in his analysis, is fundamentally unfair (Close 2009: 368). He completely rejects the idea that grades should be used as means of “rewarding and punishing students across a range of academic and institutional values, including effort, amount of improvement . . . class attendance, and course content knowledge and skills” (Close 2009: 365). Close’s argument relies heavily on the distinction between the *purpose* of grades and the *consequences* of grades (368). Close understands perfectly well that grades may have the effect of motivating certain behaviors, but he argues that grades should not be used for that purpose. “Grades,” he writes, “may have such effects causally, but they should not be assigned to students in order to bring about those effects” (Close 2009: 389).

Although I agree with much of what Close says, in this article I also argue that providing information is not the only valid purpose of grades and that there is a pedagogically appropriate use for what might be called “motivational grading.” Motivational grades are those given solely or primarily for the purpose of encouraging behaviors that are

likely to improve learning, such as attending class having done the assigned reading for that day. Although motivational grades may also provide information about course mastery, that is not their only or even their primary purpose. I will also suggest that motivational grades are particularly appropriate for what is sometimes called “learner-centered” pedagogy.

I am not arguing that grades are or should be the only way to motivate student behaviors or that motivational grades are appropriate in all courses. I believe, however, that there are contexts where it makes sense to use grades for the purpose of encouraging students to do things that are likely to increase their learning.

The Purpose of Grades

A number of authors agree with Close that the primary purpose of grades is to provide information about course mastery to both students and external audiences, such as employers and graduate or professional schools (e.g., Brighouse 2008: 74–75). Most observers also agree that grades do often motivate students to do their assigned work.

Using grades specifically to motivate behavior, however, is seen as problematic by a number of authors. Wilbert McKeachie, author of the justly famous *Teaching Tips*, bemoans the motivational aspect of grading because he believes that it discourages true learning: “Unfortunately, grades motivate studying to get a good grade rather than studying for learning that will be retained and used” (McKeachie 1999: 307). Peter Filene advises beginning (new) college teachers not to use grades as motivators:

I remember all too well my own fears as I began teaching. “How will I make them do their work?” It’s tempting to rely on the power of the grade as the solution, but I urge you to spurn the temptation. You may *degrade* the environment you’re trying to foster. (Filene 2005: 98–99)

James Terwilliger says that it is wrong even to think about using grades as motivators. He writes, “It is unwise (if not actually dangerous) to think of student evaluation as a motivational device designed to produce educational outcomes which would not have been achieved had evaluation not taken place” (Terwilliger 1997: 8). These authors concede that grades are a powerful motivator but urge us not to use them for that purpose.

Motivational Grading

Does it ever make sense, then, to use grades for the primary purpose of getting students to do things that may be helpful to their learning? As mentioned above, one area where motivational grading is sometimes

employed is to get students to attend class and do the assigned reading. Many studies show that class attendance is correlated with college success (Credé, Roch, and Kieszczyńska 2010). In addition, if most of the students have read the material *before* the class, the instructor can teach the material at a higher level. In order to encourage attendance and class preparation, some professors use motivational grades to incentivize the desired behaviors. Surprise quizzes are perhaps the most familiar example. They do test course mastery, but their primary purpose is to guarantee that the student is in class and has done the reading. Other motivational systems are more inventive:

- Some instructors, for example, use “survival cards” (Davis 2009: 283). In this technique, the instructor permits students to submit an index card with notes from the day’s reading assignment. The professor collects the cards but does not grade them. During the exam, the instructor returns to the students all the cards that they chose to submit over the semester and allows them to use the cards during the exam. In this scheme, a student who has done the reading, attended class, taken good notes on the material, and submitted cards will be at a considerable advantage during the test and might get a higher grade as a result. The higher grades gained from having the cards are purely motivational, since these higher grades do not necessarily reflect greater achievement. Indeed, those students might have done worse without their cards. Instead, the higher grade is a reward for attending class, doing the reading on a regular basis and taking good notes.
- Peter Fernald has a sophisticated version of the surprise quiz technique that he calls the “Monte Carlo quiz.” The title of his article includes the purpose of this technique as “encouraging punctual completion, and deep processing of assigned readings.” As in the famous casinos for which the approach is named, at the beginning of each class a student rolls a pair of dice. The first die determines whether a quiz will be given, the second determines which of six pre-assigned questions will be asked (Fernald 2004). Obviously these quizzes also measure mastery of material, but the primary purpose here is to get the students to read the material and think about the pre-assigned questions as they do so.

