

Mellon Evidence-Based Learning Grant Proposal

PHIL 203: Philosophy of Art

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1. *Project Description*

- a. I propose to pilot the elimination of grades on individual assignments and institute a series of student self-assessment tasks for the determination of semester grades.
- b. This change to course assessment procedures aims to address two challenges. First, because the majority of students who enroll in this course are new to the discipline of philosophy, there is often a steep learning curve. Students who are used to academic success can become demoralized when their initial grades are not what they expect, which functions as an impediment to future improvement. Moreover, students are inclined to view early grades as a proxy for their potential in the course, which prevents them from focusing on the constructive criticism offered on individual assignments. As I explain below, these impressions are backed up by empirical evidence about the effects of grades on student learning. More broadly, this change aims to reorient students' thinking around the substantive ends of a liberal arts education, in contrast with the mere mechanistic pursuit of specific grades.
- c. The proposed change aims at two outcomes meant to address the challenges described above. First, it aims to facilitate student improvement over the course of the semester by emphasizing engagement with substantive feedback on written assignments, as well as student reflection on the progress they have made and the steps they need to take next. Second, it aims to decrease student anxiety about grades by emphasizing improvement and development over the course of the semester.

2. *Research Evidence*

A growing body of literature supports the idea that letter grades can inhibit student learning, and points to a variety of interventions, including self-assessment, which can redirect students' attention and effort toward meaningful educational goals. Some examples of this literature across multiple disciplines include:

- Schinske J, Tanner K. Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently). *CBE Life Sciences Education*. 2014; 13(2):159-166. doi:10.1187/cbe.CBE-14-03-0054. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/>
- Lipnevich A, Smith J. Response to Assessment Feedback: The Effects of Grades, Praise, and Source of Information. *Educational Testing Services Research Report*. 2018. <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-08-30.pdf>
- Elbow P. Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment. *College English*. 1994; 12. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/12
- Reeves D. Leading to Change/Effective Grading Practices. *Educational Leadership*. 2009; 65.5: 85–87. Web. 23 June 2013. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb08/vol65/num05/Effective-Grading-Practices.aspx>

There are also a number of useful blog posts from faculty who have made similar changes that I plan to draw on in developing a system that works best for my students. In particular:

- <https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>
- <https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

3. *Assessment*

I propose to assess the success of this grading intervention in two ways. With respect to assessing the quality of students' philosophical writing by the end of the semester, I propose to have a panel of colleagues score a selection of papers from both this iteration of the course and previous iterations of the course (of which there have been four), to determine if any significant differences in quality can be perceived. With respect to assessing the effects on students' anxiety and general experience of the course under this alternative grading scheme, I propose to survey them at multiple points in the semester in order to determine how they perceive these changes and learn about the subjective effects they might have on the student course experience.

4. *Course Information*

This proposal is for PHIL 203: Philosophy of Art, an existing course. It will be offered in Spring 2019. The course typically enrolls ~30 students.

5. *Availability*

I plan to work on this project during the Summer of 2018 (though winter break of 2019 is also an option).