Values-Based Assessment and Learning Objectives: An Invited Essay in Conversation with Dyer (2023)

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ABSTRACT. This paper is in conversation with Dyer (2023). Grading and assessment are integrated elements of 21st-century higher education with many viewpoints, and the two papers are two of these perspectives. In this paper, I present a course structure that focuses on scaffolding with student empowerment, growth, and success at the forefront of the design. I also present options for program assessment that focuses on skills and competencies as outcomes. Each instructor and program should consider their own values, outcome goals, and the context of the student body and university when designing assessments.

Keywords: career skills, grading, inclusive pedagogy, program assessment, specification grading

Values-Based Assessment and Learning Objectives:

An Invited Essay in Conversation with Dyer (2023)

Dyer's (2023) paper was on program assessment which included learning objectives, perceptions of learning, and grade distributions. Within the focus on grading, the paper included a history and philosophy of traditional grading, including norm-referenced and criterion-referenced practices. When focusing on traditional grading, the paper introduced the concern for grade inflation within Dr. Dyer's program of Child and Family Science and the design of an intervention to correct grade inflation problems. As assessment coordinator, Dr. Dyer examined grade distributions for Child and Family Science classes at her university in 2011 and 2018, along with a short student survey about their perceptions of classes and degree of engagement. Following the 2011 data, the department decided to track grade distributions of all faculty, with the reminder that faculty should base grades on mastery of content. The follow-up data in 2018 found that there was a significant change in grade distributions, including nearly double the number of students who earned a C or lower compared to 2011 and students acknowledging that their classes were more difficult. The program outcome was a comprehensive exam students complete in comparison to the grade distribution. Thus, the paper discusses traditional grading practices and only content mastery as a learning outcome for graduates. In this paper, I present a modified specifications grading course structure and additional options for programs to consider regarding outcomes for graduates. Choices of assessment should be made based on values, frameworks, and context of instructors, programs, and universities, of which the two papers discuss a few options.

Positionality

As I engaged with Dyer (2023), I recognized the importance of understanding one's values and frameworks. Thus, as I write in conversation with Dyer (2023), I acknowledge my perspective and the context in which I write this essay. My work is framed from critical and feminist theoretical perspectives (Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994). I have also been influenced by Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), Montessori, and Liberal Arts educational philosophies. I was trained as a scholar and instructor in these frameworks (see Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020, for more information). I was also introduced to Jones' MUSIC Model of Motivation (2009, 2019), which focuses on empowering students for their own learning, including making decisions about learning; understanding why they are learning what they are in relationship to their goals; believing they can succeed; their interest in the content and instructional activities; and believing that they as the student are cared about. Additionally, I write this conversational essay as someone who spent five years working in academic integrity (i.e., honor code) and four years working in student success, which includes support structures and policies for students to have experiences while enrolled that can assist in their persistence towards graduation and a strong education when they graduate.

From these guiding perspectives and experiences, I come to the conversation with a student-centered model with the goal of accessibility for all students to build toward success. As well as empowering students in their own education assists in preparing students as pre-human service professionals and their lifelong learning in and outside their chosen professions. I value elements of flexibility through which students can make discoveries on their own, including through the world around us. This flexibility helps students to feel cared for as people and empowered to engage with learning through their own strengths, as well as their own interests. I am a guide in their learning. Within my classes, it is not solely about the content they will learn; while important, there are also elements of skills they develop that will serve them long-term.

