Grading as Creative Work

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As I round out the last semester of my fifth year as a full-time faculty member, I find myself contemplating the workload, the balance that a strong assessment with too many students on my caseload is too demanding. Balancing weak assessments with large caseloads is boring.

Grading, when done well, pulls me in. I know that I will be better able to meet all the demands of my job if I spend less time grading that social studies inquiry unit. I know that I will generate time for other administrative tasks if I simply answer the question that a student asks, as it is asked.

Maybe the students will never read this feedback? Will a sufficient passing letter grade be the only thing my students see, or they will look for, at the end of the semester?

I have chopped up assignments in the name of scaffolding to reduce the bulk of feedback at any given point in time.

I strategize, plan, and work towards a combination of what's best for me and what's best for my learners.

As I pushed back from my desk at the conclusion of a sprint-summer semester, I felt spent. It was a sprint semester on top of a semester's worth of grading, and I was tired. Then it occurred to me—that for me, grading is creative work. The style that I adopted, and value most, is not only judgment of what has been done but an imaging of what I would do if I were the creator of their curriculum content plans. I walk on the paths with them through long curriculum projects.

I offer students next steps that are concrete, walkable, and scaffolded. I reimagine plans at their conclusion and wonder, if I taught this what else I would add.

A semester is full of near-constant curriculum design. Although I put down the "planning" when the course opens on week one and consider it done, I have come to rethink how I prepare myself for grading. Grading is not a task. It is a creative endeavor.

It is fine to critique that I probably should not be grading at all. Or I should be considering a model of "grading for equity" (Feldman, 2023). I know that adopting a system like this might create a framework in which my feedback has more weight for students. Regardless of the grading model, it is evaluative and summative at the conclusion. This essay is a study of the process of giving lengthy and specific feedback about next steps, suggestions for adjustments, and being *in* the curriculum as I grade.

My emphasis here is that grading is creative. It has a creative demand. It has a learning demand that asks more of me than completion. Changing this orientation to grading aligns my practices as a professor more clearly with what I say that I value—teaching is learning (Freire, 1998). This is obvious, but I clearly missed it, or I never really articulated it in a way that exactly prepared me for the creative load of giving feedback on assessments. I think that without this very intentional mindset before I start grading, it becomes about students not reading directions, or not interpreting the readings in ways that are fully functional for the tasks assigned. I don't orient myself to grading like I orient myself to teaching. Teaching and learning in the classroom make ample sense. I know when I am tired afterwards. But grading is creative work.

Perhaps the connection is latent because I didn't develop my style out of philosophy. I developed my style of giving written feedback—grading—on assignments by receiving my own.

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Regressive Moment

I arrived at college as a first-generation student, on a generous scholarship. Someone saw potential and possibility in me from somewhere in an admission's office. But I often wondered for the first year if I was let in by accident. I figured out ways to blend in with the more traditionally accepted student body, but my writing betrayed me, and I was assessed on it continually.

I had always had a strong urge to write. I wrote extensively in journals to name and understand my experiences and the world around me. But I got feedback time and again with directions like, "Write a clearer thesis." "Can improve grammar and conventions." I did not have a strong internal voice reminding me to not end sentences with prepositions, when to use a comma, etc. I wrote effectively for meaning, but not conventions. And I struggled to construct essays that clearly expressed my sense making. I was a "weak" writer.

I diligently pursued the writing center at the university, and I attended office hours with my essays. I had a friend from high school proofread my work for an entire semester, me studying why the changes were made. I applied myself to a set of rules that allowed me to feel more and more like I belonged in the place that had accepted me and paid my tuition.

But it wasn't until I took a class in Multicultural Education, with Professor Henry, that I learned to clearly express a strong voice and style to accompany my new rule-bound essays. The assignment was simple and straightforward: write an essay about yourself in a series of narratives that you analyze using social theories from the course. Choose a few aspects of your personal identity to explore, and write what I would call a positionality paper.

It was a generative, rich assignment with room for personal voice, application of academic learning, and an essay that could not be completed in five paragraphs. Using Microsoft Word's Track-Changes, she reviewed my essay and did one of the greatest academic gifts for me. She didn't just say "revise here." She re-crafted my sentences to be cleaner, she reorganized clauses for clarity. She rewrote sentences so I could see what ending a sentence without a preposition sounded like conversationally, without losing sight of the rule. She rearranged paragraphs to show that reordering my essay created clarity. Then she left notes in the comments feature telling me what she changed and why.

