Equity-Minded Grading and Assessment Practices

"Equity is grounded in the principle of fairness. In higher education, equity refers to ensuring that each student receives what they need to be successful through the intentional design of the college experience."
Achieving the Dream, 2016

Defining Equity in Teaching

Equity-minded teaching aims to identify and mitigate potential barriers to success. Accounting for differential access to resources/opportunities before college, equity-minded practitioners:

- ☐ Question their own assumptions, recognize stereotypes that harm student success ("You either get it, or you don't…"), and continually reassess their practices to create change.
- ☐ Utilize an equity lens to identify (and mitigate) potential barriers to success. For example, some of our practices may privilege students with prior knowledge of what scholars call 'the hidden curriculum' of higher education. Clearer expectations are not lower expectations.

Addressing Equity Through Grading and Course Assessment

Balancing Ideals with Logistics

While some traditional approaches to grading and assessment can perpetuate inequities, we recognize that the equity-minded practices we recommend constitute additional instructor labor. While the practices are based on research, we acknowledge that finding ways to make them work your course means making things manageable and sustainable. We offer a handful of practices to consider with suggestions in how to make it work, *Small Teaching* (Lang, 2016) style.

Putting it into Practice – A Few Suggested Practices

- **Grading for Growth -** A great place to start is with opportunities to revise and resubmit work. Second-chance grading (Fernandez, 2021) giving students opportunities to learn from mistakes and improve on their initial attempts makes the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) real for students.
- **Distributing Feedback –** Feedback is key for learning, yet it constitutes labor for instructors. Feedback in the form of self- and peer- assessments is one way to share the workload, but we may need to guide and provide structure for that feedback (See: Nilson, 2003).
    - o Consider providing forms or set questions for peer- and self- assessment to structure students' responses.
    - o Consider having a discussion with students about effective feedback: ask what their experiences with good/bad feedback have been, and consider what makes feedback more effective.

- **Rethinking Participation –** Many instructors allocate a portion of their grade for attendance and/or participation. That said, we often assign a grade for attendance/participation based off our general impression of how much or how little students engaged in class. This invites subjectivity and potential bias into our assessment.
  - Attaching attendance/participation grades to deliverables such as formative assessments (TopHat and/or clicker questions, for example) can give everyone a chance to participate.
    - Consider grading formative assessment for completion, but checking for clarity and understanding.
  - Consider asking students to formulate goals about how they will participate/engage in the course. Alanna Gillis (2018) took this approach with her students and found that students' motivation was increased by taking more ownership of their participation.
- **Inclusive Formative Assessment -** Formative assessment is a highly recommended practice of checking student knowledge as you go. While traditional formative assessments focus on retention of key ideas, inclusive formative assessment asks students not just what they know but also to make connections and find real-world connections. Asking students to make these connections themselves correlates with positive effects on their motivation (See: Harackiewicz et al., 2016).
- **Transparency in Conversation -** Winkelmes et al.'s (2016) studies on transparency in assignment design showed a correlation between clarifying the purpose and expectations behind assignments and greater student belonging. Turning this into a conversation, where students invited to contribute and inform those expectations, can enhance this effect (Bearman & Ajjawi, 2021).

Works Cited

- Bearman, M., & Ajjawi, R. (2021). Can a rubric do more than be transparent? Invitation as a new metaphor for assessment criteria. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(2), 359-368.
- Fernandez, O. E. (2021). Second chance grading: An equitable, meaningful, and easy-to-implement grading system that synergizes the research on testing for learning, mastery grading, and growth mindsets. *Primus*, *31*(8), 855-868. https://doi.org/10.1080/10511970.2020.1772915
- Fincke, K., Morrison, D., Bergsman, K., & Bell, P. (2021). Formative assessment for equitable learning. *The Science Teacher*, *89*(2), 32-36.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Smith, J. L., & Priniski, S. J. (2016). Interest matters: The importance of promoting interest in education. *Policy insights from the behavioral and brain sciences*, *3*(2), 220-227.
- Nilson, L. B. (2003). Improving student peer feedback. *College teaching*, *51*(1), 34-38.

Further Reading

- Achieving the Dream's Equity-Minded Decision-Making Guide
- Alanna Gillis blog post on Attendance and Participation as Skill Building
- Joe Feldman's *Grading for Equity* website
- Learn more about the Hidden Curriculum (**Source**: *Inclusive Teaching Guide* from the Center for Teaching Excellence at Penn State Harrisburg).
- University of Virginia CTE page on Alternative Grading: Practices to Support Both Equity and Learning