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The Two Types of Grades and Why They Matter to Ethics Education

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And Why They Matter to Ethics Education[1]

Abstract: In-course marks and final grades each have their own nature and purpose and conflating the two does a disservice to both. Final grades represent a fixed and final statement about how a student *did* in the course in the end. They are a communication between the professor and anyone who will pick up that student's transcript someday. In-course marks, by contrast, are a communication between the professor and student alone, and ought to be representative of an ongoing conversation about how the student *is currently doing* in the course. They are subject to change with each lecture, assessment, and conversation, and should embody that dynamism and potential for progress. Building upon the pedagogical concepts of differentiated learning, growth mindset, and backward course design, this paper will examine the advantages of differentiating between the two types of grades and present three grading models that incorporate the distinction.

Let me begin with an anecdote from my own life that both inspires and informs the proposal offered in this paper. In my first semester as an undergraduate student, I was enrolled in humanities course that was required as part of the university's core curriculum. Around

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2019 International Conference of the Society For Ethics Across the Curriculum, Villanova University, Villanova, PA, October 12, 2019.

midterms, when I received my first paper back in this course, and… I got a 'D'! I was devastated. Today, I am sure I could not tell you what the paper was about or what I had done to deserve that grade but over two decades later, I can recall distinctly that on my first mid-semester progress report for my first semester at college, I had a 'D' for what was probably the first time in my entire life. You can say it left a mark, but perhaps not the one you are thinking. Sure, the 'D' was a wakeup call and I, correspondingly, buckled down, met with the professor to learn where I had gone astray, and worked to dig myself out of that hole. Yes, I recognize now that I was the epitome of a particular student type that replicates in university classrooms every year. But my "get serious" moment is not the reason I still remember that 'D' all these years later. You see, when the semester came to a close and all the dust settled, somehow that professor saw fit to give me an 'A' for the course. For many years, this disturbed me on two levels. First, it disturbed me mathematically. That first assignment was worth 30% of the course grade. By all laws of mathematics, a 'D' on that paper should have precluded the possibility of an 'A' for the course. Second, it disturbed my sense of deontological fairness and justice. My failure on that first assignment should have counted against me, but somehow it did not. This struck me as deeply unfair to those who succeeded on the early assignment when I did not.

It was not until I became a teacher myself that I began to realize just how remarkably commonplace this anecdote actually is. Any professor knows that some students start slow but finish well. We also know, instinctively at least, that this is perfectly legitimate. This article is aimed at identifying just what makes this phenomenon legitimate, and consequently, how we ought to design courses to better account for this reality. My thesis is simple: that there are two

types of grades in every college course—in-course marks and final grades—and distinguishing between types should inform how we design our courses.

THE NORMATIVE GRADING FORMULA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

My disturbance at receiving a final grade of an 'A' when it should have been mathematically impossible stems from an expectation that in-course marks ought to be related to final grades in a fixed, mathematical way. This expectation, in turn, derives from the fact that the normative structure for grading in secondary and higher education, especially in the field of ethics, takes some form of $P_1G_1 + P_2G_2 + P_3G_3 + \ldots + P_nG_n = G_F$, where G_1 through G_n represent grades on each assignment in the course and P_1 through P_n represent a percentage of the final grade that each assignment is 'worth.' The sum of P_1 to P_n equals 100%, rendering G_F the final grade. For the purposes of this essay, I will term this the normative grading formula (NGF).