Assessment and Grade Inflation

A primary discussion in Dyer (2023) was around grade inflation within her Child and Family Science program. Concerns about grade inflation in higher education have been around since at least the mid-1970s (e.g., Birnbaum, 1977; Kohn, 2002; Kolevzon, 1981) and continue to be written about regularly in peer-reviewed scholarship, higher education journalism, and lay media (e.g., Denning et al., 2023; Strauss, 2021). Many publications discuss grade inflation with fear that universities are not providing an appropriate education any longer by lowering standards (Barone, 2021). While Dyer (2023) provides some literature supporting the concern about grade inflation, it is a contentious topic within higher education, largely due to the history of grading, which was included in higher education in the 19th versus 20th versus 21st centuries, and the intent of higher education. Within the research of grade inflation simply analyzing letter grades, there is limited evaluation on scaffolding in preparation of students for college-level courses and the practices among faculty and universities to support students' successes in the classroom that would raise average grades over time (Jephcote et al., 2021). Improved grades may, in fact, be the result of practices by instructors and universities where "rising tides raise all boats." Instead, the literature often, including Dyer (2023), focuses on cross-sectional data and rarely considers contextual factors.

As Dyer (2023) notes, grades serve different purposes. Grades are multidimensional constructs that can contain cognitive and noncognitive factors, such as persistence, and which are based on the values of instructors and institutions (Brookhard et al., 2016). In fact, research does not support the concept that grades and summative-tested achievement are correlated; thus, grades and comprehensive test scores measure different things (Brookhard et al., 2016). The different assessments should measure learning differently since even when using university degrees as the pathway to a job, that job will rarely, if ever, entail repeating content back to an employer (An & Loes, 2022). Research also suggests that traditional grades mirror inequalities that are built into the structure of higher education (Brookhard et al., 2016).

Context of Assessment

When considering the curriculum and outcomes of programs, context is everything (An & Loes, 2022). As family science continues to discuss its place within universities and as a profession (Gavazzi et al., 2014; Graves, 2019; Hans, 2014; Hamon & Smith, 2014, 2017; Radina et al., 2022), each campus and department will grapple with the right place for family science within their context. This will be dependent on the university's mission, the needs of the student body they are serving, and the interests of current students. Some institutions focus on training Certified Family Life Educators (Darling et al., 2022; NCFR, n.d.), or in connection with social work (Radina et al., 2022), while others serve as a broad pre-human service professional degree with many professional paths for students.

For example, at my current institution, South Dakota State University, the Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) program is housed in the School of Education, Counseling, & Human Development. With this organization, we are in the same department as the graduate program in counseling and the additional undergraduate major in Family & Consumer Science Education. At the university, we serve as the primary human service major outside of specific career fields of nursing and pharmacy. Therefore, our HDFS majors attract students who are interested in a broad range of human service fields, including service directors in areas such as aging services or childcare services; professionals in departments of child or human services, and social services. Others seek out future education in marriage and family therapy, school psychology, occupational therapy, and speech therapy,

among many other paths. The program is available to complete entirely in-person, entirely online, or through a mix of modalities, leading to many students who are considered non-traditional, often parents navigating higher education in addition to working full-time.

South Dakota State University has an educationally diverse student body. The university is an open-access institution with an 89% acceptance rate (South Dakota State University, 2021) and approximately 27% first-generation college students. Most students work in addition to their education. Students also have diverse lived experiences ranging from Native American students, those who have grown up in foster care, farming-family students, and those who were refugees. Lived and educational diversity, in addition to the recent COVID-educational experiences, has led to a wide range of levels of knowledge and preparation for college courses that we navigate in consideration of course structures and program assessment.

Course Structure Example

In this section, I am discussing my own current practices for survey-level courses in the human development sequence. I teach two of the survey-level human development courses and two of the upper-level family science courses within my own program and consequently have built scaffolding in the survey-level courses to build towards success in the upper-level courses. Throughout the courses, students are reminded that an element of classes in our program is continuing to develop professional skills, which include actively participating in working relationships, such as communicating with peers and supervisors, time management, and being adaptable. One of the course policies is "When Life Events Happen" to reinforce communication with me and that we will work together towards continued course success (see Appendix A).

