



Specifications Grading

An Equitable Approach to Assessment

Joanne Noone, PhD, RN, CNE, FAAN, ANEF September, 2023



Smith Rock

Learning Objectives

After this presentation, the learner will be able to describe the:

1. Process of specifications grading
2. Problems with traditional grading practices
3. The findings of implementing this type of grading in a graduate program.



Secret Beach

This presentation reviews implementation of this type of grading in a nursing graduate program.

Conflicts of Interest and Disclosures: Neither the planner or presenter indicated that they have any real or perceived vested interest that relate to this presentation.



Oregon



Pair and Share

Question:

Why might traditional grading practices, such as mathematical precision, accumulation of points, averaging performance over the course, and grading for behaviors, such as lateness, effort, or participation be considered inequitable?

Pick one to discuss. Do you have an experience of an inequitable example?

Enter a few short answers here.

Grading for Equity





Background

- Grading practices, such as mathematical precision, accumulation of points, averaging performance over the course, and grading for behaviors, such as lateness, effort, or participation have come under scrutiny as inequitable (Feldman, 2019) since biases underlying these principles may benefit more privileged students.
- Awarding or deducting points for behaviors, such as lateness, may elicit faculty bias in grading (Feldman, 2019).
- Learners, especially those unfamiliar with an academic program or the expectations of a faculty, may struggle at the beginning of a course or program (Huang, 2021).
- Averaging points and/or percentages over a course term may negatively impact students with learning gaps.

Equitable Grading Practices

Accurate

The grade reflects students' academic performance, not their behaviors

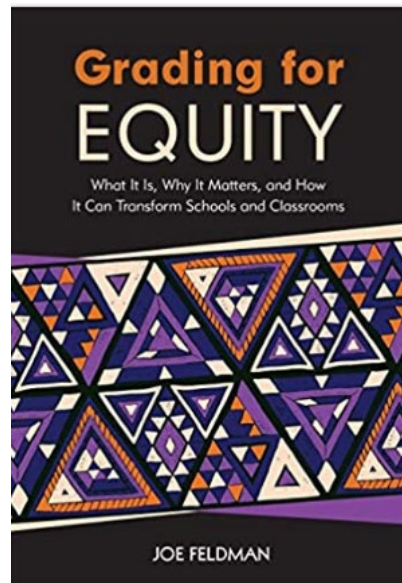
Bias-Resistant

The grade does not reward students with privilege, nor penalize students without privilege

Motivational

The grade encourages students to achieve authentic learning through intrinsic motivation (self-regulation)

Adapted from Grading for Equity by Joe Feldman



A standards-based grading practice is recommended that focuses on students' achievement of the learning outcomes.

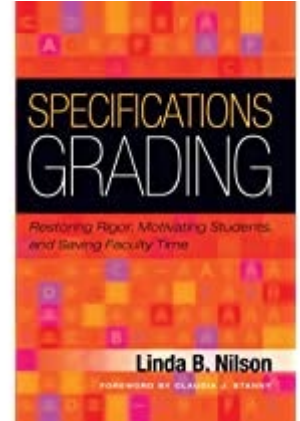


Oregon



What is Specifications Grading?

- Specifications grading is a form of standards-based grading that allows multiple opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes and select the grade and assignments to demonstrate outcome achievement (Nilson, 2015).
- Specifications grading has been associated with improved student motivation and academic performance (Katzman et al., 2021; Pope et al., 2019) primarily in undergraduate educational settings.
- Implementation of this type of grading schema within nursing academia is limited (Bray & Jones, 2022; Dabney, & VanDerWoude, 2023).
- This grading method aligns with the movement towards competency-based evaluation methods recommended by AACN and NLN





Smith Rock



Secret Beach

Specifications Grading Process (Nilson, 2015)

Assignments are linked to achievement of learning outcomes

Students are graded pass/fail on individual assignments and test or on bundles of assignments and tests

Faculty develop clear rubrics of acceptable, satisfactory work

To earn higher grades, students need to demonstrate greater achievement of skills or content

Students are allowed at least one opportunity to revise unacceptable work



Oregon

Implementation

- A specifications grading system was implemented into three courses: one in the initial course design and the other two in which the grading system was revised to address specifications grading principles (Nilson, 2015).
- Bundles of assignments were created that linked to achievement of the learning outcomes. To earn higher course grades, students needed to demonstrate higher achievement of learning outcomes, through more rigorous or a higher volume of assignments.
- Pass/fail rubrics were designed for all assessments.
- Limited options were provided for learners to submit drafts, revise unsatisfactory work, or to submit work late.
- Information on specifications grading and criteria for each grade was provided at the beginning of the course with options for learners to select the grade they wanted to work towards.