It is a good bet that the reader of this essay uses some form of the NGF in their classes, or at least, if they no longer use it, they have deployed the NGF in their past syllabi. Many schools even encourage their new instructors to grade this way (e.g GSI Teaching & Resource Center, UC Berkeley n.d.) Still, to test the normativity of this formula specifically for teachers of ethics in higher education, I gathered the first fifty syllabi that came up when I ran a google search for "Ethics Syllabus."[2] The sample that emerged included syllabi from schools from the Ivy League to community colleges and from undergraduate to graduate schools (I excluded "syllabi" for professional trainings that are ungraded and outside of higher education.) The sample included

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[2] The survey conducted on January 19, 2021 using a standard search for the term "ethics syllabus" on google.com

general-education undergraduate "Intro to Ethics" courses, as well as undergraduate and graduate discipline-specific courses in professional schools of business, nursing, medicine, law, engineering, etc. Of the fifty syllabi gathered, forty-two included some version of the NGF and seven of the other eight simply omitted their grading criteria. Only one syllabus in fifty described any deviation from the NGF, but even that one was clearly still influenced by the NGF because its sole deviation was to provide ranges of percentage for certain assignments to account for different levels of class participation, which varied from 0% of the grade to 20% of the grade, and adjusted the rest of the formula accordingly. Of course, this is far from a rigorous scientific study, and is certainly subject to inherent biases resulting from factors such as the set of instructors that post their syllabi publically online and the nature of the google algorithm. Moreover, the sample size is not large enough to make specific claims about the percentage of ethics professors use the NGF or any similar assertion. Still, this analysis and its overwhelming results are enough to demonstrate that the NGF is, in fact, the normative approach to calculating grades in courses in higher education.

This is not to suggest that alternatives to the NGF do not exist. In fact, alternative approaches to grading abound and have been growing in popularity especially in the last 30 years. This growth, however, has largely been in primary and secondary schools; higher education is only just beginning to catch up (Blum 2020, 2). In higher education, much of the movement away from standard grading approaches has occurred in pockets. For example, 19 of the top 20 medical schools have moved to pass-fail grades for preclinical coursework, even while their affiliated undergraduate colleges and their own admissions applications continue to use A-F grading

schemas (Deng and Wesevich 2016). Elsewhere, entire institutions have gone either entirely or optionally grade free:

> Grade-free institutions include Hampshire College, Evergreen State College, Deep Spring College, New College of Florida, Alverno College, Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies at Western Washington University, Prescott College, Antioch University, and Goddard College. Others, such as Sarah Lawrence College and Reed College, record grades but don't automatically report them to students. Brown University gives students the option to take most courses for satisfactory–no credit. (Blum 2020, 4)

However, where disciplines or local colleges have not taken such steps, it can be difficult for alternative grading to be accepted or even discussed.

We take for granted that grades are a necessary and longstanding part of the educational enterprise, but history shows this not necessarily to be true. Grading, as a practice, is a relatively recent innovation in the long history of education. "The letter grades most of us take for granted did not gain widespread popularity until the 1940s. Even as late as 1971, only 67% of primary and secondary schools in the United States used letter grades" (Schinske and Tanner 2014, 159). In higher education, prior to the 19th century, grading and ranking students was not a common practice. Among the earliest instances of grading was when Yale began ranking graduates into categories (*Optimi*, second *Optimi*, *Infiriores*, and *Pejores*) around 1785, but the practice was both still rare and limited to ranks on one's exit examinations. Grades for individual classes would not begin at Yale for another 5 decades. In 1837, Yale began grading individual classes on their 4-point scale, while that same year at least some professors at Harvard were using a 100-point scale. By the turn of the 20th century, the 100 point scale was had become common, though some schools were beginning to convert percentages into letter grades A-E, feeling as though the five categories were more reliable than the 100 point scale. By 1930, a 'F' or "failed" category was

generally added, but thereabouts the 'E' disappeared. By the 1940's the five letter, A-F scale we

know today was dominant (Schinske and Tanner 2014, 160; Blum 2020, 7).

