

How Engagement-Based Grading Transformed My Classroom into a Community

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Abstract

Teaching Business Presentations, a public speaking course for first-year business majors, I have focused on making connections and building community within the classroom in response to the growing mental health crisis among college students. Joshua Eyler writes, "Rates of anxiety, depression and even suicidal ideation have spiked dramatically, and academic stress tied to grades is a leading cause of this escalation" (*Inside Higher Ed*, 2022). Alternative grading changed how my students relate to me, to each other, and to the learning process. Previously dabbling in specifications grading and noticing some promise, last spring I fully committed to engagement-based grading. Not only have students reported less stress, but they ceased comparing and competing (and complaining). I witness them helping each other, while providing and accepting feedback. There is a sense of collegiality among students that does not involve pitting them against me. It is in those unforced connections that community is built. Data I have gathered since eschewing traditional grading reveals low student anxiety, impressions of inclusion, and appreciation of alternative grading; evidence has been collected through student focus groups, course evaluations, midterm Small Group Instructional Diagnostic (SGID), external reviews, and informal conversations. In short, engagement-based grading has increased student engagement and created community.

Method

Engagement-based grading measures labor and reflection (how much learners engage with the course content). I do not grade individual assignments; rather, I provide feedback that encourages development rather than evaluates product. Students reflect on their own work and the work of peers. The final course grade is determined by how many assignments are satisfactorily completed. The chart below shows how one may choose the letter grade for which to work. All assignments are marked Complete or Incomplete. Work must satisfactorily meet 80% of the assignment requirements to earn Complete. If the work does not do this, students may resubmit or re-present.

How to earn the course grade you want			
A grade bundle	B grade bundle	C grade bundle	D grade bundle
Complete: 3 Major Presentations	Complete: 3 Major Presentations	Complete: 3 Major Presentations	3 Major Presentations
Complete: all Impromptus	Complete: 85% of Impromptus	Complete: 70% of Impromptus	Complete: 60% of Impromptus
Complete: Roundtable Pitch	Complete: Roundtable Pitch	Attend Roundtable Pitch	
Complete: all Deliverables	Complete: all Deliverables	Complete: all Deliverables	Complete: Team Deliverables
Complete: all Outlines	Complete: all Outlines	Complete: all Outlines	Complete: Team Outlines
Complete: all Team & Self-Assessments	Complete: all Team & Capstone Self-Assessments	Complete: all Team Assessments	
Complete: all Discussions	Complete: 75% of Discussions	Complete: 50% of Discussions	Complete: 25% of Discussions
Complete: all Rehearsals	Complete: all Rehearsals	Complete: 2 Team Rehearsals	Complete: 1 Team Rehearsal
8-10 designated Class Activities	6-7 designated Class Activities	4-5 designated Class Activities	2-3 designated Class Activities
*All grade bundles must meet Attendance & Professionalism requirements			



Rationale

By eliminating grades on individual assignments, I hope to keep students focused on developing skills and keep myself focused on providing timely feedback that enables them to do so. Additional benefits include greater autonomy and the chance to take risks and innovate. We learn much by failing, and engagement-based grading does not penalize pupils for trying something that does not work perfectly the first time. This grading method allows learners to work in a more organic way instead of simply doing what they think I expect. Together we can examine the process of one's learning and the labor that goes into it.

Challenges

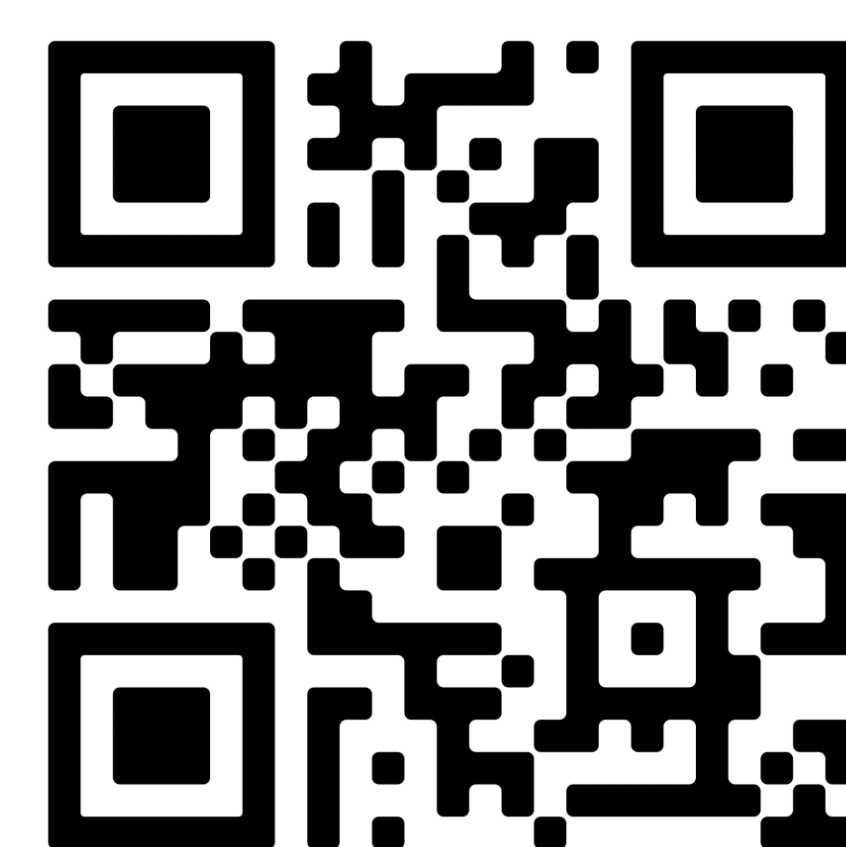
Grade inflation

More students earned high grades, largely due to the use of tokens and unlimited attempts. Allowing use of only one token and two attempts should ensure accuracy.