Oregon



Sample Bundle

| <u>To earn:</u> | <u>Do all of the following:</u> |
|-----------------|--|
| A | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Earn Satisfactory on 4 initial forum posts and 12 response posts (3 for each discussion).• No more than two forum posts need to be resubmitted to achieve a satisfactory grade.• Earn Satisfactory on Educational Presentation assignment.• Complete two Educational Resource Reviews at a Satisfactory level.• Provide a Satisfactory peer review to two peers in the class on two Educational Resource Reviews and the Educational Presentation.• No more than two assignments turned in late unless prior approval received by faculty• Submit documentation of attending Unconscious Bias Training offered by the Center for Diversity and Inclusion within the last 2 years• Complete all three IHI assigned modules. |
| B | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Earn Satisfactory on 4 initial forum posts and 8-11 response posts (must respond at least twice to each discussion)• No more than four forum posts need to be resubmitted to achieve a satisfactory grade• Earn Satisfactory on Educational Presentation assignment.• Complete one Educational Resource Review at a Satisfactory level.• Provide a Satisfactory peer review to one peer in the class on two Educational Resource Reviews and the Educational Presentation.• No more than four assignments turned in late unless prior approval received by faculty• Submit documentation of attending Unconscious Bias Training offered by the Center for Diversity and Inclusion within the last 2 years• Complete two IHI assigned modules. |



Oregon

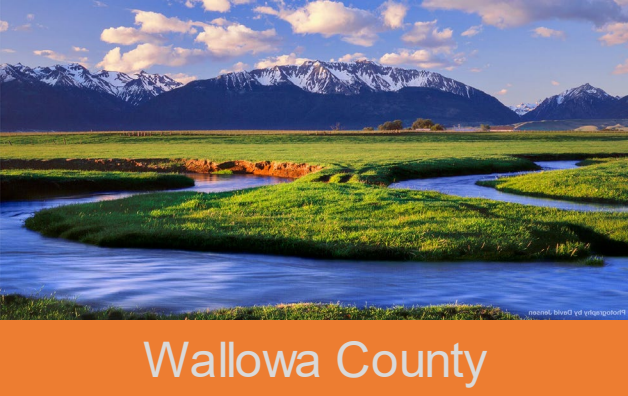


Sample Discussion Rubric

| Discussion Elements | Criteria: A satisfactory post meets the following criteria: |
|---------------------|--|
| Initial Post(s) | |
| Contribution | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Initial post is substantial and thoughtful.•Understanding of weekly topic and content is demonstrated through analysis and synthesis of concepts related to topic and discussion questions. |
| Supporting Evidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Uses examples from weekly readings, additional resources, clinical or educational experiences to further illustrate understanding and substantiate ideas. Cites additional relevant literature supporting discussion. |
| Participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Initial posting made on time as noted on the calendar. |

“Dear X, Thanks for your thoughtful discussion of empowering students. Your response is a great start and reflects your understanding of application of a trauma-informed principle to nursing education. Take a look at the rubric for initial posts, which includes that you need to “Cite additional relevant literature supporting discussion” in both your original post as well as follow-up response(s).

Since this course uses specifications grading, the initial post doesn’t meet the requirements. Can you revise and bring in some additional literature? You will be able to revise this until this Friday.”



Wallowa County

Results

- Learners were able to achieve course outcomes with minimal need for resubmission of work early on in the course.
- Learners and faculty were satisfied with the experience.
- Faculty perceived a decrease in time needed for grading assignments.
- Feedback from some students regarding the grading system indicated that they did not perceive it as significantly different from traditional grading. Others expressed unfamiliarity with grading that was not dependent on percentages towards assignments.
- Students appreciated the clear directions from rubrics and grading options.

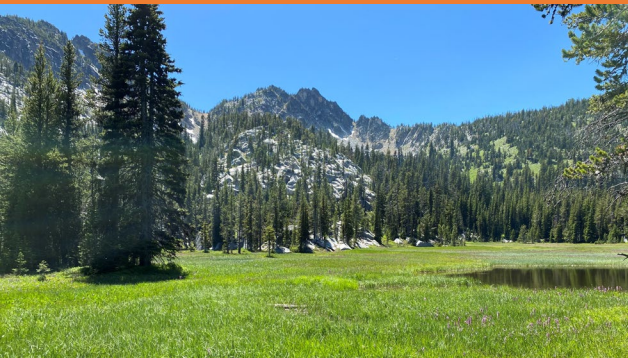
“The assessment values did not well reflect how much effort went into each activity.”

