EXERCISES, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

EXCHANGE: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal
1981, Volume VI, Number 1

GRADING AND ANXIETY: A STRATEGY FOR COPING

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This article is prompted by the contrast we have observed between our own experiences with the grading process and the remarks made on this subject in several recent issues of *Exchange* (e.g., Mezoff, Cohen, and Bradford, 1979). Our primary objective is to describe two major causes of student and/or instructor anxiety, and to outline an approach that we have found to be highly effective in coping with these sources of conflict in a variety of classroom settings ranging from small graduate seminars to large (120 plus students) undergraduate classes.

Sources of Role Conflict in OB Grading Processes

We have found it helpful to identify two separate sources of role conflict which cause anxiety about the grading processes. One has to do with the distribution of the grades that are given. In this case the conflict arises when our colleagues pressure us for low grades (since too few low grades are often equated with lack of academic "rigor" and/or a popularity contest if student evaluations are used in promotion, tenure, and salary decisions for faculty); whereas our students pressure us for high grades (to reduce *their* anxiety and, if we are effective, as a legitimate reward for their greater learning).

The second source of role conflict has to do with the kinds of behavior for which grades are given. In this case, a dilemma arises from OB faculty convictions that their courses should foster the development of interpersonal and group skills, which are unfamiliar to students who are used to performance criteria based solely on the acquisition of facts and concepts (see Mezoff et al., 1979, p. 31).

Coping with the Grade Distribution Dilemma: — With respect to the grading distribution dilemma, we have adopted an approach that we feel takes advantage of the nature of organizational norms that could otherwise be threatening to either our students or to ourselves. On the opening day of class we:

1. Frankly describe the nature of the dilemma we face and admit our self-interest in establishing grading policies for the class.
2. State our expectation that the grades for the course will be approximately proportional to the distribution for courses at the same level for the college as a whole (e.g., undergraduate upper division courses have 25% A's, 50% B's, 25% C's).
3. State that we will not give grades on the low tail of the distribution (e.g., D's and F's in an undergraduate class) *simply* to conform to the norm, but that this should not be interpreted as a "guaranteed" minimum grade because, in cases of poor performance, the responsibility for improvement would then be inappropriately with the instructor rather than the student.
4. Explain that, from their viewpoint, this policy has both positive and negative effects. On the negative side, some of them may feel that their performance in terms of effort expended and learning achieved would merit a higher grade than they will receive. On the positive side, the way the class is conducted usually results in high levels of both peer pressure and peer support which in turn greatly reduces the possibility that any student will merit a grade on the low tail of the distribution.

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We have found this approach to be highly effective in reducing much of the anxiety about grading for both our students and ourselves. Our description of the dilemma, admission of self-interest, and statement of intent about the grading distribution is reassuring for several reasons. Specifically, students (1) learn that we are aware of and sympathetic to pressures they face, (2) see that we are willing to openly discuss our own motivation, (3) know that the distribution of grades for the class will be "normal," and (4) are informed that the nature of the course itself tends to reduce the risk of devastatingly low grades. As a result, they seem to relax and adopt the perspective that the course will be an adventure rather than ordeal.

With respect to our own anxiety, we capitalize on the fact that conformity to organizational norms provides both anonymity and security. Thus, when we comply with the most visible aspect of the norms of the grading process, we are then free to design grading systems that effectively promote our particular learning objectives.

Coping with the Grading Criteria Dilemma: — With respect to what will be graded, we have developed an approach that gives students a say in how grades are determined while ensuring that they reflect student performance in the areas we feel to be important. At the same time this approach insures that students understand how the system works and are reasonably comfortable with having their grade in part determined by their performance in a group. This is accomplished by an exercise in which the instructor specifies the *criteria* of the grading system whereas the students determine the *weight* that each criterion will receive.

Setting Grade Weights: A Group Building Exercise for Reducing Anxiety about OB Grading Processes

The Setting

This exercise is conducted during the first class period of the semester (or the second class when classes are scheduled for one and a quarter hours). Prior to the exercise, students are given reading lists and a written explanation of the course requirements and grading procedures (see Exhibit 1). We explain the objectives of the course, what they might expect with respect to in and out-of-class activities, the grading curve we will use for the class (see above), and provide an opportunity for questions. After these preliminary explanations we form the class into permanent work groups, each made up of six or seven students whose backgrounds are as diversified as possible, and immediately begin the Grade Weight Setting exercise.