Grading is also a practice that not only fails to meet the purposes for which it was

developed, but actually has harmful unintended effects on students and student learning that

are not offset by its benefits. There are four generally accepted purposes for grades: providing

feedback to students, motivating students, comparing students, and measuring learning. The

problem is that studies show that letter and/or number grades alone are notably ineffective at

all four of these tasks. Grading does not provide feedback that is constructive for future learning

because the abstract grade can be difficult for students to interpret. This appears to be true even

if the grade is paired with written comments, in part because students focus on the grade and

often ignore the comments (Schinske and Tanner 2014). Far from being a motivator for students,

grades prove to "dampen existing intrinsic motivation, give rise to extrinsic motivation, enhance

fear of failure, reduce interest, decrease enjoyment in class work, increase anxiety, hamper

performance on follow-up tasks, stimulate avoidance of challenging tasks, and heighten

competitiveness" (Schinske and Tanner 2014, 161; cf. Kohn 2011; 1999).

Regardless of whether grades are used to compare students or to gage individuals against

a fixed standard, the use of grades as a measure fails largely because of the inconsistency in

grading rubrics and standards. Should credit be given for effort (including things like participation

or attendance) or for accomplishment of a given objective? Should grades be curved or fixed to

a standard? Should points be deducted for late assignments, even though punctuality is not one

of the course learning objectives? A given professor's answer to these questions could lead to

very different grading structures in ostensibly similar courses. Even if learning objectives are

standardized across a department or school, the weight and emphasis of each objective in the course and grade are inherently inconsistent. And all of this does not even begin to cover the human biases involved in grading or the issues of grade inflation and the corresponding narrowing of the grade curve.

> Grades, despite their apparent solidity, have been inconsistent from the start. Research from 1912 and 1913—early in grades' ubiquity—jolted the profession. Two researchers attempted to test how much consistency (reliability) they would find among faculty evaluating the same papers. They found little agreement in English and history—there was a range of 39 percent—but perhaps, the researchers thought, this resulted from the inherently less clear-cut nature of the subjects. Assuming judgments of math work would be more uniform, they sent out a geometry paper, where they found even less agreement: some faculty gave scores of 38 to 42, and others of 83 to 87. Some incorporated neatness or organization, though others did not. Lest you think this would have been improved in the intervening century, Dean Stevenson reported on a September 2019 investigation in which he asked for volunteers to assess student assignments; more than fifty teachers volunteered to participate. The grades they assigned ranged from 1 to 6 points. This shows that it is common for grades to be inconsistent, subjective, random, arbitrary. (Blum 2020, 11)

So if grades are neither necessary nor longstanding, and if they are not succeeding at the tasks they are intended for but in fact harming intrinsic motivations to education, then why not get rid of grades altogether? This is proposition leveled by proponents of *ungrading*, a radical approach to the problem which argues that grades can and should be completely abandoned and replaced with more substantive communication between teacher and student for formative feedback during the course.

Other alternative grading methods take a more measured approach, targeting specific failures in contemporary grading structures rather than the use of grades as a whole. *Contract grading*, for example, has students themselves define what they would like to get out of the class.

A controlled version of contract grading has the instructor construct the syllabus as a contract with terms that will lead to an A, B, C, D, or F in the course. For example, if the course has ten assignments, the student agrees to do all ten if they want an A, but can opt out of 1 or 2 if they want a B, or more if they are only seeking a lower grade. Students select the grade they wish to achieve and then sign the contract with the instructor regarding what they are expected to do. A more expansive approach to contract grading allows the students themselves to create the syllabus and define the terms of the contract. The instructor, being a party to the contract, must agree with the terms, but by asking students to take control of their own learning goals, contract grading encourages active rather than passive learning and empowers students to engage with the course material in their own creative ways (Katopodis and Davidson 2020). Contract grading also prioritizes the "primacy of labor" in education (Inoue 2019, 68ff.). Simply put, what we want most from students is for them to work hard. We want the labor of those who struggle to pay off for them and we want high achievers to strive to achieve even better. When standards are fixed, students aim for the minimum labor necessary to achieve their goals. Contract grading prizes labor itself instead of a fixed outcome, thus encouraging students advance their own potential.

