Specifications Grading

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5/23/2018

Problems with Traditional Grading Systems

- Instructors are often unhappy with grading -- many consider it the worst part of their job.
- If teaching several classes/many students, often lack the time to give good feedback and to grade in the best ways for their students.
- Many instructors use outmoded grading systems that
  - fail to motivate students,
  - are difficult to implement fairly, and
  - take a great deal of time with frustrating results.

What is specifications grading?

Rubrics vs. Specifications

Rubrics outline what qualities a successful artifact will have.

Indicate several levels of work, perhaps including levels such as outstanding, proficient, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory.

Specifications do the same thing.

There is only one set of specs. These are the requirements for passing. They could be created by combining the A and B levels of the rubric. You could consider specifications a one-level rubric.

Pass/Fail Grading

- Specifications grading is a pass/fail system.
- Passing depends on meeting specifications.
- Bar for passing should be set pretty high -- indicating competency or success
  - Is 65% complete a success??
- Fails are only soft fails because students are given tokens to redo work

Motivation

- Nilson argues that specifications grading reduces student anxiety and increases student motivation (50)
- Motivates in terms of
  - Positive outcome expectations
  - Freedom and choice -- REQUIRES TOKENS

Rigor

- Danger of partial credit in traditional grading systems
- Successes after soft fails

Designing a Specs-Graded Class

Points

- simplest version
- each assignment is accorded a point value
- if the student passes the assignment, they receive all the points
- An A in the course would indicate that the student earned most if not all of the possible points (perhaps 90% of the points or more), and each other grade would indicate a different percentage of points achieved.

Modules

- effective when it is important for students to master or achieve competency in one skill before developing a more complex skill.
- very effective in introductory-level course.
- A course may have four modules. If the student completes the first unit, she would be able to earn a D in the course. Completing units 1 and 2 would result in a C; completing units 1, 2, and 3 would result in a B; and completing all units would result in an A.

Bundles

- Bundles are either
  - various units that the student can complete in order to receive a specific grade, where the order is not important, or
  - one could create bundles with assignments from each content unit; therefore, one could not pass the class without doing work on each topic.
- Effective way of increasing student choice

Benefits of Specifications Grading

How might specifications grading help respond to the problems listed earlier?

Benefits of Specification Grading

- According to Linda Nilson, it will
  - uphold high academic standards,
  - reflect student learning outcomes,
  - motivate students,
  - save faculty time, and
  - provide useful feedback (9-13).
- It is also helpful insofar as it is fair, clear, and reflects student learning.

Potential Problems with Specifications Grading

What potential problems do you see?

Troubleshooting

- Setting specifications
- Module progression
- Prizes for keeping tokens
- Demotivating strong students
- Weighting assignments