



President's Message

Thank you for Teaching Me

Linda Bruenjes, EdD - NEFDC President

I was privileged to begin my teaching career in a place where my students were older and wiser than I. I was 24, our school was in a Boston housing project and directed by two caring, purposeful, and inspiring nuns. My students were motivated, single parents wanting to develop skills that would lead to entry-level business positions. These “learners” taught me how to leverage their diverse backgrounds that ultimately enriched the learning experience for all of us. It was they who started me on the path of both personal and professional growth leading me to question assumptions and broaden my perspective. While I always had a thirst for knowledge, I began to realize that if I wanted my students to succeed, I would need to know who my students were, how to establish community among a diverse group of learners, how learning works, and how to include their unique experiences and perspective while meeting the program’s learning objectives. I am grateful to these students – they were my first partners, and they would not be my last.

Throughout my career in education, I’ve been mentored by many others: senior faculty who were willing to share their insight into institutional culture and critique my instructional design; graduate school professors and dissertation committee members who introduced me to new pedagogies and the value and rigor of using and interpreting data; and experts in the field of teaching and learning and cognitive science who inspired me to ground my teaching practices in research. These partnerships continue to nourish me and inform my work as an educational developer.

A goal of our Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is to support and partner with faculty as they develop educational practices that result in meaningful learning for all their students. While we have always acknowledged that “teaching is hard,” faculty tell us that teaching is more challenging than ever. They explain that students are more willing to share their identities, concerns, and diverse needs, in the increasingly complex environment of teaching students who may be anxious, unmotivated, neurodiverse, and/or dealing with trauma in their lives. Faculty are trying to be inclusive, respectful, and thoughtful about their students’ well-being, all while trying to help students learn course content.

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One of the ways that CTLs support faculty is to emphasize that they are not alone. In addition to facilitating faculty conversations and encouraging faculty to engage in formal and informal conversations with one another, we remind them that there are wide-ranging student-facing supports on our campuses such as: the University Office for Diversity, Access, and Inclusion; Tutoring and Accessibility Services; First-Generation and TRIO Offices; Title IX; Counseling, Health and Wellness; University Food Pantry; Center for Student Diversity & Inclusion; Library Services, and more. These partners have expertise that we can lean on and learn from whether we are faculty, educational developers, or staff.

While there is much expertise residing within our institutions, the increasing ask of our Centers for Teaching (assessment, research, DEI initiatives, experiential education, etc.) along with the rapid rise of educational opportunities such as AI-enhanced technologies have led educational developers to seek the expertise of external partners; partners within reach and who have similar needs and complementary expertise. These partners may be directors of centers in your city or region. They may be former colleagues with whom you've kept in touch. They may be your writing partners or colleagues you met at an outside workshop or conference or through a LinkedIn connection.

We would also like to remind you that you have resources beyond your immediate circles. The New England Faculty Development Consortium (NEFDC) was founded in 1998 by a number of Massachusetts higher education faculty developers with the idea that there is “value to be gained from a network specifically dedicated to sharing resources and collaborating regionally to sponsor faculty development activities.” While we are still committed to the original mission, the current NEFDC Board recognizes the importance of evolving to meet our membership's needs. We invite you to:

- come to in-person and virtual conferences,
- present at workshops,
- seek out new relationships at NEFDC events,
- share your feedback and ideas,
- send in your manuscripts to The Exchange,
- share your interest in becoming an NEFDC board member,
- invite individuals on the NEFDC Board for a conversation on a teaching and learning topic,
- share your questions, concerns, and ideas for NEFDC offerings.

The NEFDC also recognizes that our members have diverse needs that we have not met, and we encourage you to consider how you might leverage your interest in developing expertise and/or allyship through Affinity or Special Interest Groups. I invite you to email me and share your ideas so that the NEFDC Board can discuss and respond to them at our upcoming meetings.

Teaching is hard and increasingly complex – we need to work together to support each other in our work as educational developers, faculty, and, ultimately, student learning – after all, “student learning is at the heart of our work as educators” (Saundra McGuire, 2015).

Linda Bruenjes
Linda Bruenjes

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NEFDC EXCHANGE

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Faculty Peer Coaching: Collaborative Partnerships for Instructional Development

Kristin N. Rainville, EdD and David G. Title, EdD - Sacred Heart University

Teaching in higher education can be a lonely endeavor. Oftentimes, professors find themselves alone trying to work out solutions to emerging issues of student engagement or academic struggles. As colleagues, Kristin and David came together to talk about the ways in which our experiences in leadership, coaching, and instructional design and effective teaching could support our colleagues in their development as instructors. What if we designed an opportunity and invited faculty to participate in a peer coaching community? We could provide the group with professional development about teaching and coaching, as well as space, partners and a learning community for debriefing and ongoing support. Who knew that four years ago, this small idea would turn into a university-wide initiative with 42 continuously engaged faculty participants and a growing waiting list?

In this article, we walk readers through the intentional design of our faculty designed peer-coaching initiative at Sacred Heart University and share emerging findings about the impact of this initiative.

Peer Coaching

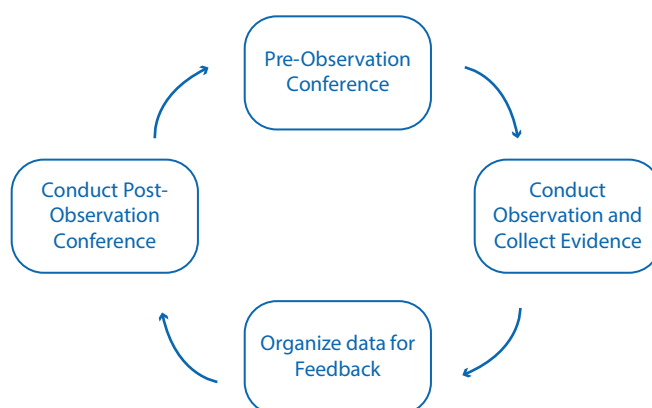
Peer coaching is a method of faculty instructional development, where two colleagues work together to improve their teaching practices. The term coaching was first introduced in the educational literature by Joyce and Showers (1980, 1981) as a tool for teacher collaboration within in-service professional development in PK-12 settings. Their early studies showed that teachers in coaching relationships practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more fittingly than did their counterparts who worked alone. Further, members of peer-coaching groups demonstrated long-term retention of new strategies and more appropriate use of new teaching methods over time (Baker & Showers, 1984).

Research on peer coaching in higher education, which remains limited, has found that peer coaching leads to improved faculty motivation and collaboration with colleagues, as well as a more reflective approach to pedagogical choices (Brancato, 2003; Huston & Weaver, 2008; Skinner & Welch, 1996). In addition to increasing teaching effectiveness, peer coaching has been

found to improve morale and collegiality (Keig & Waggoner 1994; Menges & Mathis, 1988), as well as colleagues' sense of belonging (Preston, 2020; Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023; Rainville, Title & Desrochers, in press).