She did that work over the course of three drafts. As a junior at the time, her tutelage via revision was what I needed, when I needed it. Her grading was instrumental in how I understood the process and value of revision. She did not just say, "Do it." She showed me how *I* could craft my own writing for clarity, message, and tone. She crafted *my* stories.

While the folx in the writing center and other professors refrained from "doing the work for me," it was "doing the work for me" that created a fertile place for my relationship with writing to blossom. She never rewrote the whole essay. She didn't tell a new story. She clarified the one that I wrote; she validated my narrative while helping me find a literacy of telling that was intelligible at the university, among people who felt comfortable in the earliest days of being writers. I also left my undergraduate program a writer, without qualifiers.

Current Moment

I am seeking to shore up and appreciate all parts of my work. My primary teaching commitments are methods courses in social studies for prekindergarten to grade 5

preservice teachers. In the examples chosen here, I am referring to an inquiry design curriculum project (Swan et al., 2018). Students choose topics, research, provide draft sketches of their curriculum plans, and then submit the final inquiry.

With each group and iteration of the projects, I find myself walking along with my students in curriculum development. Their projects are never just their own. They have a piece of my creativity in each project. For example, a few semesters ago I had a group who were trying to address a fifth grade standard concerning the role of markets in food diversity of the western hemisphere. The literal emphasis on pictures of food and vendor markets in the western hemisphere was not helping students understand the economic market's impact on food access. So, I redirected them towards a topic studying one food dish and the diversity of locations from which the ingredients came. In another instance, students addressed fourth grade standards about the impact of human activities that are both positive and negative. Students had trouble connecting to something concrete. I suggested a study of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio, as a study of human impact. The projects as they continued were their own, but I was a part of those curriculum projects.

I have considered over time what my role is when suggesting and insisting on revision for students. I am attempting to theorize my assessment as more than adherence to rubric definitions of quality and saying, "Something different belongs here." "You need a richer topic." Instead, I offer my thoughts and suggestions. I synthesize my feedback into short audio recordings suggesting new searches, additional sources, and different organizations for coherence.

About a year ago, at the end of a round of curriculum projects, I pushed back my chair and realized I was tired. I was not sure why. In that moment of introspection, almost by accident, I realized my own conclusion about why I was tired: grading is creative work.

If Grading is Creative Work

"Theory as Liberatory Practice" (hooks, 1994) was laser etched by a friend of mine onto a piece of live edge pine that hangs in my office. When I began graduate school, I deeply resonated with the value of theory in my life. As an early teacher, I experienced systemic oppression with and among my students, but without a name, it was hard to grasp and explain to myself and others. If I theorize grading as creative, I believe I can better prepare and manage expectations for the experience. If I name it, I understand (hooks, 1994).

Prior to this essay, I described teaching, writing, and research as creative. Yet the concept that grading is creative eluded me. It seemed like the summarizing process to a teaching project—something to be done. Perhaps others already know the creativity involved in grading, so I am late to this game. But this is my story, so I am here telling it to myself.

"There is no teaching without learning" (Freire, 1998, p. 31). Yet, much of the way I've applied the theory of Freire is my philosophy of teaching, instruction, and curriculum design. For me, grading as a technical activity feels like an afterthought to the dynamic energy of a discussion and activity-based class experience. Yet, grading and assessment do not have to be technical activities. Greene (1995) likens teaching and learning to a quest. I sympathize and appreciate the "lure of incompleteness to be explored" (p. 15).

We hope that students will be active learners "who can best learn if they are faced with real tasks and if they discover models of craftsmanship and honest work" (Greene, 1995, p. 13). When Greene mentions craftsmanship, I think of a workshop complete with all the materials and tools necessary. It would obviously be a space well used, with wood burnished by blisters, and the smell of wood glue. The workshop is not empty. It includes a craftsman and a mentor. There is an expert, or at least a person who shows up every day to do the craft work.

I wonder, sometimes, if I offer too much when grading. Do my designs and plans minimize the learning of students? This is certainly possible, especially because of the power imbalance between students and teachers. They may end up accepting my ideas without also taking up greater creative ability with the curriculum. It is possible.

Yet, when I grade, I feel like that craftsman. The design and search for engaging, rigorous, and creative curriculum is never depleted. We could build a thousand inquiries alongside students, and there would still be room for creative development in inquiry-based curriculum. When I work alongside students, developing curriculum, I am walking the path with them. If I conceptualize grading as a walking journey, then "we make the road by walking" (Horton & Freire, 1990). I have an active role to play that is collective and rewarding when I consider grading in these frameworks of education. In small moments of giving feedback, suggestions, and creative extensions in curriculum work, I am being "formed or re-formed as [I] teach" (Freire, 1998, p. 5).

