

Introduction to Specifications Grading

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1 Background

The workshop is based on Linda B. Nilson's book *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Nilson spends the first chapter exploring the motivations for a new grading system – namely, faculty frustrations with the status quo. Chapters 2 – 4 act as the foundational material for her proposed solution, specifications grading. These chapters discuss the use of course learning objectives, course design (linking objectives to assessments), and pass/fail grading. Chapters 5 and 6 introduce the essentials of specifications grading. Chapters 7 – 9 are peppered with course examples as well as testimony and research indicating both improved professor and student outcomes. Chapter 10 is a final justification for specifications grading. The book is littered with references to the education literature to substantiate her claims regarding problems with the current approach to grading and the components she stresses in specifications grading.

In addition to the book, several faculty in various departments across campus have begun to implement a version of specifications grading in their course (either in part or in full). We truly believe there is no one “right way” to do specifications grading; there are endless options, and we believe you will find something that works for you. We also encourage you to visit and contribute to the resources available on a Moodle page regarding specifications grading:

<https://moodle.rose-hulman.edu/course/view.php?id=27322>

Worksheet 1 Use this as a guide to help you critically evaluate the grading system you currently have in place.

What does your current grading system do well?

What is broken about your current grading system?

Worksheet 2 This is one framework you might use for linking course learning objectives to authentic assessments of those objectives. Collections of assessments will then be linked to course grades. This is Fink's framework (*Creating significant learning experiences: an integrated approach to designing college courses, 2003*), an alternative to Bloom's taxonomy.

Type of Learning Objective

Foundational Knowledge

What key information is important for students to understand and remember in the future?

Application

What skills do students need to gain (analyze, evaluate, create, problem solve)?

Integration

What connections should students recognize and make among ideas within this course, with other courses, and in their professional life?

Human Dimension

What should students learn about themselves or interacting with others?

Caring

What changes/values do you hope students will adopt?

Learning How to Learn

What would you like students to learn about how to become a self-directed learner of this subject?

Learning Objective

Assessment(s)

Worksheet 3 The following exercise is a helpful starting point for mapping assessments to course grades. This is a “bottom-up” approach — asking “what should passing the course mean?” After answering these questions you can build up for each grade.

What should every student who leaves my course be required to have *mastered*?

To what degree must a student master the material presented and still pass the course? Take the next course in the sequence?

What material is really optional but distinguishes awareness from expertise?

Worksheet 4 This worksheet helps you think through the creation of specification templates. You want specifications that both clearly convey to students how to approach a particular assessment successfully as well make grading timely and informative. If you ask a lot of a specific type of question, constructing a general template can be helpful (as opposed to different specifications for every question).

As an example, consider the following question: *In his attempt to spoil Christmas, the Grinch stole 22 presents and 11 stockings from the home of Cindy Lou Who. How many items did he steal in total? Explain how you got your answer.*

The question asks for both a computation as well as an explanation. Develop a set of specifications for grading such questions. Specifically consider, how can you clearly express to students what would be required to receive credit for their response without telling them exactly what to write?

Worksheet 5 This worksheet helps you visualize your course grading structure. How are assessments grouped (if at all)? How do they connect to the course objectives? What grade do students receive for completing each collection? In addition to helping you visualize the course, such maps are helpful for students to track their progress.

Bundle/Module

Content & Assessments

Supported Objectives