Although there is a lack of clarity and distinction in some research between peer coaching and peer *observation, review, or evaluation* of teaching in higher education, there are several distinct differences. Peer review tends to be evaluative and is most often tied to the tenure and promotion process (Amrein-Beardsley & Osborn Popp, 2011; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Gosling, 2014; Hamersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Peel, 2005). In addition, peer review includes one way feedback from observer to instructor, whereas peer coaching is a reciprocal process in which the observer is also learning through continual reflection on one's own teaching in a supportive environment designed to integrate new teaching practices (Kanuka & Sadowski, 2020; Ridge & Lavigne, 2020). Peer coaching takes an intentional approach to support faculty in how to engage with each other as peer coaches. In this model, partners learn the cycle of coaching and scaffolding is provided throughout the process. Figure 1 shows how we have defined the peer coaching cycle, which grew from Goldhammer's (1969) clinical supervision model and later modified for peer coaching by Joyce & Showers (1980, 1981).

Figure 1
Peer Coaching Cycle



One of the central tenets of peer coaching is to model effective practices in adult learning while the faculty members are building their own skills in a safe, collaborative environment. A crucial element in this practice is to continually bring the peer coaches together as a learning cohort during the academic year. We call this group of faculty peer coaches a *Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP)* (Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023). The PCCoP is a caring group of faculty members, from diverse backgrounds, with diverse areas of content expertise, who share a passion for teaching and learning in higher education, working together to enhance classroom practices to engage all students in learning rich, academically rigorous content. We hold each other accountable, share our celebrations and struggles – in both teaching and coaching– and learn from each other as we open our classrooms and instructional decisions and design to each other.

Design of Our Initiative

The intentional design of the peer coaching initiative, including the learning sessions before we launch peer coaching partnerships, as well as the on-going Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP), is key to the overall success of the initiative. We created two initial workshops: the first builds a shared foundation by introducing faculty participants to evidenced-based instructional practices, and the second focuses on the peer coaching process. Further, we work together as a group in a PCCoP, coming together to check-in, debrief, and learn together mid-semester and the end of each semester, with a full day of learning and celebrating at the end of the year with all the participants across the cohorts.

Building a Shared Foundation

We launch each peer coaching cohort with a workshop focused on designing evidenced-based instruction. Each faculty participant comes with deep content expertise so that the group has a wide range of knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning. Because of this, creating a shared foundation that we can draw from as individuals, partners, and groups is an essential starting place. We made the design decision to introduce a simplified, three-part instructional design framework based upon Elmore's (2008) instructional core, that places instructor decisions into three categories: *input* (content), *student engagement*, and *student assessment* (Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023). *Input* is focused on how we design and deliver content in our courses. *Student engagement* is how we intentionally plan ways for students to access and engage with that content in increasingly more

complex ways. *Student assessment* helps us look at the ways in which we gather evidence of student knowledge and understanding of the content in both formal and informal ways. The instructional core approach offered us a simple, accessible, foundational starting point for our PCCoP: however, there are many frameworks that designers can draw upon that are for participants who are at varying levels of experience.

Introducing Peer Coaching

The second workshop, which runs before we launch the partnerships focuses on peer coaching. We provide participants with an overview of what peer coaching is and its purpose, and then walk the participants through each stage of the observation cycle. We offer participants the opportunity to watch different parts of the peer coaching cycle using filmed segments from our classroom teaching and post-conferences. We choose to use recordings from our practice as instructors and as facilitators to specifically model the vulnerability and trust that we are both asking for and building. We are also growing as educators and leaders, and so we offer our examples, not because they are strong exemplars but to demonstrate that each of us have strengths and areas for growth in our work as instructors and as peer coaches. After watching a segment of our instruction, and collecting data while observing, participants work together to plan a post-conference session as the observer. We help support each other with language choices and prompts that are encouraging and uses a strengths-based lens, is grounded in specific evidence, and facilitates reflection from the instructor.

Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP)

From the beginning workshops, through the initiative, we are intentionally working on designing a psychologically safe and brave opportunity and environment for participants to show up and engage in courageous ways (Ali, 2017; Edmondson, 1999). Opening your instructional practices to discussion and possible critique is a vulnerability, especially in higher education where peer review and evaluation is included in the tenure and promotion process. This reality is addressed directly by both the facilitators and the group; evaluation *must* remain separate from peer coaching. The emphasis on peer coaching is the learning that each participant, including the facilitator, is engaged in. As faculty facilitators, we have designed purposeful ways to build trust within the group in fostering a confidential process and experience.

The peer coaching community of practice comes together to debrief and share throughout the academic year. We plan mid- and end-of-the semester sessions to connect, share, reflect and extend our learning. As facilitators, we provide support and guidance for the different parts of the peer coaching process. For example, in each cohort, we have designed part of a session to share different observational tools, model how we have taken observational notes and analyzed them to construct possible feedback and provide an opportunity to practice this skill as a group. In a forthcoming publication, peer coaching partners pointed to the benefits not only of the partnership but also the learning that the community of faculty members provided to them: “We willingly share our teaching strategies and experiences with others to improve our teaching practices and, hopefully, help others improve theirs too. We get a lot of value out of learning from the interchange with our peer-coaching partnerships, but the debriefing sessions broaden these learning opportunities.” (Naftzinger and Vaughn, in press).

Within our PCCoP debriefing sessions, participants consistently share instructional methods and tools that they have integrated in their teaching that have promoted student engagement and learning. Oftentimes, as facilitators, we are noticing and naming what these instructional practices are and confirming for folks that their instructional decisions are rooted in evidenced-based practices. At the request of the participants, we have provided additional professional learning sessions on topics suggested by the faculty. Topics have included designing effective classroom discussions and group work, engaging students in reading outside and inside the classroom, and improving large lectures and student engagement during them.

Emerging Findings Focused on Impact

We have collected data throughout this initiative, engaging in on-going data analysis. Data has included verbal and written responses gathered during debriefing sessions and an end of the year celebration. We have begun to analyze transcripts and documents from recorded debriefing sessions and post-conferences using the grounded theory approach of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There are distinct findings that have emerged that begin to show the impact of the peer coaching initiative. These include change in instruction, the need for continued growth and development, the value of the peer coaching structure and process on validating positive practices, and a sense of belonging to a community and the institution.

Instructional Design Changes

“I think that sometimes we might get lost in our own teaching silos and rationalize that this is what I’m doing in my class, and it works. But, by talking with other people, you begin shifting your disposition and start thinking, “Maybe what I’m doing isn’t working, so what can I change to make it work better?”

(Jeff, Rhetoric Professor)

Many of the participants have indicated, like Jeff, that the process of peer coaching has led to changes in their thinking and more specifically in their practice. Participants have noted several active learning strategies they have enacted successfully in their classrooms such as Think/Pair Share, an engagement strategy where the instructor pauses a lecture and asks students to process the content individually, then with a partner. A variation of this strategy applied to class discussions involves “rehearsal,” where the instructor gives students time to formulate responses individually or with a partner before being asked to participate in a discussion. Other popular strategies included intentionally asking higher-level thinking questions in class rather than recall questions; using personal examples to illustrate major concepts or theories; allowing discussions to occur in smaller groups rather than always in the large class; using a mix of activities, including physical movement, to break up longer class sessions; using technology tools, such as Kahoot or Perusal; re-designing in-class and out-of- class tasks to focus on task rigor, not simply content rigor; and involving strategies for inclusive teaching. Participants all used different student engagement strategies after just one semester of participation.