Objective

The primary objective of the exercise is to reduce early semester anxiety by:

- Insuring that students understand the processes by which their grades will be determined.
- Increasing student acceptance of the grading process.
- Providing a forum and an incentive for discussing factors that affect group performance and the level of commitment of group members (e.g., work schedules, course loads, and other individual constraints).
- Allowing the student to see that he/she is able to perform reasonably well in the group.
- Exposing students to the resources available to their groups.
- Demonstrating that the individuals in their group can function as a team.
- Building interdependence and mutual support in the newly formed groups.
- Providing a forum and incentive for group members to obtain commitments from each other early in the course.

Procedures

(1) Students are informed that the remainder of the class period will be devoted to deciding on weights to be assigned to the performance criteria outlined in Exhibit 1.

(2) Students meet briefly in their newly formed work groups (about 10 minutes). The purpose of this meeting is for each group to decide: (a) the percentage of the individual grade they would like to have determined by mini-tests vs. the final exam, (b) the percentage of the grade they would like to have determined by each of the major performance areas, and (c) which member will represent their group in a temporary task force made up of one member from each group. This task force will make the final decisions for the entire class.

(3) A temporary task force, made up of one representative from each permanent work group, is assembled in the center of the room and the ground rules for their discussion are explained. These are as follows:

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(a) The decision must be by consensus.

(b) A maximum of 50% of the individual performance grade can be determined by the mini-tests and a *minimum* of 10% must be assigned to each of the three major performance areas, i.e., individual performance, group performance and group maintenance (see Exhibit 1).

(c) The instructor will not intervene in the decision making process unless there is a misunderstanding about a specific aspect of the grading process, e.g., how scores will be computed, what is expected with respect to a specific assignment, etc.

(d) Work groups should indicate their desire to confer with their representative by raising their hands. When several groups so indicate, the instructor will interrupt the discussion and release the representatives for a brief conference with their groups.

(e) When a consensus is reached, class will be over.

(4) The discussion then proceeds.

(5) The instructor confirms that all groups are in agreement with the decision, the exercise is terminated, and class is dismissed.

The Decision Making Process

The Initial 10 Minute Group Meeting: — The exercise involves an outcome where the stakes are high. Faced with determining grade weights for the class — a decision which is very clearly associated with each student's academic well-being — an intense discussion develops in each group. High achievers often push for heavy emphasis on individual performance. Whereas others marshall arguments for emphasizing group performance, usually reasoning that "there is safety in numbers" or that it will help fulfill the purpose of the class, i.e., learning interpersonal and group skills. In many groups the question of how much individuals can rely on other members is openly discussed. This leads to a discussion of the constraints that individual members face (e.g., job interviews, work schedules, other causes) and provides a rich source of information about the group's resources. A tentative decision is reached usually in less than 10 minutes, in most groups with the dominant personality frequently selected to represent the group in the task force deliberations. At this point a hint of "we-they" feelings emerge as the groups send forth their champions to do battle.

Task Force Discussions: — This phase of the decision-making process generally begins with each representative making a hard-line statement of his/her groups positions. With these opening statements out in the open, the group turns to the representatives holding the most extreme positions forcing them to defend themselves against considerable pressure from the majority. The pressure on the deviants who hold out steadily increases as others display a willingness to compromise. This pressure often results in representatives seeking support from their groups or groups attempting to rescue their representative by calling for a strategy conference. Thus, in the early stages determined defense and argument changes as representatives negotiate toward some sort of agreeable conclusion.

Representative/Work Group Conferences: — In most groups the primary topic of discussion in the first one or two of these conferences concerns the most effective strategy for convincing other groups to accept their position. Later it is more a matter of "how much are we willing to give in?" By this stage two things have happened. First, intergroup competition has generally developed to the point where individual members are motivated to reevaluate and increase their own willingness to commit time and effort to the group work. Second, most groups gain confidence in their ability to compete with other groups, and, as a result, are more comfortable with accepting a compromise decision.

