



A Fair and Reasonable Approach to Deadlines and Late Penalties

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Although I love to teach, for a number of years, I experienced a great deal of agony while attempting to determine what constituted appropriate grounds for granting a student an extension on a course assignment. How long should the extension be? Should it make a difference if the student asked for an extension two weeks in advance as opposed to the day before? And who was I to pass judgment on the impact of a personal crisis on a student's capacity to complete an assignment on time? Because most of us still lack pedagogical training in these important instructional details, policies on deadlines, extensions, and penalties vary across departments and institutions, leaving too many students justifiably confused, if not angry.

As an instructor who takes deadlines seriously and believes that assessing late penalties is a practical and effective means of demonstrating the importance of timely work to the learning process, I have put a great deal of thought into ways to develop a policy for deadlines, late penalties, and extensions that is both fair and reasonable. I'd like to share my solution. It is one that fits with my philosophy of teaching and one that has successfully kept my students satisfied.

In my courses, all assignments have a fixed due date. I do not allow any extensions, and I impose a 5 percent per business day penalty on all late submissions. I begin to impose that penalty, however, five days after the assignment is officially due. (It is worth noting that my assignments are always due in the middle of the week so that the five days include the weekend). Even though there is no formal penalty,

students who plan to submit papers during those five days after the official due date are strongly encouraged to inform me of their intention to do so in advance (out of professional courtesy). Moreover, after the official due date, I do not provide students with any feedback or guidance on their assignments. After the official due date, my time is dedicated to marking those papers that were submitted on time.

This policy reflects five of my core teaching beliefs:

- Students are academic professionals. Submitting assignments on time reinforces their sense of personal accountability and demonstrates their respect for the learning process. (A 5 percent per day penalty is a significant deterrent and ensures that my position on this point comes across clearly.)
- Fairness is crucial to good and effective teaching. Students who feel that it is necessary to hand in an assignment slightly late can do so in my courses without having to feel like they are being judged, nor are they ever forced to reveal the details of their personal lives in an attempt to gain my sympathy. Moreover, the more litigious in the class have no need to fear that another student has been given an unfair advantage on an assignment because of an overly lenient decision on a request for an extension.
- Thoughtfully chosen deadlines play a pedagogical role in establishing the relative importance of each assignment. Firm deadlines help students determine how much time they should be dedicating to the various components of the course. By respecting them, students are more likely to have the time available to prepare successfully for subsequent work.

- Feedback on all student assignments should be prompt and thorough. Because my policy is clear, and the late penalty is significant, I can safely anticipate when the bulk of my students' assignments will be submitted and plan and budget my marking time accordingly. I generally receive 40 percent to 60 percent of all papers "on time," and begin marking right away. The next 30 percent to 50 percent arrive within the additional five days, which allows me to continue uninterrupted. No process is perfect, and I still receive late papers, but there are fewer than there used to be.
- Teaching should be a positive experience. With this system, I no longer spend hours feeling guilty about denying a student an extension or worried that I will be accused of having given one student more favorable treatment than another.

Mine is certainly not the only solution but, hopefully, this article will get us talking. Establishing workable policies for deadlines and extensions is a crucial part of successful teaching that deserves more attention than it has received. ♥

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- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
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When Teaching Less is More

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When I first began teaching sociology, I was determined to cover as much material as possible. The first textbook I used had 23 chapters, and although I knew I could not cover all of them, I sure did try. I distinctly remember hitting an entire chapter's highlights in one 50-minute period. Even at this breakneck speed, I still felt as if I had let students down by not getting through enough of the material.

By the time I became a full-time professor I was down to covering 11 or 12 chapters in a 13-week semester. However, there were still times during the semester when I felt as if I were barely touching topics before moving on. This "hit-and-run" approach didn't seem very satisfying. In every introductory class, I'd reach a point where I would come home and say to my wife, "I have got to change something about the way I am teaching." After a while I heard myself saying, "Sometime soon I am going to make some sort of big change in the way I teach, but I don't know what that change is going to be yet."

Then after more thinking and some reading, I started making small changes. I experimented with different assignments. I tweaked my classroom behavior. I rearranged aspects of the content. These tactics all paid off in small ways, but there was still that moment each semester when I thought, "where am I going with this?" Then one semester I realized that this always occurred when I hit a particular chapter. So the following semester I skipped that chapter. Guess what? I enjoyed the class more and so did my students.