Need for Continued Growth

Despite the affirmation, all participants agreed that peer coaching has made them realize they have room for growth as instructors. Learning a few new strategies has made them eager to learn more, especially after they have experienced success. One quote from an original cohort member pushed us to provide additional direct instruction on teaching strategies: “I’ve done all the easy stuff. Please teach me more complex techniques.” Because of this shared sentiment, the facilitators conducted additional workshops on teaching strategies. Some of the most common areas for growth included more engaging lectures; strategies for increasing the cognitive demands of the tasks (rigor); more engagement ideas; greater student engagement in discussions; strategies for offering more choices to students in academic tasks; techniques to draw in reluctant students into class activities.

The goal of this initiative is to develop instructors who are reflective practitioners, who are always striving to improve their craft. It is clear from this evidence that our faculty participants are eager for new learning and professional development opportunities; it is likely one reason they wish to continue in this initiative and why the knowledge from peer coaching is markedly different from traditional professional learning models. To summarize this theme, the statement most cited by the participants was this one: “peer coaching became a venue to think about our teaching.”

Validation

The purpose of the peer observation and feedback process is not to find fault but to identify effective instructional practices already in use and discuss possible improvements. One theme that emerged from the data is that faculty members discovered that some, if not much, of their practice, was effective. This is important learning because many faculty commented that they had little training in pedagogy before taking on the role of professor. It was comforting to hear from a peer that some of what they were doing was “working.” One comment that elicited the most agreement among the faculty was this: “We foster more engagement than we think!” Another statement that many peers affirmed: “I feel affirmed in strengths I did not know I had.”

Connectedness and Belonging

While the initiative’s stated purpose is to improve instructional practice, an unanticipated benefit to participants has been how connected they feel to other colleagues and the university. Representative of this impact, multiple participants agreed with statements such as “learning about other content areas,” “being paired with a completely different content area,” “having a safe space to have honest discussions about teaching without a power dynamic,” and “having a trusted colleague,” and “the process was very collegial” as key benefits of the peer coaching initiative. In an upcoming publication, a cross-college partnership explained the sense of connectedness, belonging, and support that peer coaching provided: “The process exposed faculty to overlapping and complementary perspectives and offered diverse expertise for improving their andragogical practices. Additionally, it had positive social-emotional effects on the group. Peer coaching reduces the isolation and anxiety of junior faculty by providing a unique form of much-needed professional development, navigational capital, and social-emotional support” (Preis, Martignetti, Marmo, Ostrander & Schreffler, forthcoming).

Peer coaching has the potential to be the bridge between faculty members learning about improved instruction and implementing new strategies in their classrooms. Based on decades of research on teaching practices, adult learning and successful coaching, a peer coaching initiative can play an important role in an institution’s cultural shift from one in which instructional practice is largely a private matter to one in which faculty are comfortable making their practice public to trusted colleagues.

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Grading for Learning at the University of Rhode Island

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Grading student work is a fraught topic for critical instructors who reflect on how best to equitably support student success, especially in relation to fostering students' sense of belonging and willingness to take intellectual risks. The sense of frustration experienced by many faculty around grading is not simply caused by logistical complications, but often deeply rooted in a severe misalignment between their educational values and hopes for the students and the grading-focused environment in which they teach. An increasing number of higher education colleagues have been advocating that more attention needs to be paid to grading practices to truly advance inclusive teaching efforts as students in our institutions are too often hyper-focused on the grade they receive at the end of the course rather than appreciating and embracing the learning happening throughout the semester. At the University of Rhode Island, a growing group of instructors have been discussing this

area of critically inclusive teaching practice, and experimenting with grading scheme tweaks and variations over several years. This article summarizes the history of the "[Grading for Learning: Empowering Students with Agency for Growth](#)" [Faculty Learning Community](#) (Santucci & Golas, 2021) at the University of Rhode Island (2019-2022), showcases one faculty member's specific implementation of a Specifications Grading (Nilson & Stanny 2014) approach as an example in practice, and highlights key takeaways from the collective experience of the authors (Anna, Julianna, and Alissa - "we" in this article) as we continue our shared journey of critical reflection about [grading for equitable learning](#) in higher education.¹

¹ We write this article after having co-led a session with one of our colleagues on this topic for the NEFDC Spring 2022 Conference on "Learning Assessment, Evaluation & Grading:

Our Story's Background

Summer 2019 represents the origin of this story about the "Grading FOR Learning" initiative at the University of Rhode Island (URI); Anna was a new Faculty Development Specialist in URI's Office for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (ATL) and during a consultation, Julianna, Associate Teaching Professor in Human Development, shared her frustrations with traditional assessment structures that limited her students' agency and impeded their development of sense of belonging and partnership in the course experience. Anna suggested looking into Specifications Grading (Nilson & Stanny, 2014), a body of work she was able to share thanks to her collaboration (through the Rhode Island Teaching and Learning RITL Network) with fellow educational developer Michael Palmer from UVA.² We include these details to highlight the crucial role that transformative conversations (Pleschová, Roxå, Thomson, & Felten, 2021; Thomson & Barrie, 2021) and significant networks (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) play in initiating reverberations and ripples of change. The resulting "snowball effect" connects like-minded people and empowers them to take action in their own spheres of influence, effecting lasting change and impact with their own contexts.

The Grading for Equitable Learning Landscape at URI

Since their initial conversation in 2019, Julianna and Anna have increasingly partnered with colleagues across the institution who were eager to align their assessment practice with both their own and their students' needs, especially during the emergency remote teaching storm of COVID-19. Julianna was among the key faculty champions collaborating with Anna's Faculty Development unit within ATL to promote equitable pedagogy across the university by developing sustained opportunities for engagement and shared practice for and among faculty, as well as championing accessible assessment tools (Santucci & Nasrollahian, 2021).

(Butler and Nisan Citation1986; Kohn Citation2012), that grading is a time-consuming task for instructors (Crisp Citation2007), and that grades reinforce educational inequities that arise from systemic racism (Link and Guskey 2019; Feldman Citation2019). In contrast to traditional grading, specifications grading is premised on transparency and progress-oriented feedback, with the goals of increasing student motivation, fostering clear communication, and achieving educational equity (Winkelmel et al. Citation2016).

Of course, the success of specifications grading depends on its implementation; a poorly designed system, implemented under inhospitable circumstances or by an unprepared instructor, is unlikely to positively affect student motivation, learning, or educational equity.³

As someone who had already started reflecting critically on assessment, Julianna was able to provide a vivid example of how her course was designed for meaningful, aligned learning experiences that enabled both her and her students to better weather the COVID-19 storms of continued uncertainty and trauma. Leveraging her experiences and successes, Julianna helped lead sessions across ATL's programs, was a speaker at ATL's annual showcase in Spring 2021, and inspired colleagues, including Alissa whose story is detailed below. Our collaboration culminated in the co-design and co-facilitation of the 2021 and 2022 "Grading for Learning" Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), which employed the text *Ungrading* (Susan Blum ed, 2020) as a point of departure for critical conversation, course change action planning, and individual consultations for implementation. These FLCs were regularly oversubscribed, and participants' feedback highlighted the empowerment granted by explicit focus on learning outcomes, increased learners' responsibility and autonomy, decreased stress for both instructor and students, and improved teacher-learners partnering relationships.