Learning Opportunities

With the goal of flexible assessments and providing opportunities for life to happen, my survey courses use a modified specifications grading (Nilson, 2014) and flipped structure (Ottusch & Knapp, 2021). Students have point goals for the grade they are aiming for during the semester and multiple opportunities each week to earn points towards their final goal (i.e., open-point system; Lipnevich et al., 2020). There are asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities to build learning towards the final grade, which also encourages progress criteria, process criteria, and product criteria for the learning and final grade (e.g., formative and summative assessments; Lipnevich et al., 2020).

Asynchronous Learning Opportunities: Flipped Courses

Throughout the semester, the course is divided into weekly topics. There are recorded lessons of the core content, required readings, and weekly quizzes. Depending on the course, the weekly quiz is used as either a concept check or a summative evaluation of the topic. Additionally, students are also expected to complete learning guides each week. These are provided initially as outlines of the lesson and readings, vocabulary to know, as well as reflection prompts (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993), or guided sections for added notes, curiosities, and/or annotations. When introducing the learning guides, I also discuss note-taking skills. This process criteria assists students in getting to points of achievement and supports behaviors of learning (Lipnevich et al., 2020). Additionally, providing a structure for the learning guides but also teaching additional ways to demonstrate engagement with learning materials allows for flexibility in student preferences and needs (see Gayman et al., 2023 for similar practices).

Synchronous Learning Opportunities

With the flipped course structure, the synchronous learning opportunities are the scheduled class times, whether in-person or virtually, allowing for discussions and hands-on activities. During these meetings, students also have the opportunity to develop activities for their peers around that week's topic and content. The hands-on activities are intended to build on and deepen the learning from the asynchronous work. For example, in GERO 201: Introduction to Gerontology, we examined birthday cards for the ageist messages often presented in cards. The activities allow students greater learning of course content and simultaneously build community in the classroom. Thus, attendance is expected for the majority of scheduled meeting times, as students earn points through their engagement.

Evaluation of Course Structure

For the first few years, I was at South Dakota State University, I taught in a more "traditional" structure with live lectures and grades focused on summative exams and paper assignments. Therefore, I have comparisons of summative-focused course structure and modified specifications course (scaffolding-focused) structure outcomes. Focusing on summative grades (i.e., exams, tests, quizzes), the traditional structure had an average of 76.3%, while the newer structure had an average of 81.5% [$t (217) = -3.6$, p <.01]. For final semester grades, the traditional structure had an average of 83.4%, and the newer structure had a final grade average of 89.8% [$t (213) = -3.5$, p <.01]. Based on Dyer (2023), this increase would be considered grade inflation. In my context, framework, and values, the increase is a result of focusing on student success and learning in course design.

Student Evaluation of Course Structure

In both formal and informal feedback, students noted that they really appreciate the mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, where there are deadlines and expectations, but they can learn when and in ways that are best for them. They note the importance of the various learning opportunities when there are other life events pulling their attention. Students also have explained that they appreciate the structure of the learning guides because it helps keep them on task, and they "can better understand the material." Feedback has also included that students feel the amount of work is reasonable. Through flexibility, students feel that their well-being is cared about, such as having the opportunity to have a mental well-being day while still learning (see Flaherty, 2023 for national data with similar findings).

Instructor Reflection

Over the past six semesters that I have had the course structure of flipped classes and modified specification grading, I continue to see the benefit of the structure for student learning and student success. These methods allow both growth opportunities and flexibility for students. The empowerment of choice has helped students to make their own decisions regarding time management, a key professional skill, in ways that continued to ensure their success in their other courses with me and other faculty. In addition, the variety of ways for students to engage with the course and build on their learning allows them to have a level of autonomy and facilitates personal skills and strategies for learning, which assists in building a universal design for learning and inclusive pedagogy (CAST, 2018; hooks, 1994; University of California Office of the President, 2022). There is no one way for students to demonstrate learning. The flexibility and multiple demonstrations of learning have also reduced fear and concern about ability and belonging in college and the classroom. Thus, the structure provides greater learning, higher final grades, and assistance for students who "have life happen" during the semester (e.g., depression, parental death) to finish the course strongly and still learn.