Objections to Motivational Grading

Are these and other motivational grading systems pedagogically justified? Before discussing the arguments for motivational grading, let us review some of the objections made against it in the literature.

Motivational Grades Are Unfair

Daryl Close argues that using grades specifically to motivate student behaviors is inherently unfair. Close uses the practice of grading students on class attendance as an example of unfair grading; he believes that “the idea of punishing a student with a low course grade for excellent performance *on grade components*, but who skipped class frequently, will seem counterintuitive to many teachers” (Close 2009: 366, italics mine). In Close’s example, attendance is apparently not a “grade component,” so it is obviously unfair to penalize a student’s grade for poor attendance when attendance is not explicitly described as part of the grade. But, if attendance is specifically mentioned in the syllabus as a grade component and if there are reasonable provisions for occasional or excused absences, it is not clear why it is procedurally unfair to students to require them to attend class. Close is also correct that giving an otherwise excellent student who missed classes a “low grade” is problematic, but his example assumes that class attendance is a major portion of the grade. The defender of motivational grading might well ask, “If class attendance is a specific requirement in a seminar class, is it counterintuitive to give an A- instead of an A to a student who wrote excellent papers but missed many of the sessions?” In other words, Close’s example seems to trade on the details of the case he describes, not the practice of motivational grading itself. The fact that motivational grading can be used unfairly does not mean that the practice itself is inherently unfair.

Close’s main argument against motivational grading is that it punishes a student for not complying with a practice that benefits most students but that may not be of educational advantage to the student being penalized. Close points out that it might improve student learning in general if students were required to purchase the course books, but he argues that it is unfair to punish a student who does not purchase the books yet does well anyway. Close believes that punishing a student for not having the text would be an example of the morally unacceptable principle of “punishing the innocent for the greater good” (Close 2009: 367). This reasoning is also problematic. The same logic could be used against requiring students to take certain courses that they may, in fact, never need. Furthermore, requiring an individual to do something that may not be to that person’s benefit is not the same as punishing an innocent person for a crime that he or she did not commit.

The point is that if there is an educational rationale for a requirement and if that requirement applies equally to all students, then it is hard to see why it is arbitrary or unfair, even if it does not benefit each individual student. While it might not make sense to require students to buy textbooks in all classes, in seminar classes where students will be discussing close readings of the text it is reasonable to include bringing the texts to class as one factor in an overall class participation grade just as it is reasonable for a nursing class to require students to bring their stethoscopes to a laboratory class. It is, after all, disruptive for students who do not have the text to be looking on with others. At the same time, the instructor should provide an accommodation for students who cannot afford the texts or who need to access the text through audio materials.

Another possible concern is that motivational grading grades the student, not the work. As Gregory Weiss notes, there are problems with what he calls “forward-looking” grading, for example giving a student an undeservedly good grade in order to build the student’s self esteem or because of the student’s “effort or desire or progress” (Weiss 1995: 9). Indeed, the principle of giving a student good grades to enhance self-esteem is deeply problematic because “it depends for its success on the student believing that it is not being used” and that the grade given actually reflects competency (Brighthouse 2008, 74). But the fact that some practices intended to motivate students are unfair or lack transparency is only an objection to those practices, not to motivational grading in general. There is no reason why motivational grades cannot be both fair and transparent.