² For readers who may be unfamiliar with the core characteristics associated with Specifications Grading, we highly recommend this summary definition of the approach and its benefits provided by Streifer and Palmer (2021): "What is specifications grading?"

Specifications grading is a method of assessing student work that emphasizes students' mastery of skills and knowledge in alignment with a course's learning objectives. Though students ultimately earn a letter grade for the course, the method of determining that grade differs from the traditional practice of calculating a weighted average. In specifications grading, instructors set clear, comprehensive expectations for each assignment (these are the assignment's specifications, also called expectations or criteria). Instructors then bundle together assignments to create pathways to each grade level. The grade-level bundles are differentiated by the quantity of assignments, the difficulty and complexity of the work, or both. The course grade is determined by students meeting specifications for all assignments in a particular grade bundle. No individual assignment receives a letter grade; each assignment gets credit only when it meets all of the specifications. This binary evaluation system is an essential component of specifications grading; instead of attempting to parse fine gradations in quality, an instructor sets the expectations for each assignment to a level that indicates an acceptable amount of learning (the definition of "acceptable" should be closely tied to the course's learning objectives). In order to lower the stakes, specifications grading systems generally allow for (limited) revision opportunities, and instructors provide process-oriented feedback on each assignment.

Though not a panacea, specifications grading addresses many of the dissatisfactions that students and instructors alike express about grading. Chief among these complaints are that grades cause students anxiety and shift their motivation from learning to evaluation (Chamberlin, Yasué, and Chiang Citation2018; Pulfrey, Buchs, and Butera Citation2011; Schinske and Tanner Citation2014), that they do not provide students with meaningful feedback

Facilitating these FLCs gave us hands-on experience of the critical complexities involved in attempting to map “the common ground that we seem to be walking together” as we collectively advocate for a “wholesale change in how we grade in higher education” (Talbert, 2021). Our work is in conversation with colleagues who have been increasingly highlighting such complexities by exploring the paradox of reward systems in education (Kohn, 1993) and the connections between grading and promoting educational equity (Feldman, 2019; Artze-Vega, 2020; Palmer & Streifer, 2022). The “Grading for Learning” philosophy underlying our FLCs, consultations, and overall initiative at URI thus positions approaches under the umbrella of Specifications Grading among a wider and very complex spectrum of “progressive grading models that can help students focus on learning rather than evaluation” (Eyler, 2021). For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to focus on Specifications Grading as a relatively well-defined grading strategy within this wider landscape; we share examples of implementation from Alissa’s courses, and then summarize key lessons learned and suggestions for implementation that we hope readers may find useful in their contexts.

Specifications Grading in Practice: Examples of Applied Experimentation

As Streifer and Palmer (2021) note, “Since 2014, when Linda Nilson published her book, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*, interest in specifications grading among instructors across US institutions of higher education has surged (Nilson & Stanny 2014).” Inspired by Julianna’s work at URI specifically, Alissa has applied Specifications Grading in four different contexts, each of which presents its own challenges and learning opportunities. First, she redesigned an existing (though new to her) general education course that also serves as a prerequisite for a number of majors in the college. She has taught two versions of this course: Once to 150 undergraduates in an online-only asynchronous format, and 3 times in a “flipped” face-to-face modality for ~60 undergraduates, where course content is designed to be navigated outside of the classroom, and class time is spent working on a semester-long group project or engaging in mini-lectures and case studies of weekly topics. There are no exams or quizzes. Instead, students demonstrate their learning through the discussion boards as well as a semester-long running document (a Know-Want to Know-Learned (KWL) chart), to which they add prior knowledge and learning goals before starting a topic, and then summarize the main points of their learning. Every assignment

in the course is graded as “Accept” (meeting specifications/assignment criteria) or “Revise” (can be resubmitted once instructor/peer feedback has been incorporated). In its original iteration, the grades were “Satisfactory”/“Unsatisfactory,” but students, without significant nudging, seemed unaware that they could resubmit unsatisfactory assignments; changing the language has helped with that. There are no limits on the number of resubmissions, and revisions can be submitted until the final exam period. To help students understand the grading scheme, Alissa implements a mid-semester check-in grade, in line with the grading scheme laid out in the syllabus. Despite multiple descriptions, a subset of students (~10-20%) continues to be confused by the course grading scheme. For the most part, the course is well-received, and students report at the end of the semester that the grading system helped them focus more on their own learning, rather than individual grades on assignments.

A second example involved the application of a hybrid specifications/badge-based grading scheme to a graduate level course. This was functionally more challenging, as in many ways it is easier to start from scratch and design a course around the specifications grading scheme. As the course progressed, Alissa and her co-instructor also discovered that for assignments that happen once (e.g. presentations), it is critical to consider the consequences and logistics of revisions or resubmissions. An important consideration in specifications grading is that if a student fails to meet all expectations for a particular grade (e.g. a presentation goes poorly (and does not earn a “Satisfactory”) but is required to earn a B, for example), they may end up with a much lower grade than if individual assignments are graded on a more traditional points-based scheme. Revisions or resubmissions in these instances can take the form of re-presenting (a time sink for all), or a reflection by the student(s) on why and how to change their approach in future assignments, or perhaps a curation of resources designed to support students in developing successful assignments or another creative alternative assignment that will help the student demonstrate their learning and ability to meet the specifications of the assignment. Alissa’s advice is to think this through ahead of time and communicate the consequences (and options in the aftermath, if any) of not earning a “Satisfactory” (or equivalent) grade on a key assignment clearly to students. This course was less successful than other experiments, and students reported dissatisfaction with the course grading scheme, which may have been an artifact of the growing pains and unanticipated consequences

the inexperienced specifications graders grappled with, as described above.

Learning from this grad-level course helped inform the redevelopment of an adapted and partially redesigned version of another grad course that Alissa taught using a specs grading scheme. Since this was a redesign, it was much easier to begin with the specs grading model and build the course around it, including preemptively planning for revisions. Key elements included weekly summaries of assigned scientific articles, which students peer-reviewed - an extremely effective way of supporting students to improve their individual writing, as well as their ability to provide constructive feedback to one another. Groups of 2-3 students also collaborated on two 45-minute “teaching presentations,” acting as instructors on an assigned scientific article. To support students in successfully meeting presentation criteria, students met with the instructor to discuss a draft of the presentation a week before presenting it. A reflection and corrected annotated presentation served as a “revision” opportunity for groups whose presentation did not meet all the specifications of the assignment satisfactorily. A final key element of the course included individual course goal-setting documents, which were updated with reflections and resubmitted twice before the end of the semester. Overall, this course went very smoothly and was well-received by students, with all students understanding course expectations and grade determination.