Other alternative grading methods move the role of grading and feedback off instructors and onto student peers. In *peer grading* approaches, every assignment is reviewed, commented, and graded by multiple student peers. This means the instructor gives up personal control of what grades are issued, but in exchange, empowers students to be active participants in the feedback process. The advantages here are twofold. First, students get far more feedback that they would have gotten from the instructor alone, since multiple peers are offering their review. Second, the process of reviewing and giving feedback itself becomes an additional learning

opportunity as students rigorously observe how their peers approach the problem at hand. And since students are accountable to each other, rather than just the instructor, they end up more engaged in all aspects of the learning process (Katopodis and Davidson 2020).

Another model that delegates the task of grading is *consultative grading*, in which professors encourage students to self-critique and, in fact, self-grade their work during regular one-on-one consultations with the instructor.

> Allowing the student to determine their grade can be a serious leap of faith, but that's what consultative grading is. This does not mean that all students receive an "A". Student[s] have regular check-in meetings with the instructor throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, the student writes a comprehensive reflection and puts together a compilation of their best work. The student must have data that demonstrates that they deserve the grade they propose. (Byron 2020)

Here again, the professor gives up control over the grading process, but encourages the student to become an active participant in the conversation about how their grade is earned.

All of these alternative grading approaches attempt to respond to the inherent failures of traditional grading structures. In this essay, I wish to neither reinvent nor substantially critique these alternatives. All of the methods described above are both well-designed and well-documented elsewhere. Rather, my intention in this paper is to join the ongoing conversation about the flaws in our traditional grading structures by specifically examining the relationship between the marks we give *during* our courses and the grades we give at the *end* of our courses.

DISTINGUISHING THE TWO TYPES OF GRADES

My first task is to acknowledge that in-course marks and final grades are actually two distinct things. In fact, outside the American context, these two items are often given different

names. "[I]n Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, they distinguish between *marking* on particular assignments and final *grading*"(Blum 2020, 2). For the clarity of my argument, I have adopted this nomenclature in this essay. But naming conventions aside, what does it mean to say that in-course marks and final grades are actually two different things?

Well, for one thing, the two types of grades each have their own distinct audience. In-course marks are intended as a communication between the instructor and the student. End-of-course grades, by contrast, are not primarily aimed at the student, who should already have an idea how they did in the course. Rather, end-of-course grades are a communication between the professor and anyone who will pick up that student's transcript someday, including the student and their parents, as well as their future employers, prospective graduate schools, scholarship funds, etc.

Moreover, the two types of grades each have their own purpose and, by extension, their own nature. Where end-of-course grades communicate how a student *has done* in a course, in-course marks communicate how a student *is doing* in a given course. That shift in verb tense is remarkably important, but vastly underappreciated. "How a student *did* in a course" is a fixed and final statement that places any labor and resulting growth from the course in the past. Aside from a mistake that needs correcting, the final course grade is a statement that cannot and will not be changed. But "how a student *is doing* in a course" need not be so rigid (even if, in practice, it often is). That is, in-course marks ought to be representative of an *ongoing* and *dynamic* conversation between professor and student. Such conversations should be subject to change with each lecture, each assessment, and each conversation. In-course marks still have room for further labor and further growth and should embody this dynamism and potential for progress.

Now, this distinction may seem obvious and unremarkable to some. Indeed, it requires little more than common sense to understand and observe. However, the aforementioned ubiquity of the NGF in ethics courses seems to indicate that, the normative syllabus in our discipline does not allow for the distinction at which I am pointing. The central problem with the NGF is that it restricts in-course marks to being as static as final grades need to be. Once an assignment is completed, that mark and the percentage of the final grade it is associated with is fixed in place from that point forward in the course. This, of course, is precisely the problem I described in my opening anecdote.