This caused me to recall an experience I'd had as a graduate student. I arrived at a class and realized that I had left my notes at home, more than an hour away. It was a three-hour, once-per-week class. I didn't have time to go home, and I didn't want to

cancel class for the entire week. So, I "winged" it. I taught from memory. Because my memory has never been very good, I couldn't barrage students with a long list of names, dates, or details. Instead, I introduced specific topics related to the chapter we were covering, and then we discussed them. We spent the entire three hours discussing the subject in broad terms, focusing on its various ramifications for the students' lives. Afterward, three students told me that it was the best class period they ever attended.

I had always considered this an odd incident, but when I looked at it more closely, I realized that what made the class exceptional was the depth of the discussion, not the number of details presented. That was when I decided to start teaching fewer topics. I just went through my syllabi and crossed out the least important areas. Now, I'm lucky if I get through eight chapters of an intro textbook in one semester, but because I am not in a hurry, the students and I can spend time really examining the areas we do cover. We spend time discussing why something is important, what it means to students, and what the larger ramifications are for them and for society. We move on only when a topic has been explored and exhausted. I no longer throw a lot of information at them hoping some of it will stick.

I know that different fields have different issues related to how much content gets covered in a course. I realize that the approach I'm taking in my courses may not be feasible for every area or suit every instructor. But I also know that I've learned an important lesson: when I teach less, my students learn more. ♥

Faculty Ratings: Improved With Consultation

Several years ago in this newsletter, we highlighted research that documents that if faculty solicit evaluation feedback from students and then meet with a consultant to discuss the results, their end-of-course ratings improve significantly. A recent study confirms these results yet again and provides good reason for us to revisit this important finding.

Rating data collected from students, a practice now almost universal in higher education, continues to fall well short of its potential to improve practice.

Any number of common policies and practices do not make use of well-established research findings that set out ways to positively impact the effectiveness of rating systems. Many faculty question the usefulness of end-of-course rating data in their efforts to improve, and many students doubt the sincerity of their institutions as they see ineffective instructors who are allowed to continue teaching despite consistently poor ratings. Sadly, the process of evaluating instruction demonstrates what can happen when research is disconnected from practice.

So, it's nice when there is a bright spot about which we can report and the positive impact of mid-course rating feedback with consultation is certainly one of those. Hampton and Reiser (reference below) organized their inquiry around four hypotheses:

- 1) that mid-course rating feedback coupled with consultation would increase the frequency with which instructors in the sample used six instructional activities (more about these in a moment)
- 2) end-of-course ratings of teaching effectiveness would be significantly higher for those instructors who received mid-course feedback and consultation
- 3) that students in those courses would learn more as measured by final exam scores
- 4) that feedback and consultation for faculty would positively affect student motivation.

Results confirmed the first two hypothe-

ses but not the last two, although there were some promising indications for the last two.

The six instructional activities the researchers wanted to see if mid-course feedback and consultations increased were developed from a theoretical model proposed by Gagne which incorporates fundamental principles for designing and delivering effective instructional. The instrument developed by these researchers and used in this study solicits feedback on

- 1) motivating students
- 2) informing students of objectives
- 3) helping students recall prerequisite knowledge
- 4) presenting information and examples
- 5) providing practice and feedback
- 6) summarizing the lesson.

A table in the article shows how researchers got from the theory to these concrete classroom activities.

This survey was administered at a mid-course point, and instructors received written results which they discussed for 75 minutes with a consultant who had also observed in the classroom of the instructor involved. A second observation and meeting followed this first discussion. Compared with a control group who administered the same survey at mid-course but received no feedback or consultation, instructors in the experimental group used more of all six activities at rates that were statistically significant as were ratings of overall course effectiveness.

Differences in student learning as measured by final exam scores were not statistically significant, although researchers had some concerns about the reliability of the final exam as a measure of learning. And students in the experimental sections did not have their motivation positively affected (as measured by pre and post scores on four questions about motivations), although end-of-course motivation scores did correlate positively at statistically significant levels with the frequency with which instructors used the six activities.

In sum, the researchers note that this

study “was the first step in an attempt to examine the effectiveness of a student ratings feedback form and consultation process specifically linked to a theory of learning and instruction model.” (p. 516) And their findings did verify that feedback and consultation had a short-term effect on the instruction of those involved in the study. That raises an interesting follow-up question not yet answered by this or other research: would an experience like this influence instructional practices over a longer period of time?