Alissa’s latest ongoing experiment in the Spring 2023 semester is a new upper-level Undergraduate/Grad course which is being taught in a Problem-based learning format (Amador, Miles & Peters, 2006). Students are assigned to heterogeneous stable semester-long groups and grapple with an interconnected multi-part semester-long “Problem” that students (who have ostensibly been hired as environmental consultants) must solve. Four times in the semester, at the end of each larger thematic unit, students present their group’s proposed solution (and justifications for it) to the class and “the client” in a live presentation with an additional set of annotated slides. If student presentations do not meet all expectations, groups are required to meet with the instructor, verbally make corrections and work to identify ways to improve and prepare better for the next presentation. As in other courses, another key element of the course includes a living course goal-setting document, which students periodically update and resubmit with reflections on their progress towards or achievement of their personal learning goals. The semester has just started,

so we don’t yet know how this course and its logistics will be received by students.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for Implementation

Instructors may feel apprehensive about adopting specifications grading because they worry this approach will not work for their specific courses. The course design and grading approaches described above demonstrate that varieties of specs grading can be adapted and contextualized across a range of courses including both graduate and undergraduate level, on-line asynchronous or face-to-face, and both large and small class sizes. At URI, instructors across disciplines have had success using specifications grading and adjusting the design to meet the needs of their content. It should be noted that an “authentic” implementation of specifications grading does not necessarily exist, and instructors should feel liberated knowing that there is no one right way to employ the grading method. We would also like to stress that the method works best with a new course or part of a course redesign; it can be challenging to massage specifications grading into an existing course framework. If a new course is not possible, we highly recommend that novice specifications graders wade into the process by starting small and test the philosophy out with just a single assignment using a pass/revise rubric. Although there is no one way to implement specifications grading, there do seem to be some common challenges that occur during the process. These challenges can be summarized using Julianna’s 3 D’s Acronym: (a) Disappointment that time spent grading does not get reduced; (b) Dealing with deadlines and do-overs; and (c) Demystifying the grading scheme for students.

A. Disappointment that Time Spent Grading Does Not Get Reduced

If you are looking for the Holy Grail of grading that will magically reduce the time spent grading papers, then you may feel let down to learn that time spent grading may actually increase with specs grading depending on how much formative feedback you choose to give. The decision over whether or not an assignment meets the specifications and therefore earns credit is typically quick to make; it’s the feedback you provide on assignments needing revisions that can take more time. Before you abandon the effort, know that although grading time might not be reduced, the process of grading actually gets better, with less negative energy loss. Grading feels much more constructive and allows instructors to target the entry point of student dissonance. You are no longer judging a final product, but instead assessing the steps the student needs to perform

at successively higher levels of understanding. It is much easier to identify exactly where the learning became more challenging for the student. Students, in turn, reflect more on their own level of understanding and are better able to assess their current knowledge and the steps needed to improve their knowledge and skills. Grading feels more like teaching rather than being the judge, jury, and in some cases the executioner.

B. Deadlines and Due Dates

A hallmark of specifications grading is allowing students opportunities to revise work that did not meet the specified standard. This can cause some headaches regarding due dates and feeling overwhelmed with constant grading. Consider adding “best by” and “expiration” dates in the syllabus to allow flexibility for assignment submissions, but with boundaries. “Best by” dates are an expected time when students should complete a task. The expiration dates are the final date an assignment can be submitted and/or revised. A token system is another way to handle due dates and revisions. Since Rhody the Ram is our university mascot, Julianna and Alissa implemented “Ram tokens,” which are given to students to use (or “cash in”) for extensions on assignments or to turn in revised assignments, or substitute assignments, providing some boundaries for the number of revisions a student can attempt. The social scientists among us would be interested to know that students are hesitant to relinquish their Ram tokens and are therefore highly motivated to complete assignments on time and to the best of their ability. The number of Ram tokens spent can be used to amplify or reduce a course grade (i.e. B+ or B-).

C. Demystifying the Grading Scheme

Students’ K-12 experiences have conditioned them to expect points on an assignment and the pass/revise system can be challenging for them to accept. There will be some pushback and confusion. You will need to spend time throughout the semester reminding students of the grading policy and the expectation they will read feedback and revise assignments. These are key opportunities for assessment and feedback literacy development (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Winstone, Nash, Rowntree & Parker, 2017), the lack of which surely remains a widespread concern: consistent reminders are needed to let students know that reading assignment feedback is required as their assignments may need to be revised and resubmitted. Both Alissa and Julianna have found that revisions are easy to grade and don’t demand as much time as one would think, and we have found that the number of assignments

needing revisions decreases over the course of the semester. It is important however to consider your own bandwidth for revisions and resubmissions. Consider dropping one or two missed assignments as an alternative. A mid-semester Amnesty or Check-In Week also works well to give students ample time to get used to the new grading system as well as provide a specific time for revisions or missing work to be handed in. Tokens used during the first weeks of the semester can be replenished during Amnesty Week giving students a grading “mulligan.” It can feel rejuvenating to get a chance to start again, rather than spend time digging out of a deep hole. Having Amnesty Week at the mid-semester mark gives students the necessary space to adapt to the grading expectations, while also allowing them to recalibrate and get on target to work toward earning their desired grade. With small sized classes, Amnesty Week can be an opportunity for one-on-one reflection meetings. In large sections auto generated emails can go out to groups of students letting them know which specification they are on track to complete and what they would need to do to improve their standing.

Conclusion

We have found that overwhelmingly, the majority of student feedback on specifications grading has been positive, but it is important to point out that not everyone will be receptive. Students and colleagues will challenge the efficacy of the system, and although they agree that traditional grading has its downsides, it is familiar. There will be student pushback, especially from those students who are used to a system where partial credit is better than no credit. Students have also been socialized into playing the “points” game throughout their schooling, and significant resistance can occur when the rules of the game are changed. In some cases, colleagues unfamiliar with the specifications grading approach need to be convinced of its merits, especially when students dispute course grades. For these reasons, we recommend engaging with Streifer and Palmer’s “Is Specifications Grading Right for Me?” Readiness Assessment tool (2021) in determining best steps within your institutional culture and context. If it is your first experience implementing an alternative grading approach, it would be appropriate to outline the challenges associated with shifting the grading paradigm. Describe the merits of specifications grading, frame negative comments on course evaluations in

³ For a comprehensive study on the complex notion of student resistance to active learning and pedagogical innovations, see Tolman & Kremling 2017.

the context of student pushback and chronicle your efforts toward continuous improvement and commitment to equitable grading policies.

Specifications grading is not a perfect system, nor is it a one-size-fits-all solution. However, despite the learning curve and inevitable bumps and bruises that will accompany the first implementation, we are convinced that it is a better fit for the needs of the courses described in this article, so none of us plan on returning to traditional grading methods. All students and instructors deserve to identify grading systems that allow instructors the space to continue to teach through the process of assessment, and that provide students autonomy over their grades. We have found in our courses that Specifications Grading helps create a culture that supports students in internalizing the reward of gaining proficiency, promotes continuous improvement, and values the learning process.