Motivational Grading Is Counterproductive

Others object to motivational grading on empirical grounds. The concern is that using external rewards ultimately makes students less interested in learning itself. Alfie Kohn writes: “The more people are rewarded, the more they come to lose interest in whatever had to be done in order to get the reward” (Kohn 2008: 8). This objection, which sounds initially plausible, has several flaws. First, it might be true that in some other world where there were no grades at all and students were free from the pressures that surround them, they might take classes for the sheer joy of learning and be more like their retired grandparents who take classes for senior citizens. The fact that grades distort the learning process is an objection to grades in general, rather than to specific grading practices. Secondly, the empirical literature on motivation does not speak with a clear voice on the question of whether using extrinsic rewards actually decreases intrinsic satisfaction. After reviewing a variety of studies, Linda Nilson concludes that while some studies do suggest that using extrinsic rewards undercuts

intrinsic motivation, other studies find that extrinsic rewards can build intrinsic satisfaction. Other researchers contend that the very distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is vacuous. Nilson concludes by appealing to common sense intuition: “Think about it: Does the fact that you get paid for teaching make it less appealing to you?” (Nilson 2010: 52).

The Case for Motivational Grading

There are several reasons for employing motivational grading in some contexts.

Providing Accountability in a Distracting World

For a busy person in a complex world, accountability is an important concept. Faced with a variety of demands on our time, we often turn first to those tasks where there are consequences for non-performance. We sometimes postpone even things that are very interesting to us until there is some immediate accountability for getting them done.

Professors who complain about the demands on their own time sometimes forget that the lives of their students are, at least from the students’ perspective, just as complex. “Rebekah Nathan” is the pseudonymous author of a remarkable ethnographic study that recounts the author’s experiences after enrolling as a freshman in her own university. She reminds us of what so many of us seem to have forgotten from our own college experiences: the lives of our students are often hectic and chaotic (Nathan 2005). Students experience a multitude of conflicting demands upon their time and energy. They have other courses, jobs, family responsibilities, extra-curricular activities, and complex emotional and relational lives. At the same time, they struggle with nearly addictive distracters such as Facebook and video games.

Given these realities, the traditional assessments of exams and papers do not provide a strong enough motivation to help students avoid the trap of doing all of their work at the last minute. Nathan interviewed students to learn what made them do or not do a reading assignment. She found that before doing an assignment, students typically ask themselves questions such as the ones below:

“Will there be a test or quiz on the material?”

“Is the reading something I will need in order to be able to do the homework?”

“Will we directly discuss this in class in such a way that I am likely to have to personally and publicly respond or otherwise ‘perform’ in relation to this reading?” (Nathan 2005: 138)

If none of these conditions apply, Nathan found, students are unlikely to do the reading. As an honors student at my institution explained it: “If there is no accountability for doing an assignment, I probably won’t do it at all. This isn’t because I am a bad student, I really care about my studies and I am very much interested in the work you give me. But I have a lot of other things going on in my life, and I don’t have the luxury to do the reading the way I might like to.” Grades thus provide a useful counter-pressure that students seem to welcome. This may be why surveys have found that although students do not like grades, only a small fraction say that they believe that grades should be abolished (Milton, Pollio, and Eison 1986: 18).

Students often say, “I do my best work under pressure,” but what they really mean is that they do *all* of their work under pressure. As students mature, they need to learn to manage their own priorities, but in the transition from high school to college it is often appropriate to use grades not only to assess their mastery but also to help them prioritize their time do the things that they probably know that they should do.