Reaching a Decision: — As the number of deviant groups decreases, the pressure on those who refuse to cooperate increases dramatically. During the final stages of the discussion each compromise is accompanied by cheers both by members in the task force and the work groups. The loudest of these cheers occurs when a consensus is reached, the uncertainties about the grading system are resolved, and tensions between groups are at least temporarily relieved.

Time Required

The exercise requires from 30 minutes to an hour depending on the number of groups in the class. We have used it with as few as three groups and as many as ten. With classes of more than 60 students we moved half the groups to a separate room and developed two separate grade weight systems for the same class. Even the larger classes seldom take longer than an hour because, as the scheduled end of the class approaches, peer pressure to resolve the remaining, and usually minor, differences becomes intense.

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Results

Typical Decisions: — Both graduate and undergraduate classes assign 30-35 percent of the total grade to Individual Performance, 50 percent to Group Performance, and 15-20 to Group Maintenance (peer evaluation). In five years experience with this exercise the ranges have been from 20-60 percent for the Individual Performance, 30-70 percent for Group Performance and 10-40 percent for Group Maintenance.

Understanding of and Commitment to Grading Processes: — This process is extremely effective; we cannot recall a single example in which a student later raised a question about how the grading system was supposed to work. In addition, we rarely receive complaints about grades in general. Those we do receive are directed at a group for failing to perform well or at the results of their peer evaluations rather than the grading system itself.

Group Cohesiveness: — We feel that this is the area in which the exercise makes the greatest contribution. By the conclusion of the first class period, most groups are well on their way to achieving a level of cohesiveness that will allow them to effectively deal with the assignments they will receive. One reason for the extremely rapid development of group cohesiveness is the high level of intergroup competition that is an integral part of the exercise — the brief work group conferences look more and more like football huddles as the exercise progresses. Another is that being forced to deal with the problem of shaping the reward system for the class dramatically speeds up the process of discovering and adapting to individual constraints obtaining commitments from group members. Finally, the exercise results in an incentive system that places a great value on working together as a group.

Student Reaction: — Although many students are somewhat frustrated with the initial inability of the class to reach a decision, most are extremely enthusiastic about having the opportunity to be involved in the process of deciding how their grade will be determined. One measure of the success of the exercise is that, in spite of the fact that over 50 percent of the grade will usually be determined on criteria with which students have had little experience, only about one percent of the students choose to transfer to more conventional sections of OB or drop the course. In addition, attendance at the next class session is usually 100 percent.

Potential Problems: — We have observed several areas in which caution should be exercised. (1) It is extremely important that the instructor resist the temptation of influencing the decision; otherwise it will be your grading system and not theirs. At times it may seem as though the students will never be able to come to a decision but peer pressure will eventually force an acceptable compromise. (2) This exercise works best when the course makes major use of work groups. But if work in groups is only a minor aspect of the course, it probably isn't worth the investment of time and might establish counterproductive expectations. (3) The discussion process can be somewhat disconcerting when students do not clearly understand the rationale for the exercise. Consequently, we introduce the exercise with a statement like, "we recognize we are asking you to work intensively in and with your groups and we feel that it is important to reflect that in the grading system — thus the minimum requirements — but that we also want you to shape the grading system into something with which you can feel comfortable." (4) The effectiveness of the exercise in building group cohesiveness is such that it makes it difficult to integrate those students who did not attend the first day of class. As a result, latecomers, for whatever reason, are much more likely to become isolates and receive low evaluations from their peers.

Piggybacking on the Exercise

We also use the exercise to help us accomplish two other goals. We get a running start on learning students' names by taking pictures with an automatic camera during the initial 10 minute work group discussion. This shows that we are serious about getting to know them as individuals, which reinforces our efforts to dissipate anxieties over the use of the group approach. In addition, we videotape the task force in the process of making the grade weight decision which becomes an extremely valuable case study for later use. Reliving the opening session after having been exposed to many of the concepts in the course turns out to be a real eye-opener for most students.

Conclusion

We have attempted to spell out some of the dilemmas we face in trying to get an OB course started on the right foot, and have described an approach that we have found to be highly effective in a wide variety of settings, ranging from graduate seminars to large undergraduate classes. We feel that there are at least five reasons for the effectiveness of the approach that we are using.

First, the exercise is a dramatic demonstration that the class will be conducted differently than those to which students have previously been exposed. This knowledge, required on the first day of class, allows

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students to make a decision about whether to stay enrolled or not. As a result, we seldom have the problem of their feeling trapped by something they did not expect.