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The Art of the Hook: How to Engage Your Students From the First Day of Class to the Last

Daniel Zukergood, PhD, - Sacred Heart University, Jacquelynne Anne Boivin, PhD, - Bridgewater State University, and Christopher Hakala, PhD, - Sacred Heart University

Abstract

Student engagement is an issue of critical importance in higher education. In this piece, we offer suggestions gleaned from years of teaching and learning, as well as the literature on science of learning, to suggest a framework for how to enhance student engagement and develop relationships in the classroom that lead to higher quality educational experiences. We couch these practices in practical examples drawn from disciplines that would be beneficial to faculty teaching in any level of education.

Teaching and learning has undergone a great deal of change over the last several years. Concerns of student disengagement have dominated the literature, and as a result, much of the work that has been done in higher education has focused on helping faculty learn to better engage students in the classroom. The purpose of this article is to help teachers create exciting, engaging lessons that make teaching and learning come alive for everyone in that classroom.

Some of the previous research claims have focused on what the students are doing and what is distracting them (Lang, 2021). For example, in a study that caused a great deal of upheaval, researchers found that taking notes via pen and paper seemed to better serve students than taking notes via the computer. Despite the fact that this finding has not been replicated, and the fact that the computer can serve faculty well in the classroom, many instructors began to ban computers from their classrooms in an attempt to create a more engaged, and more effective learning environment.

In this article, we would like to argue that the extreme measures sometimes taken by faculty to engage/hook students is, in many ways, not the approach that best serves students. Rather, it creates an environment that leads to a more orderly classroom, and the appearance of engagement. However, *true* engagement in the context of teaching and learning leads to true learning. And, to do that, we would like to describe an approach that we call the “Art of the Hook”. In essence,

this article provides insights to allow any faculty member to practice incorporating the “Art of the Hook” to achieve two objectives: 1) make students’ learning more relevant, exciting, engaging and efficient and 2) ensure their learning will extend beyond the classroom. These are two overlapping concepts because if students are more engaged (since they see the implications outside of their classroom), their learning process is more efficient.

The Art of the Hook starts with the notion that in order to effectively teach students, teachers need to be certain to first focus on the mission of the students rather than just focusing on the content. That is, you need to work to have students see that the purpose of learning is not just to know content (although that is critically important), but to also understand the context around the content, how that context might have changed over time, and how it is relevant to their mission in life. Furthermore, students need to see that not only is it important that they know certain things: they also need to realize that knowing these things helps them in actually accomplishing their life mission. Your mission, to put it directly, should be to *educate* students and have them see how the content and skills you are teaching them will be useful in their lives today and in the future. Students, as a result, see each lesson as a powerful contributor toward their goals, whether they are to be a surgeon, or a professional athlete.

The role of metacognition

In the teaching and learning literature, there has been a big push to understand the notion of metacognition and to help students begin to navigate this difficult topic. Metacognition, of course, refers to being aware of not only what you know, but being able to think about what you know and how you know it. Willingham (2023) describes the difference between memory and thinking. Using much of what we do when we say we are thinking is memory and we use that as a model for how to act in the situation. That’s not a bad strategy, and one that allows us to shortcut much of what we do in our lives. When we go to a restaurant, for example, we don’t need to think about what to do. Rather, we rely on previous experiences

in restaurants, and from that, we remember how we behaved, and we do that again. Thinking is entirely different. Thinking requires us to integrate newly acquired information into our knowledge, recombining previously learned information to create a different solution or outcome. Engaging in a process that leads to increased connections leads to understanding. Effort to simply remember is important under certain circumstances, but it doesn't lead to the kind of deep thinking we would promote. Helping students to understand this goes a long way towards them developing a clear understanding of metacognition.

Once they are clear about their own mission, we now can begin supporting them to move beyond just rote memorization and having them apply more higher level critical thinking skills for them to see the relevance of the material to their mission.. Once we have established a clear understanding of metacognition in our courses, students can begin to articulate what their goals are for the course that goes beyond just knowing the material.

Creating the hook

When we are speaking of “hooking” students, we are speaking about engaging them. We are speaking about creating learning environments that are vibrant, conversant, student centered (as opposed to teacher centered) and high in critical thinking. Our experience in the field tells us that students love to be challenged, to be engaged and not just sit there listening to a talking head for an entire class period. Once we set the tone in the classroom for learning beyond memory, we have the appropriate context for helping students begin to see relevance in the material. From a cognitive standpoint, students can now integrate incoming material to help them decontextualize it and see relevance. Students often spend a great deal of time creating structures that isolate material in memory, which can easily be recalled under the right context (i.e., exams or class activities) but that does not impact them beyond the classroom. “Encoding” is a term that we use for this process. The notion of encoding specificity suggests that humans are often best able to recall information when the original encoding context is reinstated. This is one of the reasons that faculty can often remember students’ names in class, but when they see students outside of class, they are unable to recall their names. To alleviate that, we want students to have additional “hooks” to hang the information on when they learn it. By doing so, students will then have multiple ways of recalling that information when they are not in class. To do so

without structural support in class is difficult. Students have learned, through years of classroom behavior, that teachers want information back in ways that are consistent with the way they were told (Daniel & Chew, 2012). This manner of learning is consistent with much of their experience and they are comfortable with it.

What we are suggesting in this piece is that there is both an experiential and experimental reason to hold students to a different level of accountability. But, we have to help them. The art of the hook is the way we argue that we do that.

The Art of the Hook

In the simplest terms, the art of the hook starts with the mission (shared reason for learning, between the educator and the student), but really begins to engage students to see the relevance of material. One of the biggest criticisms of this approach is that students just need to learn some things (one author often hears, “but my class is a heavy content class”). Faculty believe that students need to learn (i.e., remember) everything that is said in class. This is patently not possible nor reasonable for learning. Rather, if we conceptualize learning as a process that involves: identifying a purpose for the learning; seeing relevance or how it relates to the student; then seeing how it might help the student identify, understand or handle upcoming situations, we then create a much more powerful learning context for students.

We try to destabilize learning by centering it on the students’ lived experiences and have them see, no matter what we are teaching, there is relevance. Students are not perfect, but they are also not inefficient. If we create a learning environment that centers on remembering things, they will do that. If we create a learning environment that centers on their metacognition (their ability to think), contextualized content, and application of material beyond the class, students will do that. And, they will be engaged in the classroom while they do it. This idea is at the heart of the Art of the Hook method.

While most faculty would not argue with what we propose, some may maintain that it is not their job to “edutain” the students, but rather, it’s the students’ responsibility to be engaged with the required material. And, in some ways, this is correct. Student learning is something that has to happen in the student, not in the instructor. In fact, one author’s favorite saying is, “if it doesn’t happen in the student, it isn’t learning”. The students need to do the work to learn. That is not in dispute.