Findings like these are interesting in and of themselves, but there are some larger implications. Even if faculty teach at an institution that does not use a system of mid-course feedback and consultation, there is nothing that prevents an individual faculty member from implementing these findings. Many reliable and valid feedback forms exist (the one used in this research appears in an appendix at the end of the referenced article). They can be administered mid course and what the results might mean for instructional practice can be discussed with a colleague or consultant from the local teaching and learning center. Sometimes, even though the systems used to evaluate our instruction might not be all that effective, we can work around them and still acquire feedback that will enable us to better help our students learn.

Reference: Hampton, S. E., and Reiser, R. A. (2004). Effects of a theory-based feedback and consultation process on instruction and learning in college classrooms. *Research in Higher Education*, 45 (5), 497-527. ♥

Non-Threatening Classroom Environments

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What makes a classroom environment threatening to students? That depends on the student. Some may find the subject itself threatening — it may be embarrassing, distasteful, or just too difficult. Others are threatened because they think that everyone in the class knows more than they do. The personalities of some students threaten or intimidate fellow students. Opinions expressed on a topic may take one side of an issue and that can intimidate students who disagree — “I’m the only one who doesn’t think like this.” Instructor mannerisms and communication styles, course requirements, or structure sometimes threaten students’ comfort level. Language and cultural factors are well-documented as further barriers to creating a non-threatening classroom environment for all. And finally some students are intimidated by class size. If it’s really big, they may be afraid to participate; if it’s really small they may be afraid they’ll have to.

So what makes a classroom environment non-threatening? Recently, we asked our students this question, and after a discussion of their responses we came up with this description: “A non-threatening classroom environment would be one in which each participant feels safe and free to learn within the limits of the instructor’s design for the course.” We don’t claim that this is a conclusive definition, but it is a place to start.

What can we do to create this kind of environment? We believe it is possible to mitigate most of the feelings of discomfort by paying attention to the factors we can control in the classroom environment. In our experience, the introduction we give of ourselves to the class and how we approach the first five minutes of the first class session sets the tone for that class. Research has shown that many students will have formed an opinion of the class by the end of that first five minutes. We should do all we can to be welcoming to the students and to establish an atmosphere of initial rapport and caring. Does this preclude being firm or “tough?” Not at all. Showing genuine interest in students and their diverse strengths and weaknesses

can establish an initial safety zone. Policies and requirements of the course can then be explained. Establishing ground rules appropriate to the course’s design and purpose can extend the safety zone into areas such as class discussion (i.e., one person speaks at a time, two-minute limit on comments, attack the argument instead of the person) and electronic communication courtesy and protocols (i.e., phone calls to professor end at six; e-mails Monday through Friday answered within 24 hours).

As classroom environment issues emerge, they can be approached proactively. We recommend requesting student feedback anonymously on threat levels and triggers, and, if appropriate, discussing that feedback in class. Some issues that threaten the learning security of a classroom can be dealt with privately, such as an overbearing student who needs counseling, but others must be confronted as a class, such as an endemic trend toward sarcasm in discussions.

Finally, what about the impact of a threatening environment on the professor?

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To Read or Not to Read PowerPoint Slides

Late last spring we published a piece proposing some rules for effectively using PowerPoint (“Twelve Commandments for Using PowerPoint, TP, June/June, 2004). One of those commandments forbade reading, word-for-word, material printed on the slides. We printed an objection to that rule in our August/September issue, and that motivated another reader to send a link to this website: http://www.communicateusingtechnology.com/articles/ppt-survey_article.htm

If you connect to this link you will find the results of a survey conducted by and reported on by Dave Paradi. He asked 159 people from various organizational levels and in different countries (not an audience

of students taking classes) what they found most annoying in PowerPoint presentations. Number one on this list was: “the speaker reads the slides to us,” reported as annoying by over 60 percent of the respondents. Other top annoyances included, text too small to read, identified as annoying by almost 51 percent of the respondents; and slides with full sentences as opposed to bullets, listed by almost 50 percent of this group.

Based on these findings, Paradi makes this recommendation: “It is important that a presenter focus on getting short, relevant and readable text on the slides and add to each point with what they say. Simply reading slides that are jammed with text ...

is an insult to the audience, and the results indicate that by doing this presenters are severely damaging the message they are trying to deliver.”