However, if the problem of fixed early grades was simply that they did not allow slow starters in the course the opportunity to earn a full A as a final grade, then there are easy solutions to that issue. One could, as my professor did, simply make a prudential exception to the NGF and award a grade higher than the mathematical calculation when necessary. Or, if one wanted to be more formal about it, they could mathematically build in the means to either overcome the fixed nature of static early grades (e.g. by weighting later assignments more than early assignments) or to remove outlying grades (e.g. by allowing students to drop their lowest grade in a set). This being said, it is worth noting that these approaches are nearly as rare as the more radical alternative grading structures I described earlier. In my sample of 50 ethics syllabi, only five of the 42 syllabi using the NGF allowed for any of these methods and all five only allowed them for certain assignments (e.g. quizzes could be retaken or dropped, but not essays).

Even so, the mathematical disturbance I felt as a student was actually not the real problem with the NGF. The more lasting effects of a strict NGF approach and the fixity of in-course marks are pedagogical, not just mathematical. Here my argument begins to find harmony

with those put forth by advocates of alternative grading mechanisms. As I have said, in-course marks are, by their nature, a communication between professor and student about how the student *is doing* in the course. But as already noted, standard letter or number grades are remarkably ineffective at this task. Part of the problem, I would argue, is that the NGF makes in-course marks simply a variable in the final grade formula and thus forces the students gaze toward the final grade, rather than on the learning that was actually being measured by the given assignment. Moreover, when in-course marks are fixed and static, they prevent students from seeing already recorded marks as tools toward future learning. By contrast, if in-course marks are left unmoored and capable of constant improvement, then the student's focus is on what they can currently do to keep improving that mark.

Acknowledging the necessity for fluid in-course marks embraces the contemporary notion of a "growth mindset." Educational psychologist Carol Dweck distinguished between two different sets of attitudes and presumptions about the nature of education and learning (Dweck 2007). Though students are those who adopt these mindsets, they can often be encouraged toward one or the other mindset in overt and subtle ways by teachers, parents, and others whom the student looks to for guidance. The "fixed mindset" presumes that intelligence is a fixed quality and that some people possess talent at a subject and others do not. The stereotypical example of this is the student who says "I am bad at math" or "spelling" (or "ethical reasoning") and thus assumes that they are not and never will be as capable at the subject as their peers. This leads to less effort and a self-fulfilling prophecy. The less obvious but more insidious example though is the student who sees themselves as "good at math" or "spelling." Such students, interestingly, tend to underachieve as a result of their fixed mindset. Since success is presumed, the student

never challenges themselves. In response, Dweck argues in favor of encouraging a "growth mindset" in which intelligence is understood as a growth process and improvement is always a possibility. As Dweck puts it "when students learned through a structured program that they could 'grow their brains' and increase their intellectual abilities, they did better" (Dweck 2015). Distinguishing between final grades and in-course marks encourages a growth mindset. As already noted, final grades are a fixed quantity that must be locked in at the end of the course, but there is no requirement that in-course marks share this fixed nature. By disconnecting the two types of grades, we create space in which students may err, and then learn from their errors without ultimate consequence. That freedom to err is part of creating a course that encourages a growth mindset.

Dynamic in-course grades and a growth mindset are both especially important in ethics courses precisely because students tend come into ethics classes with varied educational backgrounds in the subject (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner 2006; Santangelo and Tomlinson 2008). Such differences are exacerbated for courses in the core curriculum, including most ethics courses, because different backgrounds mean students can begin from very different starting places. When a student takes a course in their major, certain expectations for the student's knowledge can be assumed both indirectly, by the level of the course, and directly, by the prerequisites for the course. Core curriculum requirements, by contrast, are typically filled by stand-alone courses, which neither have prerequisites nor are situated within an ordered hierarchy of course progression. This means that core courses often include students from first year to graduating seniors. More to the point, it means that while many students come to core

ethics courses with absolutely no background in the subject, others may be well read in ethics or

tangential subjects such as philosophy, theology, sociology, etc.

