

Grading Practices to Promote Agency and Autonomy

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Overview

- I. What is agency & why might it be a way to engage students
- II. Grading systems to promote agency: Point-choice and Planned-goal
- III. Questions and discussion

What is agency & why might it be a way to engage students?

Agency (aka student voice): A feeling of powerfulness (rather than powerlessness). A sense of having a voice. A sense that one's words and actions have impact. A sense of movement toward meaningfulness, growth, change.

Autonomy (aka student choice): A sense of being self-directed, guided by internal (as opposed to purely external) goals and values. A sense of having a choice and being competent to make that choice.

Studies have linked more student agency and autonomy with greater motivation, more retention of content knowledge and skills, greater sense of mattering, and more self-confidence. A student who feels powerful and self-directed is more likely to be positively engaged with their education, to seek help when needed, and less likely to 'game the system.'

Anecdotally, student voice and choice may improve instructors' feelings about teaching, lead to greater ease in grading tasks (and reduce grade fussiness), and save time.

Point-Choice Grading

What is it? In a point-choice grading system, flexibility is built in for formative assessments as there are more points available than students can use toward their grade. Students can 'choose their own adventure' by selecting which assignments to attempt and can continue to complete assignments to earn points and demonstrate mastery even if they do not perform perfectly. It is superior to a 'drop the lowest' system as it benefits students who perform consistently across the assignments (drop the lowest: the average of five 81% is the same as the average of four 81% but point-choice allows accumulation of all the points).

HOW WILL I DEMONSTRATE THAT I AM LEARNING?

- Your grade will be calculated out of **1000 points**
- Prep+Participation (you **choose** up to **250 points**)
 - PsycLearn (~130 points available)
 - Worked Exam Examples (~130 points available)
 - Canvas video worksheets (~80 points available)
 - Attendance (~40 points available)
- Exams (**750 points** on any 5 exams)
 - 5 Unit exams
 - 1 Optional cumulative final

Choose where you earn your points

Drop the lowest

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Scan for materials and examples!



How did it work? This can be confusing to begin with. The LMS does not understand the cap, so you need to add more communication about grade calculation. Students are concerned about the fate of any extra points that they earn (as they can't be assigned to their grade). Students appreciate being able to earn full points – almost all students earn up to the cap. Some students persist to continue completing assignments while others tap out as soon as they reach the cap.

Tips.

- **Find a balance** of points needed and points available: you want to build in enough flexibility without adding too many assignments. You want to clearly signal which assignments are most valuable and where students should spend their time while still allowing for flexibility and agency.
- **Communicate.** I send out emails to students when they reach milestones (e.g., 100 points) which helps me to remind students about the system and also creates an opportunity to notice their effort or give tips to engage.

Planned-Goal Grading

What is it? Students self-assign a portion of their grade to their own goal (e.g., attendance, early submissions). Successfully piloted in upper-division course with 20-30 students and repeating this term. Students committed to same goal across term (or elected to use mean quiz score). Most common approaches are submitting work early and actively engaging in class, but students appreciated opportunity to suggest how they could demonstrate progress on other goals, such as time management, note quality, and applying content outside of class. Overall, the learning approaches counted for 5% of final grade (Spring 2023), and I increased this to 10% this term (Fall 2023).

How did it work? At end of Spring 2023 course, 90% of students recommended including the “learning approaches” in future class. Common “pros” mentioned were motivation, opportunity to practice, accountability, better relationship with the instructor, deeper understanding of the class material, and easier to stay on task. “Cons” included that it was hard to remember or track and could be stressful.

Tips:

- Use one assignment in your course management system to track submissions on across the term. Award full points at the start of term and deduct if an approach is missed, and use comments to update when the goal is met or missed.
- Offer a way for students to make up a missed approach and/or have fewer points deducted for the first “miss.” E.g., start with 10 points, and deduct 1 point for the first miss, 2 points for the second, and so on.
- For large classes, limit goal options to specific choices that can be tracked automatically or imbedded into assessments.
- Written self-reflections submitted regularly by students can be a powerful tool for evidencing progress on hard-to-observe goals, such as focusing on studying a certain way. Trusting students to honestly report on how they are progressing towards their goals (and giving credit for the reflection, not for perfection) can also boost their sense of autonomy!

Considerations for Grading Practices that Promote Agency and Autonomy

- Create a flexible grading scheme and then say ‘no’ to exceptions. Do not create a situation where you need to adjudicate ‘issues.’ (More privileged students may ask for more privileges.)
- Create situations where students decide which content to focus deeply on and how to demonstrate their learning.
- Create scaffolds – promote student-driven choice, within reason.

Questions for discussion

- 1) How are you promoting agency through your grading practices?
- 2) What problems around grading and agency do you want to solve?
- 3) How do you know when your students are exercising their agency?

More Ideas to Enhance Agency and/or Autonomy in Grading

Opportunities to **apply knowledge**:

- Students can generate test questions, with accompanying explanations
- Students can create something for a broader audience than the instructor (e.g., poster, conference paper, presentation, etc.) either as a class or individually.
- Students can build their own research / lab project(s)

Opportunities for **self-grading and engaging with feedback**:

- Students can resubmit homework or problem sets and explain their errors
- Students can build criteria for evaluation of learning (co-constructed rubrics or grading checklists)
- Students can participate in multi-stage exams where they take the exam on their own first, get graded feedback, then talk to others who had different exam strengths about what went well, how they solved, and what they did to prepare. Students can resubmit answers with explanation for partial credit back.
- Students can peer review each other's written work
- Students can self-assess learning through exam wrappers or metacognitive reflection prompts

Opportunities for **self-direction**:

- Students can choose class readings, or write a review of one of your chosen readings / chapters in advance of class to help explain it to their colleagues
- Students can select projects from a range of due dates, or a range of topics
- Students can choose which questions to answer among some options on exams so that they demonstrate understanding of concepts but can also play to their strengths

References and Recommended Resources



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