Penalty Grades and Fairness

The threat of lower grades can also be used as penalties, for example for work submitted after the due date. Professor Close also objects to “punitive grades,” which he defines as grades that are “lower than the instructor’s best estimate of the student’s knowledge or competence in the course content would otherwise determine” (Close 2009: 389). For example, while Close believes that academic integrity should be punished with non-grade sanctions such as suspensions, he does not think that a student who wrote a good paper but helped another student cheat should receive a lower grade. Close believes that to describe a “B paper as a C paper is unfair because my grade is a lie, literally a libel. The student is a B student, not a C student, and I have misrepresented her level of competence in the course material to every reader of her transcript” (Close 2009: 390). Although he does not specifically discuss late work, presumably he would also object to describing a B paper handed in late as a C paper for the same reason.

Penalizing late papers is a clear example of motivational grading, since it uses the threat of a lower grade than the paper would otherwise deserve for the purpose of motivating the behavior of timely submission. In this case, it can be argued that motivational grading protects fairness, rather than violating it. Not punishing a late paper is unfair to the students who submit their work on time. The student who hands in a late paper may be able to use the extra time for a variety of academic and non-academic purposes not available to the student who does the work on time. Other students can argue that if they were given extra time, they could have written better papers and received higher grades.

The penalty grade may not reflect the tardy student's mastery of course material, but it does rebalance the undeserved advantage the student has taken over other students. From a practical point, of course, if there are no penalties for late work, there are no due dates at all.

Motivational Grading and Learner-Centered Instruction

In a conventional lecture course, where the assessment is based on a midterm, a term paper, and a final, there may be no particular need for specifically motivational grades. The evaluative grades provide their own motivational consequences, even though that is not their primary purpose.

When instructors use more learner-centered instructional techniques, motivational grading becomes more appropriate. For example, Christopher P. Long builds his philosophy course around a blog, where students engage with each other (and with the instructor) in a threaded discussion. (He also requires a traditional term paper.) Student participation in the blog is graded according to a rubric that emphasizes the quality of the posts, but he also specifies how many times per week the students need to make their posts (Long 2010: 352). Students who make fewer posts or who concentrate their posts at the end of the marking period get a lower grade even if their posts are of high quality.

Much of the literature on pedagogy advocates the use of similar active learning strategies as a supplement to lectures. Faculty members are encouraged to emphasize class discussion and to have students participate in group work during class. However, students cannot learn effectively from these activities if they do not attend class and do the reading. This suggests using techniques such as requiring students to write reflection papers about the reading, giving them surprise quizzes, or using a well-designed rubric for grading class participation. Many of the strategies to create greater student engagement, in other words, seem to call out for motivational grading as a way of providing accountability.

A Concern about Grade Inflation²

Although I have not found any discussions of this in the literature, one potential concern about motivational grading is that it may contribute to grade inflation. The problem is that motivational grading often focuses on student activities that are somewhat mechanistic. To choose an example from my own teaching practice, when I cover topics such as feminism or Marxism, I often require students to bring in an example from the world around them. Students usually bring in an advertisement, a YouTube clip, or material from an interview with a parent or acquaintance. These assignments often provoke lively discussions and

provide examples for use in later classes. It is, however, difficult to evaluate the quality of the examples that the students bring in. Realistically, any student who actually brings in an example is going to get full credit for that particular assignment.

To put the problem more broadly, the purpose of motivational grading is often to give students some accountability for doing certain things. If they do those things they will receive the promised grade, and, over the course of a semester, those grades will become a significant part of the overall course grade. Realistically, it is easier to get full credit for a weekly reflection paper than it is to get an A on a paper or an exam. Students have the rubric in front of them, so if they want full credit, all they have to do is to conform to it. Thus, students have more control over the grades that they will get in those parts of the course. A high grade for things such as reflection papers, class participation, or participation in a threaded discussion may then offset lower grades in more traditional assessments such as exams and tests, where the student may have less control. In other words, motivational grading can tilt toward grading for effort rather than quality.

