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Contemplating the Future of EMI Assessment: Using Contract Grading to Empower Student Intellectual Risk-Taking

Abstract:

This presentation will discuss how contract grading was used in a Sino-American university upper-level EMI literature course to de-emphasize grades and to encourage students to focus on achieving specific course learning outcomes of their choice. Contract grading supported the formation of an interpretive community in which students pursued such learning outcomes as taking interpretive risks, developing personal critical reading and thinking skills, and exploring scholarly perspectives on the literature without worrying about getting everything just right or reaching the correct answer. The presentation will discuss the following topics:

1. Overview of contract grading
2. Specific application of contract grading in an EMI literature course
3. Preparing students unaccustomed to alternative grading pedagogies
4. Collaborative evaluation using rubrics
5. Student perspectives on contract grading
6. Instructor perspective on converting to contract grading
7. Applications of contract grading to language learning, EAP, and composition courses in EMI contexts

This presentation contributes to developing new pedagogies that empower Chinese students to worry less about their grades and to focus more on true learning, which requires taking risks, courting error or even failure, and not fearing penalty for such failure. Most educators experientially know that much is learned by making mistakes, but the academy too often penalizes such failure. This presentation argues that contract grading offers a new assessment pedagogy for the Sino-foreign university context that fosters deep learning by encouraging experimentation and failure, while (re)valuing the benefits of learning from such failure.

BIO: Dr. David S. Hogsette is Executive Director of the School of English Studies and professor of English at Wenzhou-Kean University. His books include *The Transcendent Vision of Mythopoeic Fantasy* (2022) and *Writing That Makes Sense*, 2nd ed. (2019). He publishes articles on Romanticism, Gothic literature, science fiction, and fantasy.

Submission Link: <https://survey.xjtlu.edu.cn/vm/QnjwL.aspx>

Proposal:

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a growing number of educators in the Western academy have rethought the traditional ways in which student work is evaluated and final grades assigned, embracing what is generally referred to as “ungrading” pedagogies.¹ The ostensible reason for common grading practices has always been to provide students constructive feedback on academic work and to indicate the degree to which students are learning the course material. Many contemporary educators and scholars of education question the assumptions linking grading with learning and argue that the hierarchical nature of traditional assessment undermines student learning by discouraging risk-taking, which many recognize as a fundamental component of constructive learning. By worrying about grades, students generally focus more on achieving scores than on developing skills, learning material, and enhancing critical thinking. The “ungrading” proponents argue that the necessary intervention is to embrace alternative grading pedagogies in which students are encouraged to take risks without worrying about consequences for the final grade.² Alternative grading pedagogies allow students to focus on learning.

This presentation examines alternative grading pedagogies specifically within the EMI Sino-foreign university context by discussing applications of contract grading.³ Most of the students in Sino-foreign universities come from traditional Chinese grammar school and secondary educational environments in which memorization and recall are common educational practices. Students work hard and focus largely on achieving high grades on examinations. Interestingly, these students choose to attend Sino-foreign universities to experience a Western educational paradigm in which trial and error, experimentation, applied learning, and critical thinking are the dominant pedagogies. Yet within most of these Western-styled classrooms, students are still pressured to achieve high marks and “get the A,” especially those planning to attend Western graduate programs. Thus, most Chinese students in EMI classrooms continue obsessing about grades and avoid the risk-taking that fosters deeper understanding and develops inquisitive frames of mind foundational to life-long learning.

In this presentation, I will discuss how contract grading was used in a Sino-American university upper-level EMI literature course to de-emphasize grades and to encourage students to focus on achieving specific course learning outcomes of their choice. Contract grading supported the formation of an interpretive community in which students pursued such learning outcomes as taking interpretive risks, developing personal critical reading and thinking skills, and exploring

¹ See Blum, “Ungrading” and “Introduction: Why Ungrade? Why Grade”; Kenyon, “What is Ungrading?”; Stommel, “How to Ungrade”; and Talbert, “What I’ve Learned from Ungrading.”

² See Blum, “Just One Change (Just Kidding)”; Chiaravalli, “Grades Stifle Student Learning”; Sackstein, “Shifting the Grading Mindset”; Stommel, “How to Ungrade.”

³ See Katopodis and Davidson, “Contract Grading and Peer Review.”

scholarly perspectives on the literature without worrying about getting everything just right or reaching the correct answer. The presentation will discuss the following topics:

8. Overview of contract grading
9. Specific application of contract grading in an EMI literature course
10. Preparing students unaccustomed to alternative grading pedagogies
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Alternative grading practices like contract grading are not truly “ungrading” because in a vast majority of institutions of higher learning, a final grade must still be assigned to each student as a measure of performance. However, the goal of contract grading is to problematize the assumption that high grades necessarily equate to true learning, an assumption strongly held by Chinese students attending Sino-foreign universities. This assumption results in Chinese students obsessing about their grades and “getting the right answer,” often to the detriment of deeper learning. This presentation contributes to developing new grading pedagogies that encourage Chinese students to worry less about their grades and to focus more on true learning, which requires taking risks, courting error or even failure, and not fearing penalty for such failure. Most educators experientially know that much is learned by making mistakes, but the academy too often penalizes such failure. This presentation argues that contract grading offers a new assessment pedagogy for the Sino-foreign university context that fosters deep learning by encouraging experimentation and failure, while (re)valuing the benefits of learning from such failure.

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