Moreover, as demographics of college students shift from a normative standard of white,

heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class students to a more inclusive and in some cases more

international student body, the contemporary classroom thus includes students with a more

diverse set of beliefs and backgrounds than ever before (Pliner and Johnson 2004). These

different backgrounds, experience, and learning styles all need to be factored in when designing

courses in which every student can succeed. By encouraging students that ethics as a subject that

can be learned with effort and discovered over time and experience, and by structuring grading

to allow for continued growth throughout a course, we can allow for a reality in which different

students can start the course at different places, but we are all travelling the same road together.

By structuring the grading of a course to not penalize those who have less education and

experience in ethics, we give all students a chance to grow and succeed.

THE PRIORITY OF COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

To this point, I have largely focused on the nature of in-course marks as dynamic and a

measure of current progress *during* a course. Now I need to spend a moment focusing on the

other half of the two types of grades. Final grades are a fixed and permanent statement of how

a student *did* in a completed course. What is often overlooked, however, is a recognition of what

the final grade, by its nature, ought to be fixed to: the Course Learning Objectives (CLOs). That

is, the final grade is a communication between the professor and anyone who would read that

students' transcript about how that student measured up to the Course Learning Objectives at the end of the course.

Here again, this may seem obvious to some, but in practice it is often not the case. The NGF can have a tendency to define success purely in terms of the formula, which can often be quite detached from the learning objectives. Educational scholars have distinguished between two types of syllabi. A content focused syllabus

> is a physical artifact outlining key structural elements of a course. It often serves contractual, record keeping, and/or communication functions. It is the place where faculty describe what content they will cover, what books and articles their students will read, the assignments they will complete, dates when things are due, and all the policies and rules that are supposed to keep everyone happy and out of trouble. (Palmer, Wheeler, and Aneece 2016, 37)

These types of syllabi tend to be structured contractually and focus on outlining key structural elements of the course including information on the instructor, schedule, and of course, grading. Not surprisingly, the NGF is commonplace in content focused syllabi. Its clear and mathematical means to calculating the final grade. is helpful for "keeping everyone happy and out of trouble. It provides a clear map for getting from content to assessment to the final grade. But notice that the learning objectives are not the focus in that pathway. Some have gone so far as to say "such syllabi "omit any mention of learning" at all (Singham 2007).

Learning focused syllabi, by contrast, are centered around the course description and learning goals. Here the learning objectives are given prominence and the assignment descriptions and detailed course schedule focused less on policy but instead on how these elements will lead to achievement of the CLOs (Wheeler, Palmer, and Aneece 2019, 1).

> They are developed from principles of backward-integrated course design… educative assessment, active learning, evidence-based pedagogies, and student

motivation…. They are characterized by engaging, question-driven course descriptions; long-ranging, multi-faceted learning goals; clear, measurable learning objectives; robust and transparent assessment and activity descriptions; detailed course schedules, [and] a focus on student success. (Palmer, Wheeler, and Aneece 2016, 38)

My argument for the distinction between the two types of grades is an argument in support of learning focused syllabi precisely because such syllabi prioritize learning objectives and link student success explicitly to such objectives. They assume that CLOs can and should drive how we structure our courses and therefore, begins with these CLOs and work backwards to assessments asking "how will I know they met the objective?" and then back again to individual lessons asking "How will I teach the concepts necessary to succeed on the assessments?" Content driven syllabi tend to begin with content, and sometimes never even get to the learning objectives.

It should be noted that in the sample of 50 ethics syllabi I found online, forty-five would have fallen into the category of content driven syllabi. Fifteen did not even list learning objectives or goals and another thirty included a list of learning objectives that was often either vague and detached from the rest of the otherwise content driven syllabus or, conversely, were simply a repeat of the content and policies already listed (e.g. one listed "demonstrate mastery of lesson content at 70% or higher" as a learning objective). Only five of the fifty sample syllabi could even remotely be considered learning centered syllabi, with the learning objectives serving as focus and starting place for the course and syllabus design.

