

Grading as a Dilemmatic Space: A Study of Teachers Negotiating Classroom Grading Dilemmas

Abstract (200 words)

In this paper, we consider grading within a dilemmatic space in which teachers have to negotiate often competing policies, tools, consequences, contextual and social conditions, and assessment theories for decision-making. While previous research into grading has focused primarily on the reliability and composition of teachers' grades as well as the predictive and concurrent validity of grades, our research explores the ways teachers negotiate grades within a dilemmatic space. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine teachers' negotiated responses to classroom grading dilemmas. Data were collected from Canadian and Swiss secondary teachers through qualitative methods: interviews, focus groups, and writing reflections. Through inductive thematic analysis, results identified five themes that emerged from the articulation of grading dilemmas which collectively characterize the dilemmatic space for teacher grading: (a) fairness, (b) justification of grading decisions and communication, (c) teacher investment, (d) commitments to learning, and (e) validity of grading systems for learning system. Collectively, these results hold implications for teacher assessment education and grading theory, specifically the consideration of grading as a cross-cultural phenomenon and grading as a dilemmatic space.

SUMMARY – Grading as a Dilemmatic Space:

A Study of Teachers Negotiating Classroom Grading Dilemmas

Purpose: Walvoord and Johnson Anderson (2009, p. 2) argue that grading is a “complex context-dependent process that serves multiple roles.” For many teachers, grading, and more broadly assessment, represents an area of challenge in their profession practice with significant inconsistencies in how teachers approach grading (Cross & Frary, 1999). Grading can be well characterized as a dilemmatic space as teachers need to negotiate often competing policies, tools, consequences, contextual and social conditions, and assessment theories when making grading decisions. Accordingly, teachers “find themselves in situations in which there is often no right way of acting, but only a way of ‘acting for the best’” (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 5).

While previous research into grading has focused primarily on the reliability and composition of teachers’ grades (Brookhart, 2013; McMillan, 2008) and the predictive and concurrent validity of grades in relation to other achievement measures (Thorsen & Cliffordson 2012), our research explores the ways teachers negotiate grades within dilemmatic spaces. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine teachers’ negotiated responses to classroom grading dilemmas. Guiding this study are the following research questions: (a) What dilemmas do secondary school teachers face in two learning contexts, Canada and Switzerland? (b) What are teachers’ negotiated responses to various categories of classroom grading dilemmas? and (c) How is grading characterized as a dilemmatic space?

Theoretical Framework: Grading is a longstanding, complex practice in education (Brookhart et al., 2016) that is both technical and cultural-situated. One of the most consistent findings across grading literature is that teachers have variable grading practices and weight student achievement evidence differently in relation to achievement and non-achievement factors as well as student expectations and grade consequences (Brookhart et al., 2016; McMillan & Nash, 2000; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Unsurprisingly, grading has been characterized as a ‘hodgepodge’ practice in which teachers continually negotiate grading dilemmas (Cross & Frary, 1999).

In this research, we draw on the notion of 'dilemmatic space' (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013; Honig, 1996; Singh, Märtsin, & Glasswell, 2015) to provide a novel theoretical framework for interpreting teachers' grading practices. While *dilemmas* are traditionally defined as problems without clear solutions (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013), adding *space* to the notion of *dilemma*, brings forward the relational environment and makes visible the contextual factors that shape dilemmas. Hence, by using *dilemmatic space* as a framework to interpret teachers' grading practices we view grading dilemmas not as "specific events or situations, but things that are ever-present" and as events always tethered to a complex and incongruent context (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013, p. 7). Theorizing grading as dilemmatic space offers a novel conceptualization as it pushes beyond notions of context-dependency by characterizing grading as an always irreconcilable practice.

Methods. Participants & Data Sources: Qualitative data on teachers' grading dilemmas and responses were collected from 18 Ontario secondary teachers and 6 Swiss (from canton Vaud) secondary teachers. Ontario teachers taught the following subjects: English, Art, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, History, Physical Education, Geography, Exploring Technologies. They participated in three semi-structured focus groups (Patton, 2015), which consisted of questions about their teaching experience, assessment professional development, and their conceptualizations, uses, and dilemmas of grades within their classroom. All focus groups were audio-recorded and data were transcribed verbatim. The 6 Swiss teachers taught mathematics (n=3) and French (n=3). These teachers were each involved in in-depth interviews (Kaufmann, 2011) and each wrote 6 narrative reflections focused on their grading practices and dilemmas (Desgagné, 2005). All interviews were recorded and data were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis: A 3-stage inductive analysis approach was used for all data collected in this study (Anadon & Guillemette, 2007; Silverman, 2009). First, grading dilemmas were identified followed by an inductive coding of dilemmas and teachers' responses to dilemmas. Based on these codes, themes were generated that characterized the dilemmatic space for teachers' grading dilemmas

and responses. These themes aimed to explain what is at play in grading practices and worked to respond to the identified research questions (Raab, 2015).

Results: We identified five themes that emerged from the articulated grading dilemmas and responses which collectively characterized the dilemmatic space for grading. Each theme is briefly described below; in the full paper, each theme is elucidated with specific examples and quotes.

Fairness: Fairness was at the heart of teachers' grading dilemmas and response. In particular, teachers questioned the fairness of criteria and the sufficiency of scales to adequately reflect student learning. Teachers also perceived fairness as balancing individual versus group grading decisions.

Justification of Grading Decisions and Communication: Teachers' capacity to justify their decisions in light of who and how they have to communicate grades to was seen as a persistent dilemma for teachers given the diverse influences, audiences, and expectations about grades.

Teacher Investment: Teachers repeatedly commented on the time and effort required for grading in light of both ensuring quality (e.g., moderated marking practices) and generating benefits from grading. The investment of time, effort, and resources was seen as a constant tension.

Commitments to Learning: There was a consistent interest amongst teachers to support student learning even through grades and grading processes; however, at times, this interest was articulated as challenging given the consequences and larger accountability context of grading.

Validity of Grading Systems for Learning System: Here teachers discussed the (mis)alignment between grading protocols (e.g., scales) and understandings about the complexity of learning, often expressing a mismatch between the two.

Educational Importance: This research begins to articulate characteristics of grading as a dilemmatic. In doing so, we are better able to support teachers in negotiating grading dilemmas within this complex context through empirically-informed assessment education. This research further documents the subjective and complex context and the multiple factors shaping teachers' grading decisions, which has implications for the ways grading policies are written, implemented, and used.

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