Grading is Creative Work

I assert that grading is a creative process that drives curricula. Grading is an active, generative, collaborative process, because grading in its essence is creative work.

Curriculum theory points us towards the importance of intellectual engagement (Pinar, 2019) and the educator as entangled and joined with the "complicated conversation that is the curriculum" (p. 23). Disconnecting the teacher from theory and practice risks dehumanizing a profession whose central question is: "*What knowledge is of most worth?*" (Spencer, 1860, as quoted in Pinar, 2019, p. 15). I understand my curriculum of grading and feedback is closely tied to my identity. It is tied to my experiences, perspectives, current knowledge, politics, and values. By grading, in this style, I offer something of my own answer to *what knowledge is of most worth* in each iteration, which may not be uniquely my own experience, knowledge, etc. It is grounded in myself. I offer suggestions based on my interpretation of *what knowledge is of most worth* for inquiry-based curricula.

Eisner (2002) identifies the art of teaching in four dimensions: teaching is an aesthetic performance, teaching requires qualitative judgments in real time, and teaching is made richer by anomalies and unpredicted events that require the ability to respond "inventively." Finally, teaching is like art because "the ends that it achieves are often created in process," and artists, "discover ends through action" (Eisner, 2002, p. 155). When grading inquiry-based assignments, the topics, approaches, and purposes of the curriculum change each semester and for each group. By reviewing projects, I trust that I will have something to offer as feedback or suggestions. I cannot pre-determine which parts of the plans will prompt what feedback. But I trust that I will discover what is helpful by exercising my ability to read, think, and respond.

My evolving knowledge prepares me to meet each new student-created curriculum plan as a new reader. Using reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), I assume that

the dynamic between my students, the inquiry plans (as text), and myself as the reader have multiple opportunities for dynamic engagements that generate curricular guidance in grading. Rosenblatt's (1978) observation that "the individual reader has seldom been acknowledged as carrying on his own special and peculiar activities" (p. 4) holds true in contemporary conversations about grading. For many reasons, attention and critique of assessments that are simplistic, reductive, and dehumanizing for students should be made (Eisner 2002; Pinar, 2019). Yet, less attention has been paid to the reader, the grader, the educator whose peculiar activities can be curricular, creative, and pleasant (Rosenblatt, 1979).

Synthetical

One of the best pieces of advice an artist and friend gave a group of her students is that creative work requires time. She understands writing as creative and so recommended time and space for the task that is not just a process of aggressively "knocking-out" 10 pages, but creating something new.

When I prepare for grading, I now consider the experience one in which I can learn. I set intentions for grading that are aligned to the students' needs and follow-up instruction in the course. I also set intentions for my learning:

> Today, I intend to consider how I can improve this curriculum plan.
> Today, I intend to walk alongside students who are curriculum writers.
> Today, I intend to offer my current-best energy and effort toward this shared curriculum project.

In the end, I am not working alone. Students sometimes reject my suggestions. At other times, students take part of what I suggest while not adopting the rest. Sometimes, due to a myriad of factors that I cannot name, students implement none of my suggestions. Yet, while assessment and grading provide great feedback to learners, this particular essay is about my own experience.

Conceptualizing the process of grading curriculum that involves my unique, human contribution to the task helps me avoid the boredom of grading as a rote task (Greene, 1995). I feel philosophically and ethically grounded in the practice of grading. I am attempting to create a context in which students "become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught, side by side with the teacher, who is equally subject to the same process" (Freire, 1998, p. 33).

As an undergraduate student, I was being seen by Professor Henry. I felt capable of continuing to create because she walked alongside me in the process of articulating my narratives. And as a professor now, I consider what a monumental to-do list a pile of students' positionality narratives must have seemed on Tuesdays, all the while having department meetings and advising and caregiving commitments from above and below. When Professor Henry sat down to edit my papers, she left a piece of herself behind in my writing. I cannot point to any particular turn of phrase or style choice I adopted that is hers. I cannot even remember much of what she contributed to the paper or how she changed my thinking. But I remember that it must have taken her a lot of time, presence, and caring about my narrative to put so much of herself into the task of grading it three times. Through the theoretical lenses of care (Greene, 1995), learning (Freire, 1998), and lived experience, I remind myself that grading is creative care work, and I have the choice to engage technically or ethically with my students.

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