

Multiple Option Grade Contracts

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The issue of grades has sparked much controversy among educators, with some advocating the total abandonment of grading. During the sixties many school systems experimented with pass-fail systems. For a variety of reasons (e.g., parental and community pressures, teacher dissatisfaction, college admission requirements), many schools have re-introduced letter grades. Increasingly, teachers are faced with the obligation of assigning a letter grade to each student at the conclusion of a specified grading period. The perfect grading system has not yet been developed, nor will the final solution to evaluation-grading dilemmas be found here. A flexible, point contract system, however, is described which eliminates some of the disadvantages of grade contracts.

One option which has been used by many teachers is the grade contract. In its most common form, the instructor specifies a relatively small number of assignments which are required of all students, with each higher level grade requiring one or more additional tasks. Generally, the student signs a contract at the start of the course for an A, B, or C. The student who contracts for an A, but completes the required tasks for a lower grade, presents a dilemma for the teacher. Should the student be penalized for failing to reach the contracted goal, or rewarded for the performance level that he successfully attained?

The specified tasks reflect the expressed or hidden objectives of the course. There may be other goals that the teacher wants to obtain, but the students will tend to emphasize the ones which are being evaluated.

A contract is an agreement between two parties stipulating that when a specified event(s) has occurred, a particular positive consequence will follow. As completion of the grade contract is dependent upon attainment of a preset standard of performance rather than relative position

within a group, it is a criterion-referenced form of evaluation, rather than a norm-referenced form.

A Multiple Option Contract

The multiple option grade contract is an extension of the grade contract system which maximizes the advantages of a criterion-referenced contract system while eliminating many of the deficiencies encountered with standard grade contracts. The model presented here is a flexible grade contract which has been used by the author in a variety of high school and college courses. Colleagues and former students have adapted the system to many different courses at pre-college levels. The multiple option grade contract is flexible to incorporate the teaching style, needs, and evaluation program of the individual teacher. It is shared as a grading option to be considered by teachers not as the elixir for all student evaluation. The author has experimented with a variety of adaptations and continues to strive for improvement.

At the first class meeting, students are given a handout describing the terms of the contract. The minimum number of points needed to qualify for each letter grade is specified. The contract used by the author is:

100 points	=	A
80 points	=	B
60 points	=	C

I do not specify a number of points for a D, but I announce that if anyone wants to contract for a D to see me and we shall negotiate a number. Thus far, no one has accepted that offer!

The Assignment Menu

Each week, students receive a set of from two to ten activities and projects. These assignments are keyed to the course objectives. Successful completion of each task is accepted as mastery of a particular objective or skill. Some activities, reflecting vital skills or concepts, may be required of

everyone. There may be alternative means available for demonstrating attainment of the same skill. Many learning tasks are optional; the student chooses those which best reflect his individual needs, values, and interests. The fact that a student has an active choice, even among a limited set of alternatives, enhances motivation.

The total number of points available should exceed the sum required for an A, usually at least double. The contract is cumulative and positive. The student receives points for achievement and effort. Points are not subtracted for poor performance, rather nothing is added to the student's total.

Students are encouraged to propose assignment options which will demonstrate their learning. Class presentations, reports, book reviews, and interviews are all valid learning experiences which should be encouraged. The student and teacher can negotiate a mutually acceptable point value for such assignments. It is essential that at least a relatively specific point range be negotiated as a part of the contract.

Individual assignments may be evaluated "pass/fail," indicating that minimal criteria were achieved, or a student's effort may be prorated and thus receive partial credit. I usually evaluate each assignment on a pass/fail basis and allow the student to resubmit the project after alterations if a "fail" is received.

It is possible to grade exams on a point basis. Exams are given a specified point value, 10 or 20 points. The student is rewarded for good performance. Poor performance is not rewarded, but one bad test does not doom the student for the duration of the course. Because the points are cumulative, a low score does not unnecessarily deflate a grade. The student is not dealing with arithmetic averages. This will tend to decrease test anxiety.

To make this program work, the assignments need to be clearly stated. The student should not have to guess what you want. What are the minimal criteria? It helps to have sample products or assignments submitted in previous courses which were evaluated as acceptable. The students will not perceive the program as fair if they

must constantly rewrite assignments because they guessed wrong.

Some students may procrastinate, particularly if the teacher does not set deadlines for assignments. This could lead to a huge deluge of papers the last week of class. I have asked students to turn in projects within four weeks after receiving their assignments, and they have usually been cooperative.

Advantages

1. The responsibility for grades is the student's. The relationship between performance and grade is apparent. Students know how many points they have accumulated and how many are needed to reach the grade sought.

2. The flexible grade contract provides an opportunity to individualize instruction and assignments. A menu is presented to the student. Essential skills or experiences may be required of all students, but in many instances alternative routes to a goal exist. Students may be able to provide evidence of mastery of a skill in a variety of settings. They are given a choice of activities and perhaps even those skills which best reflect their needs and interests.

3. This method of grading encourages the teacher to reflect upon his goals for the course. In what way will the students be different when they leave than when they entered the class? How will the teacher know whether students have achieved skills or mastered concepts or principles reflected by the course objectives?

4. The students are competing with themselves--not their peers. No one's grade is dependent upon how well others in the class perform. The student is striving toward a preset standard of performance.

5. It is fair. The student knows where he stands. He is in control. The subjective elements of outpsyching the teacher are minimized. This can allow the instructor to be perceived as a resource person. Of course, it must be recognized that this does diminish the instructor's power and that the criteria for evaluation are public and open. There are no last minute surprises for not pleasing the prof or feeding his ego.

Conclusion

The primary function of grades is to communicate a level of performance. A fair and consistent method of evaluating academic accomplishment without damaging the self-concept of the student has vexed educators for decades. The recent movement to criterion-referenced evaluation has eliminated many of the destructive elements of a competitive norm-referenced

grading system. A practical method of adapting a criterion-referenced evaluation program to the traditional and generally required letter grade has been described. The multiple option grade contract is presented as a general framework. It can be adapted and modified to fit particular teaching styles, student populations, and course characteristics.

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