Time spent

Providing qualitative feedback in extensive written comments takes much more time than checking boxes on a rubric. A combination of rubric and comments will strike a balance.

References



Kelley School of Business

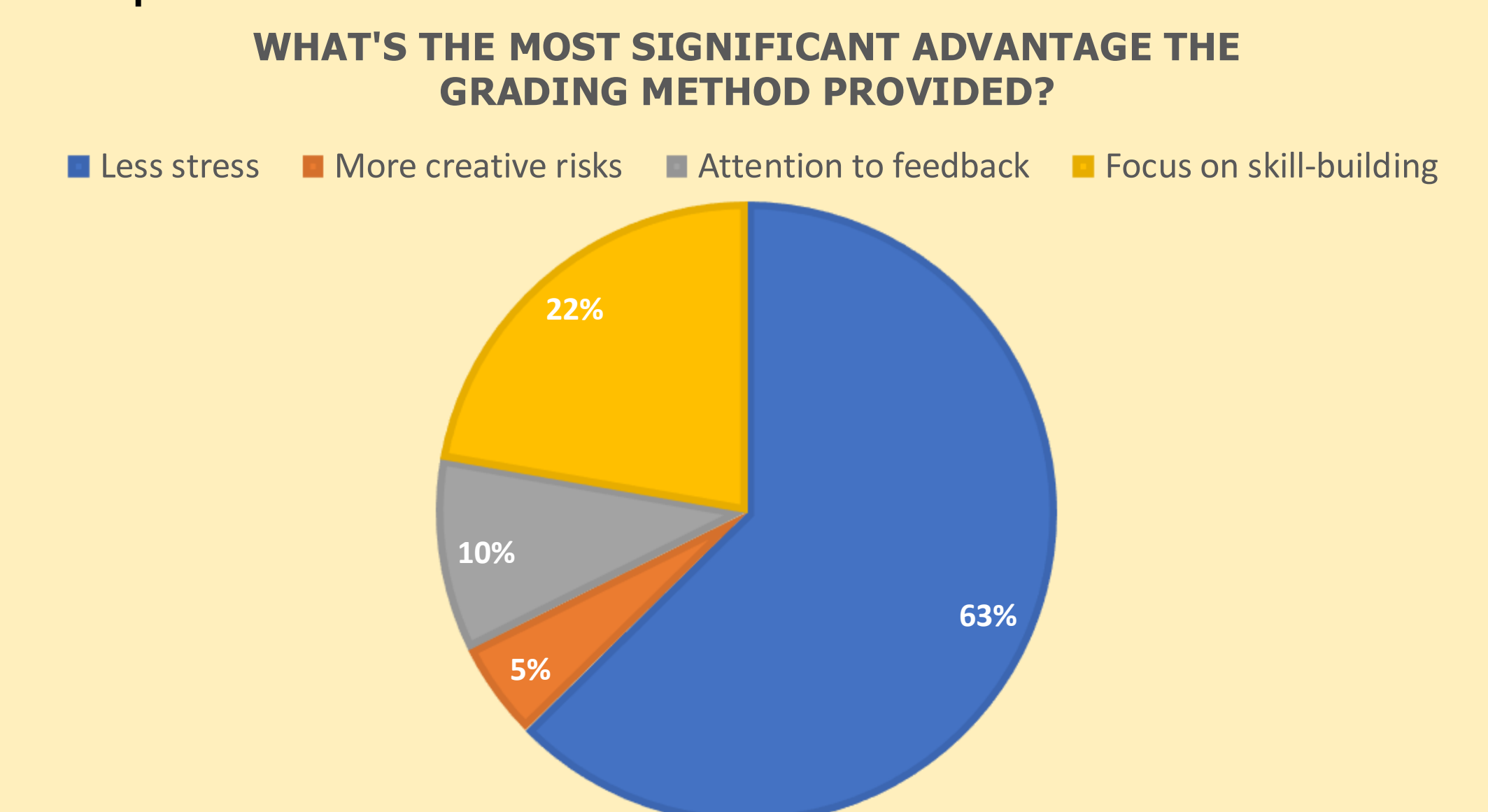
Student Responses

Small Group Instructional Diagnostic Report

"Students reported that they like the way the course is being graded: they feel less stress and anxiety, feel less competitive, and feel that this approach allows them to focus more on the feedback that they receive. They also said that they find the ability to redo (resubmit) an assignment very helpful to their learning."

End-of-Semester Survey Results

Ninety students across four sections participated in an anonymous survey, and 97% responded favorably to the grading method. The chart below specifies what was most useful.



Course Evaluation Comments

"I really like the course's grading system. It helped me focus a lot more on the actual presentational skills that I was supposed to be honing and not stress as much about grades."

"Professor Scott-Harmon taught me that it is okay to mess up as long as you learn from your mistakes and grow from them. That was the whole point of her grading system; she wanted her students to focus on the feedback rather than the grade, which is precisely what I got from this class and her grading system."

"She prioritizes students' learning and development through her 'choose your own grade' system, and she provides great feedback!"