THE TWO TYPES OF GRADES IN PRACTICE

When it comes to putting the theory of two types of grades into practice, it should be clear that many of the alternative grading approaches I described above inherently acknowledge at least aspects of my argument here. Contract grading reconfigures our understanding of in-course marks and how they ought to be related to final grades, but the focus on student labor as the primary measure for the final grade risks minimizing the importance of course learning objectives. Similarly, peer grading is structured to provide regular feedback to the student, promote a growth mindset, and encourage student ownership of their own education, but turning over in-class marks entirely to students runs the risk of over-focusing on the individual assignments and marks, and losing attention to the final learning objectives. Finally, ungrading's total abandonment of in-course marks *and* final grades is noteworthy in its ambition and its critique of traditional grading structures, but it too risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater if marks and grades are not replaced with an alternatively rigorous means to maintain focus on the learning objectives. Conversely, alternative grading practices like consultative grading, that do not abandon marks and grades but instead emphasize both a more robust conversation between instructor and student as a central tenant of in-course marking and a focused attention on course learning objectives, share much in common with the two types of grades theory.

With all of that being said, however, my final task in this paper is to offer my own approach to putting the two types of grades into practice. This methodologies are meant to be demonstrative not authoritative; to engender a conversation, not offer a recipe. This is an approach that has worked for me, and in my particular courses, and is in keeping with what I have discovered about the two types of grades.

My approach leans into the primacy of the course learning objectives I have described and actually measures student performance directly against a version of these objectives. To do this, I first extrapolated the four CLOs given to me by the university core curriculum committee, into forty specific grading objectives (SGOs).[3] These were tasks that students were expected to master by the end of the course. Many of these followed a general pattern. In my course I teach six ethical methods. For each method, I look for my students to be able to:

    (a) define the method,

    (b) identify the strengths and weaknesses of each method,

    (c) compare the method to other methods,

    (d) identify an instance in their lived life in which they or someone they observed used the method,

    (e) use the method (properly) to evaluate a case (since my course is in ethics in technology, these were all engineering cases).

Thus, for 30 of the 40 SGOs I simply looked for each student to be able to accomplish these five tasks for each of the ethical methods studied in class. I adapted these objectives for certain methods (e.g. virtue ethics required a wholly different set of objectives due to its wholly different nature), and added a few summative tasks (e.g. each student is expected to define their own moral approach and defend it) to get to 40 total objectives.

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[3] If I had designed the course learning objectives myself, I might have been able to grade directly against my own set of CLOs. In this case, however, CLOs were passed down from the university core curriculum committee and were stated in fairly general terms, so I added SLGs as an intermediary, measurable, outcome.

Then I designed a series of short written assignments, small group discussions, and one-on-one oral exams that were peppered throughout the course. For each assignment, students were graded against these forty objectives on a scale of "achieved, not achieved, or not assessed." For example, in a graded discussion of the Tuskegee Syphilis Trials, a student might attempt to use rule utilitarianism to suggest that a rule about informed consent was ethically required due to the overall utility of that rule with respect to medical trials. I would then assess that attempt and give them a "mark" of either "achieved" or "not achieved" for using rule utilitarianism in a case. If another student responded that utility calculations are inappropriate when life is in the line, and that Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative is the better standard to apply, I would assess that student on their use of Kant. But, if the ensuing conversation went back and forth comparing and contrasting the different standards, then both students might get credit for "applying" both methods.

It is important to note that recognition of the difference between the two types of grades (and their respective purposes) means that they do not need to take the same form. Subjective grades on an A through F scale serve little purpose for in-course marks in the rubric described above. In fact, letter grades alone often muddy the communication between professor and student, requiring extensive comments to explain what the grade means. Subjectively parsing an A- from a B+ on each assignment also makes grading far more difficult. Instead, I simply identify whether the student has achieved or not achieved the SGO. This approach keeps assessment fair but also encourages the type of relationship I described when I first introduced the notion of in-course marks above. In-course marks, I said there, are a communication between the professor and the student and ought to be representative of an ongoing conversation between professor

and student about how the student *is doing* in the course. This grading structure does precisely

that: telling the student what they have accomplished and what they have not.