What is in dispute, and what we would like to argue, is that faculty can create learning environments (via the art of the hook) that lead to much more efficient learning. By providing a mechanism for students to think about their learning, providing rich context around the material and relating it to the students, and holding the students accountable for engaging and integrating the material into what they already know, we are creating a situation that can lead to incredible learning for them .

The act of establishing a shared mission, which can be tied to their life goals, can manifest in every academic discipline. While students may only take a few courses outside of their chosen major(s), it is important that every class feels like it plays a role in their larger goals and development. Below are some ways to get started with establishing a shared mission with your students:

Science – One purpose of teaching Science is to have students understand more about their bodies so that they can make good decisions on how to stay healthy. Without this knowledge, students would be more apt to make poor choices about their health, which would limit their ability to do all the things in life they are interested in doing.

English Language Arts – One purpose of teaching ELA is to have students learn how to read and write well. Without being able to read and write well, students will greatly limit their ability to understand what is going on in the world, will limit choices of occupations they would be capable of doing, will limit their ability to express their feelings and emotions and will limit their ability to communicate with others.

History – One purpose of history is to create good citizens who are aware of content and who can think critically in order to make the world a better place for everyone. Without having this knowledge and critical thinking skills, students would not be able to make decisions that will provide a good and peaceful future for themselves and others, including younger people on whom they may have influence in the future.

Physical Education – One purpose of Physical Education is to have students see the importance of being fit in mind, body and spirit. Without this, students will limit their abilities to live the life of their dreams.

Math – One purpose of Math is to have students learn and apply high level critical thinking skills that can be used both

in solving math problems and real world problems. Without this, students would not possess certain problem solving skills that would help them in their daily lives and in their future professions.

Art – One purpose of Art is to give students a way to express themselves. Art allows people another way to release fears, emotions, ideas, etc. in a healthy way. It is also an important way to make the world a more beautiful place and get people thinking in new ways.

Education – Teacher-preparation faculty who can model student engagement strategies help their students, who are future teachers, consider their own teaching practices. Students can be encouraged to notice what the professor is doing and consider why they are doing it and whether there are better ways of teaching this material.

Connecting the mission makes for a great engagement tool. We suggest that teachers use the first few days of classes getting to know each other and having students create their own common purposes for what they would like in their future (Lang, 2020). They then need to be clear about the mission of their teachers - which might be to help their students achieve their missions. Yes, the students will be learning content and skills that will be important, useful and relevant for them to achieve their missions, no matter what those missions will be.

Hooking the Students at the Beginning of Each Class

Besides hooking students during the first week of classes on relevance and utility of the course, the other important time to engage students is during the first few minutes of every class, a time many teachers refer to as the hook, the motivator, the anticipatory set, etc. We would like to propose that a good hook has three components:

1. It is clearly relevant to the student's lives (sports, food, friends, family, music, school, etc).
2. It is interesting/fun.
3. It introduces the main concept(s) and big ideas being taught during that lesson.

Most teachers can easily see that if you begin a class talking about things that their students are interested in, many of them don't even realize they are actually doing schoolwork. That is the beauty of teaching conceptually. You can relate almost any concept to a student's life and relate it to the material that is being taught in that lesson. In other words, students will be engaged at the beginning of each lesson, and will be able to see exactly how the content is relevant to their lives today and

useful for their future endeavors. Of course, once the teacher knows the mission of each student, they can always point out to individual students how what they are learning is specifically useful to them for their mission.

So now we are doing two things that will help to engage students. We are having them create a mission at the beginning of the course and having them see that the teacher is there to help them achieve that mission by teaching them things that will help them get there. Additionally, the teacher will be reinforcing that every day by starting each class with a hook that will be clearly relevant and useful to their lives now and in the future.

The endgame is, of course, student learning (Overson, Hakala, Benassi, & Kordonowy, 2023). What we would argue is that, although not easily measured in some contexts, the engagement that students have in the material as a result of using this approach leads to more effective student learning. We believe that when students see that the material being taught each day is directly relevant to their lives, they will take a more active interest in it. We attest learning is something that transcends test scores and lesson plans. Rather, learning is a transformative experience that gives students the ability to use what they learned in other contexts to continue learning. We believe that the Art of the Hook is setting students up for this by helping them see how to learn, how to develop the connections necessary to learn, and to begin the long, engaging, and incredibly rewarding process of learning not just for a grade, but for the sake of satisfying the natural curiosity we all started off with as children.

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Using Feature Films to Explore the Experience of Individuals with Severe Disabilities: The Role of Critical Reflection

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Abstract

This article reports on a project assigned in a graduate course titled *Issues in Severe Disabilities*. In order to explore how the social phenomenon of ableism applies to media portrayals of individuals with severe disabilities, graduate students were required to view a movie at least twice and analyze the portrayals of these individuals using a critical reflective process. The critical reflective process was facilitated using predetermined question prompts devised by the author, a scholar of Disability Studies in Education.

Introduction

While the purpose and focus of graduate education can be widely debated, it is reasonable to propose that one foundational goal is to help students understand perspectives of marginalized groups and how these perspectives are likely to affect their classroom teaching practice. Marginalized groups can be defined as people or groups of people who are systematically excluded from accessing full participation in a society or culture, thus creating boundaries to reach their full participatory potential (Garrett, 2016). Critical reflection can be defined as intellectual and/or affective activities in which people explore their own perceptions and experiences in such a way that leads to new meanings of them (Boud et al., 2013). Critical reflection has been shown to be a key process for teachers to improve their understanding and practice of the educational process and is a critical aspect of authentic learning (Herrington et al., 2014).

The Activity: Critical Reflection on a Movie Portraying a Severe Disability

Individuals with severe disabilities have been historically marginalized in the United States and other Western cultures for decades, if not centuries, in multiple ways (Shyman, 2013).

Therefore, employing the process of critical reflection to gain a deeper understanding of their experience is an effective way to engage in an exploration of social, cultural, and political issues faced by people with severe disabilities.

Because teachers may not have direct access to people with severe disabilities, feature films were used to provide insight into what these experiences might be and, specifically, how media portrayals of people with severe disabilities employ elements of ableism. Research shows that students value films as a means of contextualizing actions, and that using films can lead to a higher level of awareness through the observation of character experiences and struggles. However, for this medium to be effective, students must be given specific guidance in connecting media portrayals with real life (Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Scott & Weeks, 2016).

In order to facilitate critical reflection on this topic, four feature films from the 1980s to 2020s were selected, all of which portrayed main characters that presented with a severe disability: (1) *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (Down's Syndrome), (2) *The Fundamentals of Caring* (Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy), (3) *The Other Sister* (Intellectual Disability), and (4) *My Left Foot* (Cerebral Palsy). Students were required to contextualize the film with a short summary of the main plot, the disability portrayed, the year in which the movie was released, and the timeframe the movie portrayed. Students were then directed to frame their critical reflection around the following questions:

1. How did the timeframe the movie portrayed impact the message about the disability?
2. What model of disability (medical or social) was most prominently portrayed?
3. Was the disability portrayed in a positive or negative manner?
4. Did the movie reinforce or challenge the concept of ableism?