Suggestions for Program and Course Assessments

Within my essay conversation with Dyer (2023), I acknowledge that the program in which Dyer teaches needs to make the best decision for their student body. The structure of my courses was designed for the student body I work with in relation to the values I hold around higher education and student success. This includes the multiple career pathways students take when they have earned a degree in Human Development and Family Studies (or the various names of the programs related to family science; Hans, 2014). As programs consider assessment options, I present a few additional options, including how their program fits within High Impact Practices (HIP; Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], n.d.), Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics (AAC&U, 2009), or through stakeholder competencies (Craig & Bartolic, 2021; Schvaneveldt et al., 2013). These options broaden perspectives regarding student success beyond a focus on grades and more on skill building.

High-Impact Practices and Student Engagement

Students have higher levels of learning success when they are involved in high-impact practices (AAC&U, n.d.). Some of the high-impact practices include having capstone courses or projects; collaborative assignments and projects; global learning; internships; service learning or community-based learning; undergraduate research; and writing-intensive courses. Research supports the use of high-impact practices in building toward learning outcomes such as critical thinking and intercultural effectiveness (Kilgo et al., 2015). The practices are high impact because students dedicate considerable time and effort to meaningful tasks; interact with faculty and other students substantively; synthesize and apply their learning to different settings; and have regular formative feedback (An & Loes, 2022).

By the nature of the field, HDFS is well-positioned to include high-impact practices throughout the curriculum. Programs can analyze their use of high-impact practices within courses and the entire program in relationship to the desired learning outcomes. Additionally, many universities engage with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), which analyze perceptions of the actual use of high-impact practices, student learning, and development. Some of the learning and development outcomes within NSSE/FSSE include analyzing and synthesizing data; applying theories; collaborative learning; and understanding others' perspectives (Center for Postsecondary Research, n.d.). This can be useful information for assessment and program development. In particular, high-impact practices and the learning outcomes noted in NSSE lead to deep learning, indicated by higher grades, greater student persistence, and greater integration and transfer of information (Conefrey, 2021; Kuh, 2008).

Learning Outcomes and Competencies

The VALUE rubrics were developed across U.S. colleges and universities as fundamental criteria for student learning outcomes across programs and institutions to have a common understanding of student success (AAC&U, 2009). It is meant to be an authentic assessment to measure the skills, abilities, and dispositions that students need (AAC&U, 2009). The outcomes include civic engagement, creative thinking, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, lifelong learning skills, global learning, information literacy, inquiry and analysis, integrative and applied learning, intercultural knowledge, oral communication, problem-solving, quantitative literacy, reading, teamwork, and written communication.

While programs may need to survey their own regional stakeholders regarding important competencies for graduates, there have been a few studies in the U.S. and Canada that have done this analysis focusing on family science (e.g., Craig & Bartolic, 2021; Schvaneveldt et al., 2013; Walker & Blankemeyer, 2013). Across Craig & Bartolic (2021) and Schvaneveldt et al. (2013) studies on employers, top competencies of importance included ethics; understanding of, appreciation of, and interaction with a diversity of lived experiences and populations; critical thinking and problem-solving; interpersonal competence including teamwork, group dynamics, conversations with others, conflict resolution; and application of knowledge such as through assessment of needs and implementation of strategies or using theoretical information in practice. Walker & Blankemeyer (2013) surveyed alumni who noted that their primary employment activities were around supporting clients accessing and maintaining services, advocacy, and educational activities. The mid-range of importance among employers included subject mastery, including being conversant in family life and knowledge about human development; multidisciplinary awareness; and life-long learning (Craig & Bartolic, 2021; Schvaneveldt et al., 2013). Interestingly, both employer studies also found that quantitative skills were not considered highly important skills for graduates (Craig & Bartolic, 2021; Schvaneveldt et al., 2013). However, the alumni study noted data management as a top employment activity (Walker & Blankemeyer, 2013). What has been found within family science field competencies is also seen in the VALUE rubrics (AAC&U, 2009) and other research on desired skills (An & Loes, 2022; Kuh, 2008). Therefore, the VALUE rubrics may be particularly useful for HDFS programs to engage with.