Also of interest, Paradi asked respondents how many PowerPoint presentations suffered from the problems identified. Over 40 percent of the respondents reported that these annoying characteristics were part of more than 40 percent of the presentations they viewed.

And so the debate continues. We probably won’t report more opinions on the topic. Our best advice to instructors: survey your student audience to see which ways of presenting material on PowerPoint slides best facilitates their learning.

Study Reveals Faculty Attitudes About Grade Inflation

Most professors believe grade inflation is a problem. Their beliefs are buttressed by some evidence and by accounts that have appeared in widely read media like *The New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *National Review*, and *USA Today*. But not all the evidence lines up in support of those who believe grade inflation is a rampant problem.

In situations where the empirical evidence does not agree, qualitative research methods can be used to explore conflicting reasons and results. One such study appeared in a recently published book featuring scholarship of teaching and learning work done at research universities. In this qualitative analysis of grade inflation, the researchers conducted 25 in-depth (45 minutes to three-and-a-half hour) interviews with faculty from different fields, all working at a research university. The researchers explain the rationale for this qualitative approach: “we were convinced (and became even more so during the interviews) that the approach we selected would enable us to go beyond professors’ automatic responses to questions and instead to explore their more reflective accounts and, indeed, the meanings underlying professors’ beliefs about grading and grade inflation.” (p. 196) When they analyzed the interviews, five themes emerged. Results for each are summarized below. In the article the results are supported and illustrated with a range of faculty comments. Space limits prevent us from including more than a couple of these.

Perceptions of grade inflation

In this small faculty cohort, 56 percent were convinced, in many cases strongly convinced, that grade inflation existed at their institution. A contrasting 24 percent did not believe that it was present. However, the results became interesting when it emerged that even though faculty believed that grade inflation was occurring, they were equally convinced it was not happening in their departments and very sure that it was not happening in their

courses. “Our interviewees saw grade inflation as a problem that did not occur in their neighborhood, and especially not in their own household,” the researchers write.

When asked if their grading was “easy,” “moderate,” or “tough,” none of the respondents chose easy, and half reported that they were tough (sometimes qualifying by saying things like they were “tough but with heart”). More than half believed their grades were lower than their departmental averages.

In one of the most interesting findings of the study, the interviewer asked each respondent to indicate what a typical grade distribution for one of their courses might look like. Then researchers compared these estimated distributions with actual grades given by the instructor. “Nearly all of the interviewed professors believed their grades were lower than they actually were.” (p. 201) In the most extreme example one professor estimated a distribution that included 11 percent A’s, 24 percent B’s, 53 percent C’s, 7 percent D’s and 4 percent F’s which translated into a 2.31 GPA. The actual grades of this individual revealed this distribution: 62 percent A’s, 33 percent B’s, 3 percent C’s, 1 percent D’s and 1 percent F’s or a 3.53 GPA. Although this example was the most extreme, 92 percent of those interviewed miscalculated their GPA distribution and all in this same direction.

Explanations for grade inflation

Surprisingly the most common explanation given by this group of faculty involved pressure being exerted by students with many characterizing it as a “powerful factor fueling grade inflation.” (p. 205) One professor explained it this way: “Because they are much more grade conscious, it seems to me, than they used to be, [and] much more likely to come in and challenge, it’s a lot more likely they think there a ‘Let’s Make a Deal’ sort of atmosphere.” (p. 204) Although here again, many in the cohort denied that they had experienced this pressure, and those

who had experienced were convinced that they had not been influenced by it.

Grades and student evaluation

Faculty interviewed here did believe there was a link between end-of-course student evaluations and grades — that faculty graded more leniently as a way of obtaining better student evaluations, but again this was a problem they attributed to others. They did not believe the good evaluations they received were a function of grades they gave. In the end, even though it contradicted previously stated negative portrayals of students, most faculty in this sample gave students credit for being “savvy” and able to disentangle leniency from grades.

Ideal grade distributions

Those faculty interviewed were asked what they believed an ideal grade distribution should look like. Only two thought their grades should be lower, although the ideal distribution proposed by two-thirds of them was lower. Of their responses, the researchers write, “[they] suggest once again that instructors did not see their courses as contributing to grade inflation and that they viewed their own classes as qualitatively different, so different that they warranted a higher grade distribution.” (p. 209)

Policies to address the “problem” of grade inflation

Despite their conviction about the extent and seriousness of the problem, this faculty group was “hesitant” (p. 212) to endorse policies that might correct or prevent the problem. “Most did not advocate much beyond conversation.” (p. 212). Two-thirds did not even support establishing recommendations about grading practices, objecting that this violated principles of academic freedom.

