

## INFORMATION ABOUT GRADING FOR CHAIRS AND DIRECTORS

### Terminology used in this document:

*Assessment* – any mechanism instituted in a course to provide feedback and measure student learning, divided into two sub-categories: formative and summative (see Appendix 2 for a list of both of these forms).

*Formative assessment* – is assessment for learning that is primarily used to inform a student (through feedback by verbal, written or other means) about their learning and progression towards the requirements to successfully complete the course. Typically, formative assessment is not assigned a grade, or if it is, it has a low value.

Forms of formative assessment:

- a. *Classroom or embedded assessment* – incorporated into instructional activities, such as using personal response systems, such as iClickers or classroom assessment techniques. Within a lesson plan for a class, pre-assessment and post-assessment are used. Pre-assessment is a diagnostic used at the beginning of class to determine what students know about concepts for that lesson. Post-assessment determines if students achieved the intended learning outcomes set for that lesson.
- b. *Peer-assessment* – students assess other students' work with no grade. There is much research about peer-assessment and most agree on two principles: (a) peer-assessment should not be assigned grades, and (b) when used as formative assessment, peer-assessment is very effective and contributes to students' ability to self-assess.
- c. *Self-assessment* – students are required to assess their own work with respect to certain standards, such as a rubric provided by the instructor. This activity provides an opportunity for students to reflect on their own work to see how they can improve.

*Summative assessment* – is assessment of learning that is graded. Many forms of summative assessment exist, but increasingly authentic assessment methods are being used, because they more accurately represent how student learning will be reflected in practice (Wiggins, 1998). For example, according to Wiggins (1998), authentic assessment has the student “do” the subject by simulating real-world contexts so that students can actually apply the subject matter.

### Introduction

Many factors contribute to how assessment is approached. Despite evidence that the increase in grades over the years may be due to multiple factors, the real problem lies in grade inequality<sup>1</sup>. Hodges (2014) claims that the use of rubrics with clear criteria eliminates the many factors that affect grade inflation and inequality. Rubrics indicate the standards that students need to attain to receive the assigned grade, with the result being that there is increased consistency in grading and a decrease in instances of students challenging grades (Hodges, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about grade inflation and inequality, please see document titled, “Grade Inflation and Inequality.”

### How can assessment practices be improved?

Kohn (2008) reminds us that learning is rarely mentioned in discussions about grading. Overall, literature about how to improve assessment practices focuses on the following areas:

- criterion-based assessment to be utilized (Sadler, 2009), which requires instructing all involved with grading in the course about how to satisfactorily use rubrics based on clear criteria
- clear, intended learning outcomes at the program, course, and module level that clarify good performance are developed
- rubrics are provided for all assignments to ensure grade consistency (Aufderheide et al., 2016; Hodges, 2014)
- proactive student role is encouraged rather than a reactive student role in assessment (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2009)
- relevant examples of how to recognize the quality of work expected (students have to practice evaluating work themselves), so that students are aware of instructor's expectations (Sadler, 2009)
- exemplars are provided to help students peer-assess (Hendry, Armstrong & Bromberger, 2012)
- feedback from instructor and peers is scaffolded so that students can increase their meta-cognitive skills and eventually self-monitor the quality of their work (Sadler, 2009)
- multiple measures and sources that are implemented continuously to ensure fair representation of student learning (Pusateri, 2009)
- explicit instructions are provided for all assessment tasks (Pusateri, 2009)
- formative and low-stakes assessment that lead to an increase in self-regulated learning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006)
- self- and peer-assessment is used (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud & Soler, 2016—term they use is sustainable assessment<sup>2</sup>)
- assessment of authentic tasks (related to real world case studies, practice, portfolios)
- evidence-based approaches are taken to assessment (Joughin 2010)
- assessment practices are self- or peer-evaluated (Pusateri, 2009)
- the singular final grade is representative of what the student learned in the course (Guskey, 2002)

Keeping learning as the goal, Guskey and Baliey (2010) distinguish three distinct approaches that instructors can take in setting criteria for assessment: product, process and progress, illustrating a more holistic approach to assessment (James, 2012).

1. *Product criteria* – is used when instructors focus strictly on what students know, as demonstrated in final products, such as examinations, reports and projects or other forms of culminating forms of learning.
2. *Process criteria* – is used by instructors who believe that product criteria do not provide the whole picture of learning that students undertook. How students learned the course material is an important contributor to the final grade. This means that the instructor values the learning process that students undertake and take this process into consideration. Process criteria

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable assessment is “every act of assessment needs in some identifiable way to build students’ capacity to manage and judge their own learning and thus equip themselves for the more challenging environments they will confront post-graduation” (Boud & Soler, 2016, p. 410).

therefore include formative assessments, homework and punctuality on assignments, attendance, class participation and quizzes.

3. *Progress criteria* – focuses on how much students gain through their learning experience, which makes this approach very individualized. In this approach, a learning continuum is what a student's progress is measured against in order to see how much they have progressed in their learning (mastery approach).

Guskey and Bailey (2010) suggest that instructors using product, process, and progress approaches together establish explicit criteria for each to provide a more accurate picture of what a student has accomplished and their academic achievement.

Schinske and Tanner (2014) concur with Guskey and Bailey (2010) regarding emphasizing and rewarding student processes in learning. In large classes, these processes can be accomplished through iClicker participation marks, classroom assessment techniques (CATs) that have students complete one-minute papers or other CATs, homework that has students complete meaningful assignments and contribute to summative assignments, opportunities to practice some aspect of an activity or material and reflect on it, and more. These assignments can be peer-graded marked for being turned in, or checked that they wrote the right number of words or other criteria. These types of assignments can incentivize students, promote practice and support student learning through various activities.

To assist with making the descriptive feedback process more efficient for the instructor and to develop self-regulated learning and metacognitive skills in students, self- and peer evaluation can be used by providing opportunities for students to self-reflect and to encourage dialogue with colleagues about their work (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). To ensure high quality of self- and peer-assessment, the following mechanisms can be employed: exposure to high quality work; comparison of their work to high quality work; and learning how to adjust their work to increase quality (Sadler, 2009).

These ideas resonate in the work of McDowell, Sambell and Davison (2009) who argue for a more integrated approach to assessment that includes an environment rich in feedback, the active participation of students leading to student autonomy, a reduction in summative assessments, and authentic tasks and assessment.

**Questions that can be used for discussion within units for shared understanding of grading practices and their relation to students' learning:**

- Have all instructors received UVic's grading policies and procedures?
- Are all instructors aware of the department's approach to grading and the purposes of grading?
- What issues presently exist within or across courses?
- What anomalies exist and is the rationale clear as to why?
- Do all instructors use formative and summative assessments? Rubrics that are shared with students? Clear assignment instructions?
- Are assessment methods aligned with the intended learning outcomes?
- Is the weighting of the different methods appropriate to the importance of the outcomes and the time that students will spend on learning?

- Are the assessment methods distributed over the course in order to reduce stress and provide feedback to learners on progress towards achieving the intended learning outcomes?
- Will the assessment methods chosen reflect what the student has learned in the course?
- Are a range of methods used to adhere to Universal Instructional Design principles?

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