Learner feedback

“I think the grading was described as being different. It did not feel different. It was clearly outlined what was expected to achieve a particular grade. I decided what I wanted to try for based off the criteria..”

Learner feedback

Elkhorn Mountain Range





Oregon



Recommendations

- Specifications grading demonstrates potential to more equitably assess students' achievement of learning outcomes and reduce faculty and student grading burden
- Provide clear information about grading structure
- Allow learners to select grade
- Add grading acknowledgement at beginning of term to confirm grade student selected
- Build in opportunities for drafts and revisions into course schedule



Oregon



Additions to Course Information about Assessment

- Your course grade in NURS 559 will be determined by the quantity and quality of evidence you can provide that you have mastered the course objectives. Please review the assignment description and associated rubric, which is graded on a pass/fail basis. Each work you produce will be graded with a simple grading scheme of **Satisfactory**, **Unsatisfactory** or **Not Submitted**. If your work is graded **Unsatisfactory**, we will provide feedback to where you need to revise to achieve a satisfactory grade.
- **Specifications grading** is a more recent recommendation to consider for fair grading. I (JN) have had experience years ago with an assessment type called "contract grading" which has many similarities and I am still learning the differences. This likely may be your first experience with this type of grading so please post questions about this. I have tried to model the literature in creating the assessment design.
- Nilson LB, Stanny CJ. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing; 2015.
- Pope, L., Parker, H. B., & Ultsch, S. (2020). [Assessment of Specifications Grading in an Undergraduate Dietetics Course](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2019.07.017). *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 52(4), 439–446. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2019.07.017>



Not Ready Yet to Implement Specifications Grading?

- Ensure graded assessments align to meet learning outcomes
- Reduce/eliminate grading behaviors – focus on achievement
- Avoid extra credit or bonus points – may not be linked to learning outcomes and may be arbitrarily applied.
- If students do not submit an assignment, avoid assigning a “zero”. O’Connor (2022) recommends awarding an Incomplete until sufficient evidence is submitted, or record a grade between 50-59 if the submission was indeed a failing grade
- Do not grade on a curve - compare students to a standard not each other
- Provide opportunities to redo an assignment so that students meet outcomes
- Provide a variety of assessments
- Use low stakes assessments prior to high stakes assessments to facilitate mastery



Oregon

Sample Gradebook

| Assignment | % of Final Grade for each Assignment | Student Alpha | Student Beta | Student Delta (trad) | Student Delta (rev) |
|-----------------------|--|------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Quiz 1 | 10 | 90 | 95 | 0 | 59 |
| Exam 1 | 25 | 80 | 95 | 0 | 59 |
| Quiz 2 | 10 | 80 | 100 | 95 | 95 |
| Exam 2 | 25 | 85 | 95 | 100 | 100 |
| Cumulative Final Exam | 30 | 80 | 80 | 100 | 100 |
| Final Grade | 100% | 82.25% | 91% | 64.5% | 85.15% |

Adapted from Najjar, 2023

References

- Bray, L.A. & Jones, A.R. (2022). *Using Specifications Grading to Promote Student Engagement and Content Mastery in a BSN Honors Program*. Sigma Theta Tau 33rd International Research Congress, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Dabney, B. W., & VanDerWoude, C. J. (2023). Implementing a Specifications Grading System in a Nursing Course. *Nurse educator*, 48(4), 187–191. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNE.0000000000001372>
- Feldman, J (2019). *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. Corwin.
- Huang, C. Y. (2021). Walk the Talk: Design (and Teach) an Equitable and Inclusive Course. *The Teaching Professor*. Retrieved from <https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/classroom-climate/diversity-equity-inclusion/walk-the-talk-design-and-teach-an-equitable-and-inclusive-course/>
- Katzman, S. D., Hurst-Kennedy, J., Barrera, A., Talley, J., Javazon, E., Diaz, M., & Anzovino, M. E. (2021). *The Effect of Specifications Grading on Students' Learning and Attitudes in an Undergraduate-Level Cell Biology Course*. *Journal of microbiology & biology education*, 22(3), e00200-21. <https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.00200-21>
- Najjar, R. (2023). Equitable Assessment Practices. In Noone, J. & Gubrud, P. (Eds.). (2023). *Best Practices in Teaching Nursing*. National League for Nursing.
- Nilson, L. (2015). *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus Publishing.
- O'Conner, K. (2022). *A repair kit for grading: 15 Fixes for broken grades* (3rd ed.). FIRST Educational Resources, LLC.
- Pope, L., Parker, H. B., & Ultsch, S. (2020). *Assessment of Specifications Grading in an Undergraduate Dietetics Course*. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 52(4), 439–446. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2019.07.017>



Thank You!
Questions?