

## The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

### **Constructive Grading: How to get Students to *Read* Faculty Comments on Papers and Exams and *Learn* from them!**

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Every year in my Fossil Record class, I start off with good rapport with the students. The students like learning about the history of life on earth, and I serve as a coach and guide to them in exploring this subject. Then comes the day I hand back the first paper, and I feel a separation between the students and me as its grading opens a large chasm between us.

What to do? Well, this October as I neared this day of reckoning, I opened *The Teaching Professor* to find an article by Michael Hogan entitled “Reaction to a Suggestion for Returning Papers.” He begins by asking, “How do we avoid sending students away with graded essays to brood about a score that they feel is undeserved? What can we do to be sure they read all those instructive responses we have labored hard to provide?” He then tells of his practice of grading the papers but handing them back with comments but no grades. He asks each student to read his comments outside of class and give themselves a grade. At the next class period, he exchanges slips of paper with each student. They each give him their grade and he gives them their grade. He said that they take the assignment seriously and are surprisingly accurate in their grading. By involving the students, he takes some of the mystery out of grading for them.

After reading this article, I decided to give it a go even though I felt some fear in opening myself to student judgment here. What if they all disagree with me? That anxiety made me work harder than ever to write extensive and clear comments on each paper. I also prepared a handout telling exactly what I had expected to find in each paper. (I had never done that before.) I soon realized that the combination of my comments and the handout allowed me to influence each student’s evaluation of his or her papers. After making the exchange of grades, I found that 16/20 students had picked the grade that I gave them, two chose slightly higher grades and two chose lower grades. That match seemed better than expected.

But what surprised and pleased me most was that each of the students wrote a paragraph justifying the grade that they chose. Michael Hogan had not mentioned asking for such, but my students gave me a gift and much enhanced the effectiveness of this new method. As I read their justifications, I was able to comment all over again on their work. This time my main focus was to highlight the positive and to note again what I liked about their work. So like all great ideas, this new method grew on its own. It solved a problem not only by preventing the chasm from opening between me and students but also by adding a whole new way of communicating with them.

### **Putting Theory into Practice:**

Inspired by Prof. Webb's model of encouraging students to really benefit from comments on papers and exams, faculty and TAs may wish to develop their own form to be handed back to students with their papers. The form should make it clear that the faculty member **expects** students to respond to the comments as well as to provide their own idea of what possible grade they might have earned. The form may be photocopied and attached to each paper or exam at the

time they are handed back to the students. Alternatively, if the entire class is on e-mail, this form could be sent to students on e-mail for them to fill in and return directly to the faculty member. In either case, the actual grade and further comments may be put on this form after the faculty member has read them over. Ideally, this will lead to a productive dialogue between instructor and student.

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