In their summary, the researchers do not back away from the often misinformed

Translating ‘Ideal’ Professor Characteristics into Practices

When students evaluate teachers, they likely compare their “real” teachers with some notion of an “ideal” professor. In previous research, words like “warm,” “capable,” and “accessible” have been identified as descriptors of ideal teachers. But as the research team of Epting, Zinn, Buskist, and Buskist (reference below) point out, in order to be truly useful to teachers, these characteristics need to be translated into actions — policies and practices that guide their interactions with students.

To discover what ideal teachers do, they designed a 40-item, multiple-choice survey that asked students to specify actions in three categories: personal characteristics, course design and policies, and classroom behaviors. They administered the survey to 119 undergraduates, 85 percent of whom were juniors or seniors. They focused on upper-division students because juniors and senior have more experiences on which to base their responses.

Among a variety of interesting findings, the researchers discovered that “personal characteristics” did not distinguish ideal professors from typical ones. “The pattern of preferences indicated for Ideal professors generally matched the pattern of experiences with Typical professors.” (p. 181) Researchers hypothesize that personal characteristics may matter less once students are in a major and have a vested interest in the material.

But in the other two categories there were some significant differences. Consider these examples (others are listed in the article):

- Forty-three percent of the respondents indicated that ideal teachers talked informally with students sometimes; only 15 percent of their typical teachers did this.
- As for teaching methods, 78 percent of the ideal teachers lectured; 93 percent of the typical teachers did, as compared with 58 percent of the ideal teachers who included student-teacher discus-

sions and 64 percent of the typical teachers who did not.

- Ninety-seven percent of the ideal teachers use humor often; 75 percent of the typical teachers included it occasionally.
- Sixty-eight percent of the ideal teachers solicit anonymous, written, informal feedback on the teaching and the course; only 17 percent of typical teachers do. Seventy-two percent of the ideal teachers do this two or more times a term; 30 percent of the typical teachers never do.

The researchers sum their findings this

way: “Overall, our research suggests that Ideal professors are highly accessible to students, allow student input into the course policies and procedures, provide for significant variety in the course and provide a comfortable learning atmosphere for students.” (p. 182)

Reference: Epting, L. K., Zinn, T. E., Buskist, C., and Buskist, W. (2004). Student perspectives on the distinction between ideal and typical teachers. *Teaching of Psychology*, 31 (3), 181-183.

GRADE INFLATION

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and contradictory views expressed by the faculty they interviewed. They do not believe that these faculty were being disingenuous. “It is important to recognize that these patterns are not apparently related to self-delusion or lack of self-reflection on the part of our sample of professors. To the contrary, we were impressed by our interviewees thoughtful, detailed and complex responses.” (p. 214) How could they be so misinformed and contradictory? Researchers suggest that they “may illustrate a general tendency identified in the social psychological literature: the idea that individuals believe they are better than average and that their situation is distinct from others.”(p. 214) That explanation makes some sense, but whatever the reason, this study ought to challenge all of us to reconsider the facts behind our beliefs about grade inflation!

Reference: McCabe, J., and Powell, B. “In my class? No.” Professors accounts of grade inflation. In W. E. Becker and M. L. Andrews, eds., *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Contributions of Research Universities*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004.

NON-THREATENING

FROM PAGE 4

Students can intimidate, cause embarrassment and discomfort, even totally shake the confidence of seasoned classroom veterans. The first step is to recognize that there is a problem and take action as soon as it occurs. If not, it will almost certainly get worse. Bringing in an experienced assessor and mediator (maybe someone from the Teaching & Learning Center) to proactively work with both the students and instructor to identify the problem and to suggest solutions for both parties has proven itself a constructive approach.

Although our discussion of non-threatening classroom environments, what they are, why they emerge, how they diminish learning, and how more constructive climates can be created produced few definitive, one-size-fits-all answers, we felt enriched by our discussion. Reflection on this key question is well worth the effort. What role does each of us play in creating a non-threatening learning environment? Which factors can we control, and which must we seek to understand and ameliorate idiosyncratically?