Within individual courses, or faculty members who teach across the curriculum at their institution, a focus on learning objectives for the entire program could also be beneficial. When developing course and grading structures, acknowledging the outcome for graduates from the program may change the structure (University of California Office of the President, 2022). For example, instructors may choose to engage with alternative grading practices such as ungrading or standards grading with a transparent connection to the learning outcomes of skills and competencies (Flaherty, 2023b; Knaack, 2023; Kohn, 2002; Marchus, 2023; Stommel, 2020); or build in additional scaffolds within courses and the program to increase preparedness for professional roles (Gonyea & Kozak, 2014; Koepke & Wolfgram, 2016; Schwab et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Assessment—both for courses (i.e., grades) and programs—are a fundamental part of 21st-century higher education. Depending on the values of instructors, programs, and universities, as well as desired outcomes, assessment can be viewed in various ways. Dyer (2023) focused on traditional grading practices and grade inflation for program evaluation. This viewpoint highlights content learned as a sole learning outcome. In this paper, I presented an alternative course structure using modified specifications grading, which focuses on growth in content and skills, and reaching students where they are with student success as a goal. I also presented options for program assessment highlighting skills and competencies useful in careers and as engaged citizens as outcomes. Each instructor and program should consider the context of the student body and the values and learning outcomes of their program when considering assessment.

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Appendix A

Sample Syllabus Statements

"Hidden Curriculum"[1] of Skill Building Syllabus Statement

1. The Learning Objectives discussed above focus on the content you will learn in this class. But that is not all that you will learn.

    a. Many employers desire people who are professional, with a strong work ethic, and actively participate in working relationships. Classes, such as this one are a great place to practice these skills. Some suggestions to help in these areas are available on the following pages.

    b. Most jobs ask for people who have strong communication skills. In this class, communication will be done through in-class discussions as well as formal and informal writing. Through regular practice, you can strengthen these skills.

    c. For college and work, time management is a helpful skill to have. It is imperative to plan your time to complete everything thoroughly and by the due date, arrive on time to work (class), and inform supervisors (your professor) if you cannot attend work for illness or family emergencies. Information about university policies on informing when ill and missing and make-up work is available on page 4.

    d. College is a time to develop what educators call critical thinking skills. Others call these skills logical thinking, or the ability to analyze and synthesize information. For me, it can be looked at as deep thinking or looking at situations from various perspectives. Learning is more than remembering a set of information, and critical thinking demonstrates that you are able to do that.

    e. This time of the pandemic is influencing the workplace. This includes using digital platforms to work, being adaptable, and creative problem solvers. These skills and being able to work synchronously and asynchronously will benefit you throughout your career.

When Life Happens Syllabus Policy

2. When life happens, and you need a bit more assistance from Dr. L-S due to illness (yours or a family member's), a death in the family, an accident, or some other life event, please let her know **As Soon As Possible.** She may ask you to contact Academic Affairs and/or Student Affairs, as they can provide a different level of assistance. To the best of my abilities, based on class and university policy, Dr. L-S can work with you in creating a plan to complete the course, but it is best to let me know **As Soon As Possible.** This is an area to practice professionalism in communicating that something in your life is taking you away from your work (studies). Communicating with Dr. L-S is particularly important as we navigate this time of the pandemic.

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[1] Within higher education "hidden curriculum" can also refer to implicit or unwritten rules, norms, and expectations of academia. For the syllabi statement, I use it to mean the additional skills beyond core content of the class that students will continue to strengthen as part of a college course.