

Relational Grading: assessment that deepens connection to aid growth and learning

Abstract: This session explores techniques to generate assessment of learning in ways that strengthen the dialogue, mutuality and dialogue between learners and educators. Relational grading can deepen student development and learning and enrich the learning experience for all parties. In the session we will share multiple, actionable, methods to grade in a relational manner. These techniques can be adapted/adopted by attendees. The session is also a time for discussion and sharing of methods attendees may be using as well as to address the challenges specific to relational grading approaches in addition to the benefits.

Keywords: Assessment, Grading, Relationships

In this hour long session, a couple of relational grading techniques will be shared. These methods can readily be adapted and adopted by attendees. One technique that will be shared involves grading a small portfolio of assignments collaboratively with students through one on one meetings. While it is time intensive to schedule individual meetings with an entire class, investing approximately thirty minutes with a student to discuss assignments is less than the time it would take to provide written assessment but in-person dialogue allows more time to invest in the relationship, to answer questions, and gauge whether feedback is understood. Another approach is to use specifications grading (Nilson, 2016). Students are given very clear specifics of what a sufficient demonstration of knowledge looks like.

There has been a longstanding recognition that purely summative, nearly mechanistic grading procedures have limits that more relational approaches can overcome by considering context-relevant factors such as effort, degree or progress (Biggs, 1976 & 1978). There is also an large literature emphasizing the developmental value for learners of more formative grading that is designed to elicit and help learners benefit from reflection about the process of learning (Pavlovich, Collins, & Jones, 2009) not just summative assessment of the degree, amount, or accuracy of learning that has transpired.

Relational grading can also be understood as a natural correlate to more developmental forms of teaching (Aspelin, 2021; Ramsden, 1987, Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). A common feature of such approaches is when learning goals are about personal growth for learners in addition to content knowledge. Many approaches, such as so-called relational teaching (Edward & Richards, 2002) aim to cast the relationship between educator and student as a supportive alliance (Rogers, 2009). Relational grading is designed to diminish an emphasis on educator power and construe learners as essential partners in more authentic forms of assessment (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001, Hines, Stephens, and Van Oosten, 2022).

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The session is not just a time to share actionable resources however. It is also designed as a time to hear from attendees who may be experimenting with more relational approaches. First we will elicit and generate a list of the practices or techniques attendees may be using. We will return to these and discuss their application after sharing a few approaches provided by the session organizer to model how to briefly convey an approach in an actionable way that invites dialogue. Any form of assessment involves challenges. In this session we will discuss whether some kinds of assignments or learning goals better lend themselves to this approach, the possible time-intensive nature of more relationship-focused approaches.

Table 1: Session Agenda and Timing

Welcome, Introduction, Theoretical Framing	7 Minutes
Elicit and Inventory Attendee Relational Practices	8 Minutes
Share and discuss multiple relational grading techniques	15 minutes
Discuss attendee relational practices	10 minutes
Discuss relational grading challenges	10 minutes
Wrap up, conclusions, closing thoughts	10 minutes

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