While there were highly individualized responses to the questions across films and across students, some notable themes were evident. First, most students suggested that the timeframe in which the movie was released as well as the timeframe the movie portrayed was associated with the type of portrayal (negative versus positive). Second, students emphasized that in all but one of the movies (*The Peanut Butter Falcon*), the character was not portrayed by an actor with the actual disability depicted. Third, students reflected that

their own ableist perceptions have been influenced by media portrayals of people with disabilities, and the critical reflection process assisted in their ability to name these perceptions, which were previously unrealized. Fourth, in all of the movies there was at least one non-disabled character who engaged with the disabled character in an infantilizing manner.

Implications for Practice

This activity demonstrated the significant role that media plays in forming, reinforcing, or potentially changing perceptions about people with severe disabilities. Further, exploring the frequency of non-disabled actors being cast to portray disabled characters, and why this trend appears to be maintained, was revealed as a notable area for further investigation. Finally, the connection between perceived gender roles and people with disabilities was shown to be a fruitful area for reflection (for example, pressures for disabled men to display aspects of masculinity through feats of physical strength, as in the *Peanut Butter Falcon* and *My Left Foot* or disabled women to display aspects of femininity through efforts toward stereotypical beauty, as in *The Other Sister*).

Further, while this particular project was assigned in the context of a graduate program in Special Education, the use of feature films and guiding critical reflection questions is generalizable to multiple fields. Some questions that members of other fields may consider are:

1. What are core presumptions perpetuated about your field?
2. In what ways are these core presumptions perpetuated by entertainment media?
3. What movies capture the positive/negative elements of these presumptions?
4. In what ways can the participants relate to the characters in the film?
5. In what ways can the participants relate their own experience in the "real world" with that of the characters' experience in the movie?

Ultimately, using feature films can be a useful and effective means of inspiring students to consider alternate viewpoints and experiences of individuals with disabilities. Feature films allow students to observe and analyze situations from a perspective they may not otherwise have, and provide a means of developing empathy, understanding, respect and value for experiences that are different from their own.

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Scoring Online Class Participation Based on Concrete Deliverables

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As a student, I dreaded in-class participation and never knew if I was participating enough to earn full credit. Later, as a teaching assistant, I equally hated grading student participation because I was provided with rubrics that used vague language for my ratings such as contributed substantively versus adequately to the discussion or rating participation as exemplary, satisfactory, or minimal. The rubrics lacked further descriptions to aid me as a student and provided no clear guidance to ensure I scored students fairly and consistently as a TA.

When I became an instructor, I had the power to define what participation meant to me and what I asked of my students. There were three aspects that I wanted to address when creating my rubrics: 1) attendance versus engagement; 2) observable behavior versus subjective interpretation; and 3) support of different types of engagement.

Over the past few years, I have continued to refine the wording and weight of how I score class participation based on student feedback, but the features I describe below continue to serve as the framework and reasoning in each of my online classes.

Attendance

The first decision I made was to equally divide the score between attendance and engagement. In giving credit for being present, I wanted to honor the effort and sacrifice inherent in attending live classes. For example, students juggle school

with work, child- and eldercare, personal illnesses, and more. I also wanted to acknowledge that students may not be able to be present for the entire session, be that missing a few minutes or half of a session. To capture this, students earn half of their attendance score by attending the first half of the session, and the other half by attending the second.

Observable Participation

The next aspect I shifted was to move from vague or subjective language when describing the quality of participation to emphasize concrete behaviors that reflect engagement during the session. I reviewed the features of the platforms I used for online teaching (Zoom, Adobe Connect, etc.) and determined how to capture student engagement. For example, when a student speaks on the mic I can write down their name and if there is a question regarding whether they spoke or not during a session, we can review the recording. If I want to know how many times a student commented in the chat, I can search for their name in the chat log. If I want to count how many times a student used in-app reactions, such as giving a thumbs-up, I could take a screengrab after I ask for this kind of participation and then review the pictures. After identifying the available features, I assessed how easy or cumbersome they would be to track during weekly sessions. For example, keeping a list of which students spoke during the session proved to be relatively easy compared to keeping track of how many times a student gave a thumbs-up during the session. It was

important to me to select options for student engagement that weren't overly complicated or time-consuming to track as these would be barriers to implementing this approach to scoring participation.

Different Types of Engagement

Once I understood the engagement options and how to track them, I selected tasks that drew on a variety of skills and student comfort levels: 1) speaking on mic every other week; 2) answering 70% of polls (the exact number of polls varies each week); and 3) participating in the chat four times. Each semester I hear from students who have to challenge themselves to engage in one of these tasks, with fears generally

rooted in imposter syndrome and not wanting to make a mistake in front of their peers. Spreading out the score across attendance and these tasks has resulted in most students earning at least 95% in participation throughout the semester. Even when a student refrains from engaging in one of these tasks (i.e., not wanting to speak on mic) but they earn credit in the other areas, they can still expect to earn 85-90% in overall participation.

Students frequently express their appreciation for clear guidelines around participation scores and the division between attendance and engagement. Whether they choose to engage in each task or not, they know exactly where they stand.

Save the Date for the Fall 2023 NEFDC Conference! Friday, October 20, 2023 @ Holy Cross University

THEME: BREAKING CONVENTION THROUGH STRUCTURED FLEXIBILITY

IN DEFENSE OF TEACHER-CENTERED TEACHING . . . AND OTHER THINGS I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO SAY

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: DR. LINDSAY MASLAND

Dr. Lindsay Masland is the Director of Transformative Teaching and Learning and a Psychology Professor at Appalachian State University. Lindsay's teaching and research interests lie at the intersection of student engagement, effective teaching practices, and inclusive excellence, and her passion is to help educators make sound pedagogical choices that lead to transformative educational experiences for the many types of students they find in their classrooms. She's also very interested in the positionality of teachers in higher education, including the societal and systemic pressures that conspire to devalue the role of teaching and learning in academia. In short, she's an enthusiast for equitable, transformative, and liberatory experiences for all who endeavor to teach and learn in higher ed.

At the Fall, NEFDC conference, her talk will focus on the issue of faculty putting faculty at the center of their teaching.

*Faculty are exhausted, and we can blame that on the pandemic, but that doesn't go far enough. Even if the pandemic didn't happen, we were already on this path to burnout. Kevin Gannon's Radical Hope is centered on the premise that our hopes *for the students* is what keeps us grounded in our teaching missions, but, just like the mother who exhausts herself via her care for her children without any attention to her own needs, at some point, teachers are limited resources who run out. This isn't a new idea—the need to put our own oxygen masks on first—but it IS countercultural in a faculty development world that is about supporting teachers for the sake of the students. It is counter-cultural in a faculty development world in which scholarship on teaching measures only student outcomes when deciding whether to appraise something as evidence-based. So in this session, we'll be asking, what if we weren't in it for the students but for ourselves? What if we were to trust faculty that if we gave them the right tools and outright told them to be self-centered, they'd end up making good decisions, not only for their students but for themselves too? Dr. Masland's session will focus on strategies to redesign courses that are still beautifully student-centered, but that also have the instructor at the center, as well.*

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