This method also encourages a growth mindset. . If a student did not achieve the objective

on a given assignment, then the next assignment offered a renewed opportunity to succeed. It

also fosters a collaborative relationship between student and professor—both are working

toward the same goal, student learning—as opposed to traditional grading in which the professor

has to hold in tension the roles of the mentor and judge.

At the end of the course, I simply tallied up the "achieved" marks and divided by 10 to

arrive at the student's final grade on a 4.0 scale. To get an A in the course, the student needed

to achieve all 40 objectives. Thirty-seven or more earned an A-. Thirty-four or more earned a B+,

and so on. In this way, a student's final grade was still objective and was more directly tied to the

course objectives that ought to be the measure of the student's ultimate performance in the

course.

The greatest drawback to this approach to grading is that it is unfamiliar to students. Thus,

it does require significant communication from the professor to the students, first at the outset

of the course, then again after distributing grades to the first few assignments, and finally again

at the end of the course, when inevitably, some students will finally become aware of the novel

grading method. Once students have bought in and understand how grading works, however,

they almost universally prefer it to traditional grading. The method is straightforward and clear,

and since letter grades are removed from the individual assignments, it removes much of the

potential for biases to influence grading. Also, because every single assignment is an opportunity

to earn any marks "achieved" they might have missed on previous assignments, the method also

expands upon the benefits of allowing for multiple paths to success, emphasis on a growth mindset, and a focus on those who are struggling most.

This method also offers tangential advantages as well. For one, it eliminates most excuses for not doing a particular assignment. Computers do crash, flat tires do leave us stranded, and dogs may occasionally eat our homework. In a system with in-course assignments that are rigidly tied to the final grade, these events require exceptions to the normative frame, and judgments on the part of the professor for when such excuses are "legitimate." Under this method, however, any given student can have an off day or week and make it up with the following assignment. The penalty is simply one less opportunity to demonstrate one's achievement of the SLG.

Finally, the shift from letter grades to a binary "achieved" or "not achieved" marks simplify grading and thus, allow for more graded discussions, as I described above. This is especially important for teaching ethics in core classes, which are typically taught to non-philosophy majors. If we want to train non-philosophy majors how to make moral arguments in their professional and personal lives, then we need to acknowledge that moral arguments are rarely given formal write-up in the professional world. Professionals should absolutely be able to think critically and form moral arguments, but for these future employees the next Theranos or Enron, the ability to think and talk about ethics, on the spot, and in context is precisely the skill we want to inculcate. This method opens up new possibilities to making that happen. The typical barrier to grading discussions is the burden of grading them on a traditional scale. But with this method, all the professor needs is a grading matrix of students and SGOs in front of them during the discussion and they can quickly check off "achieved" marks as students discuss.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have argued that there are two types of grades being used in every college class today—in-course marks and end-of-course grades—and that distinguishing between these two types of grades—by recognizing their distinct audiences, natures, and purposes—will allow us to better design our courses to be focused more precisely on the skills we aim to inculcate. Final grades are fixed and permanent communications between the professor and the world at large about how a student *did* in a given course. The standard by which they are arrived at needs to objectively and fairly applied to all students equally. This standard should also be imminently tied to the course learning objectives that define the course itself. In-course marks, on the other hand, are a communication between the professor and the students about how a student *is doing* during a course. As such, they need not be as rigid, formulaic, or objectively the same for all students. In-course marks can and should allow for multiple paths to success and encourage a growth mindset. They should also include room for a professor's judgement about how to communicate best with each given student about what they need to achieve next on their particular growth path. Separating these two grades and allowing each to function towards its own particular purpose can reduce professor workload, improve the professor-student relationship, and, ultimately, lead to greater student learning. It is distinction well worth taking seriously.

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