Second, the exercise is highly effective in reducing unnecessary anxiety. Not only is the grading process understood and accepted but the exercise builds social support in the newly formed work groups. Having groups make and defend decisions about how much of the grade they are willing to assign to the products of their collective effort insures the rapid development of interpersonal support and group cohesiveness.

Third, the approach results in a high level of certainty about the nature of the grading system while also insuring reduction of students anxieties. The Grade Weight Setting exercise has a self correcting feature. Groups can, and will, hold out until pressure from other groups results in sufficient level of social support that anxiety about group interaction and performance is reduced to an acceptable level. In fact, almost without exception, groups that are attacked the most vigorously in the Grade Weight Setting exercise turn out to be the most cohesive groups in the class.

Fourth, we feel that the approach is successful because it is consistent with our own values and the concepts we examine as the semester progresses. As a result we are able to use our own behavior as illustration of what we teach. For example, our discussion of the grade distribution dilemma and the course of action we have adopted provide an excellent illustration of the nature of organizational norms.

Finally, this approach is successful because students learn a great deal about us, the teachers, in the process. During this first class period, we demonstrate by our behavior that we: (1) have needs of our own that must be satisfied and are willing to openly discuss them; (2) have strong feelings about the importance of the concepts we teach; (3) expect students to work hard developing interpersonal and group skills; (4) care about students as individuals; (5) are aware of their needs, and (6) are confident that the course will be a rewarding experience for students and the instructor alike.

References

Cohen, A. R., "Beyond Simulation: Treating the Classroom as an Organization." *The Teaching of Organization Behavior,* 1976, 2(1), 13-18.

Mezoff, R. M., A. R. Cohen and D. L. Bradford, "A Dialogue on Treating the Classroom as an Organization." *Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal,* 1979, 4(1), 25-36.

Exhibit 1

Grading Requirements and Procedures

Exams and Projects

There will be five short, true/false, multiple choice mini-tests given during the course. (The same mini-tests will be given to individuals and groups.) All other exams will be open book, open note, application exams over novels or full length feature films. On group exams and projects, each group will turn in only one paper and all group members will receive the same score.

Grading Criteria

The grades will be determined by scores in three major performance areas: (1) individual performance, (2) group performance, and (3) group maintenance.

Setting Grade Weights

The percentage of the grade that will be determined by scores in each of the major performance areas (individual performance, group performance and group maintenance) will be determined by representatives of student work groups as soon as these groups are formed. These representatives will also decide on the relative weight of mini-tests vs. the final exam *within* individual performance. The procedure through which the grade weights will be set for the class will be as follows:

1. Groups will set preliminary weights for each area and select a member to meet with representatives of other groups.
2. Representatives assemble in the center of the classroom and discuss until a consensus about the desired grade weights is reached.

NOTE: The only limitations on the grade weights are that: (1) at least 50 percent of the individual performance grade must be determined by the final exam, and (2) a minimum of 10 percent must be assigned to each major area.

Grading Criteria within Major Performance Areas*

	Percent of Score within Area
1. *Individual Performance*	
a. Mini-Tests (5)	0-50
b. Final Exam (application exam over full length feature film, e.g., Bridge Over the River Kwai)	50-100
2. *Group Performance*	
a. Mini-Tests (5)	10
b. Organizational Structure Critique & Exam	10
c. *The Great Escape* — Application Exam	40
d. *Final Diagnosis* paper and oral presentation	40
3. *Group Maintenance* (Peer Evaluation)	100

Peer Evaluation

Each individual will rate all of the other members of their group. Individual peer evaluation scores will be the average of the points they receive from the other members of their group. Assuming arbitrarily that: (1) the peer evaluation is worth 10 points, and (2) that there are six members in a group, an example of the peer evaluation procedure will be as follows:

1. Each individual must assign a total of 50 points to the other five members of their group.
2. Raters must differentiate some in their ratings, e.g., each rater must give at least one score of 11 or higher and at least one score of nine or lower.

NOTE: As a result of this procedure, the average peer evaluation score for each group will be identical although there will be some variation in scores *within* groups.

*Requests for information about specific assignments should be directed to Larry Michaelsen, Adams Hall, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma 73019

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