While motivational grading may allow conscientious students to get higher grades, it is not obvious that this is grade inflation in a pernicious sense. Grade inflation has sometimes been defined as an upward shift in grades “without a corresponding increase in student achievement” (Kamber 2008, 46). If students get higher grades because they have participated in groups, blogs, or class discussion, does that signify grade improvement (suggesting that the student has actually learned more about the subject through these activities) or grade inflation (suggesting that the student has padded the grade with mechanistic activities that have little to do with learning)? Resolving this question is beyond the scope of this short discussion, but my own view is that these activities can create greater student engagement with the material and can promote a kind of learning that may be just as important as the skills that are measured by traditional tests and papers. I cannot claim to have any hard evidence for these beliefs, but I doubt that the opponents of motivational grading have any evidence to the contrary either. Teaching, as we all know, is an art as well as a science, and, especially in the humanities, we need to rely on our instincts and experience as well.

Recommended Principles for Motivational Grading

All of this suggests that there is a place for *some* motivational grading. Here are some suggested principles that grow out of the analysis above:

Grades Should Not Be the Only or Primary Motivators

Grading systems, no matter how ingenious, are not a substitute for good teaching and rewarding material. Rather than using grades to get students to learn uninteresting material, we should make the material interesting.

Balancing Evaluative and Motivational Grading

In most contexts, motivational grading should co-exist with grading practices that stress measurement of achievement as their primary rationale. The grade on the final examination is primarily evaluative (although it has a powerful motivating effect), while a grade on class participation may have more of a motivating component. Typically, a larger share of the final grade should be based on grades that are primarily intended as evaluative.


Developmental and Contextual Factors Are Important

Motivational grading is not appropriate for a senior majors' course but is often useful for a required introductory humanities course taken as a distribution requirement. As students move farther along in their educational career, they should be expected to develop a greater ability to structure their own time, especially in their chosen major field. Thus, in professional courses where there is clear content that must be learned for certification or licensure or in upper division classes where students are preparing for graduate schools, motivational grading is usually not appropriate.

Fairness and Transparency

Motivational grades should be based on behavioral criteria rather than personal characteristics, and the opportunity to earn motivational grades should be equally available to all students. In other words, motivational grading means giving students a grade to motivate them to do something that can be observed; it does not involve grading their motivation (which typically cannot be observed). The criteria for motivational grades should be at least as clear as the criteria for purely evaluative grading. One way to do this is to provide rubrics that specify what qualifies as good work.

Motivational Grading Schemes Should Be Connected to Learning Objectives

 Attendance is, as we have noted, a behavior that often improves student learning. However, I do not think it always appropriate to grade class attendance in a large lecture class. If students can master the

material without coming to class, more power to them. On this point I agree with Daryl Close that it is better to grade a student on in-class activities that require class attendance instead of grading on mere class attendance (Close 2009: 387). Thus, it might make more sense to grade a student on class participation, which would include not just coming to class and speaking but being prepared, treating others with respect, and making contributions that are based on the text and that advance the discussion. In this case, attendance in class is a necessary condition for receiving the grade but not a sufficient condition.

* * *

Many observers agree that grades have a powerful motivating effect on many students, providing the “carrots and sticks” to shape how students spend their time. Our focus has been on the subtler question of whether instructors should deliberately use grades for the purpose of motivating students to engage in certain activities in and out of class. In this paper, I have argued for the modest thesis that motivational grading is appropriate in some contexts. The more difficult challenge is how to incorporate this tool as part of an overall pedagogical approach. Rather than being embarrassed about using motivational grading at all, instructors should focus their energy on using it effectively and appropriately.

Notes

1. Professor Close’s essay was the recipient of the 2010 Mark Lenssen Prize for the best article on the teaching of philosophy. I am indebted to Daniel Immerwahr, Brian Greene, and to the anonymous reviewer from *Teaching Philosophy* for their helpful and insightful comments.

2. I am indebted to Allison Mostrom and her colleagues from the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia for raising this problem at their presentation on grade inflation and learner-centered teaching strategies at the Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching and Learning in Washington, D.C., June 4, 2010.

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