Graduate Student Orientation

Grading and Evaluation

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Chris McCracken

Slide #1

Chris McCracken: Hello. I am Chris McCracken. I'm a doctoral candidate in the English Department in Literacy, Rhetoric, and Social Practice. Java Murniadi and I, he's a doctoral in Communications Studies, we've created this PowerPoint presentation for new TA's to give some advice on grading and evaluation.

Slide #2

Chris McCracken: Teaching assistants have different authorities and responsibilities when it comes to grading. First, it's important to check with your department whether you have to create new learning assessments or follow the ones that are available for your course. You can check with your advisors, your graduate student coordinators, or fellow graduate students.

Second, each student learns differently so it's best to evaluate their knowledge and understanding using different forms of assessment such as exams, pop quizzes, presentations, group work, papers. Also, attendance and participation are important to consider. Each assessment could carry different or similar percentages toward final grade depending on the nature of the class.

Slide #3

Chris McCracken: This is the university sanctioned grading scale. As you can see, we use a +/- grading scale at Kent State. Regardless of the grading scale you use, it's important to clearly define it in the syllabus, and also to clearly define policies and policies on late work especially.

The policies and procedures you should clearly define in the syllabus have to do with whether or not grades will be curved, consequences for late or missed assignments, the percentage or relative points assigned to each assignment or exam, rubrics for each assignment, and how points will be distribution for group projects.

Slide #4

Chris McCracken: These are the deadlines for when grades are due. Always pay attention to them when you're drawing up your syllabus. Your students are probably going to want to know when the last day is they can withdraw from the class without a failing grade. Midterm is important for first year students. You're required to turn in midterm grades for them every semester.

Slide #5

Chris McCracken: Grading disputes, unfortunately, are kind of common. There's a few ways you can avoid them, though. One of the most obvious ways to do so, we already discussed, is to use clear grading rubrics and samples to demonstrate how a grade is decided upon. Spend some time in class going over this with them.

Moreover, you can update their grades regularly on Blackboard. This is a going to make it less likely that you're going to receive grading disputes after the semester is over because they will have access to their grades as the semester is going along.

Tackle grading issues as soon as possible and keep records of all conversations having to do with grading disputes should things escalate. Email is usually a preferred method of communication with these things.

Make sure it's fair to all students if alternative assignments are offered. For instance, if attending a certain event at a certain time on a certain date may not be ideal for those with conflicting schedules. In contrast, if the alternative assignment is something that can be retrieved online, then every student should be able to participate in that.

In addition to the A-F+/- grading scale that I mentioned earlier, there are other grades you can assign your students. W is when a student decides to quit the course after his or her course schedule became official.

NF - this is when the student failed the course because he or she never attended the course.

SF is when the student failed the course because he or she stopped coming to class. In this case, you're required to state the last date of attendance so be sure to keep track of that.

IF or ID means the student has not completed all the class assignment due to excused or unforeseeable circumstances. You'll then extend the deadlines of the assignments beyond the length of the semester. F and D are the default grades should the student fail to complete the assignments before the due date.

Slide #6

Chris McCracken: It's especially important in your first year as a TA and probably throughout your career, that you engage in a lot of self-evaluation. Keep track of what's working. If an assignment, reading, discussion, or activity goes well, keep it in your repertoire. It's easy to forget the stuff that works so write it down. A lot of people keep journals in their first few years, and that really helps. I keep a dropbox folder filled with materials, prompts, notes, and ideas that work well semester after semester.

Keep track of what's not working too. This will probably actually stick in your mind a little easier than what worked. The truth is, fiascos are going to happen sometimes but they don't have to be repeated. It's also important to remember that sometimes successes from one semester aren't going to be successes another semester. Simple things like class time and the make up of your classroom are going to alter the success of your strategy and assignments. So you have to stay flexible and reflexive.

When something doesn't work but you really want it to, you should ask yourself why it didn't work and how can make it work next time.

Also talk it out with your colleagues and your advisors. Ask people to observe you. This includes other graduate students and, of course, your advisors. Ask them what's working and what's not working for them. Steal their ideas wherever you can.

Slide #7

Chris McCracken: When it comes to student evaluation, each class will conduct formal evaluations every semester. These will usually take the form of student evaluation of instruction surveys or SEI's, which can give students the opportunity to rank instructors in terms of, for example, how organized the class was, how helpful the instructor was, and how well equipped the classroom facilities were.

Though they do provide a space for students to write their own comments, SEI's are not very specific, are not very precise, so it's useful to ask students to give you feedback on how you're doing. For them to give you feedback on what's working, on what's not working from their perspective. Using informal evaluations is a good way to ask them more specific and more precise questions that can help you the next time you're teaching this course.

Slide #8

Chris McCracken: Here are some tips to responding to student writing that will, I think, save you some time and energy. First, make it easy on yourself. You can't cover everything in any given paper even though you may want to. Give yourself a reasonable per paper timeframe. 15 minutes is pretty common. And try to stick to it. Set an egg timer if you need to.

Second, consider higher and lower order of concerns. This is a good way to make it easier on yourself by creating sort of a hierarchy of important and less important concerns. Higher concerns might include things like overall structure, the overall clarity of arguments, and the appropriateness of the written work to the assignment prompt.

Grammar is typically a lower order concern but it can get in the way of meaning sometimes. It can become sort of a higher order concern. In that case, rather than commenting on every grammar mistake, maybe pick a few big ones that really get in the way of meaning and draw the student's attention to those. Or, if you notice a lot of students making the same grammar mistakes, don't bother making a bunch of notes about it in the paper. Instead, spend some class time discussing it with everyone.

I recommend if you use the comment bubbles in Microsoft Word or Google Doc, keeping handy a list of websites that can help with these problems, that way you can simply copy and paste the links into the comments bubbles, and the students can work on their writing issues on their own time.

Revision is a win-win particularly if you're interested in helping your students become better writers. I say revision is a win for students because it gives them an opportunity to boost their grades by correcting their mistakes. It's a win for teachers because it gives them an opportunity to assign guilt-free assessments.

If students have a lot of opportunities either leading up to the final draft or after they've turned in their paper, they have no excuses for not getting the grades they want. You can grade harsher earlier on.

Finally, be open to trying new strategies for responding to student writing. Be flexible and adaptive when things go wrong. If you find yourself taking a lot of time and expending a lot of energy grading student writing, look for new strategies to help reduce your stress and reduce the amount of time that you're spending responding.

Slide #9

Chris McCracken: Unfortunately, when you're responding to student writing, you're at some point, probably going to have to deal with the problem of plagiarism. The University policy register has a very detailed policy on plagiarism and academic dishonesty that you should familiarize yourself with.

One interesting resource Kent State offers for students who plagiarized is plagiarism school. It's a one-on-one session between a student and a tutor where they'll cover the basics of plagiarism to try to make sure the student is clear on what counts as plagiarism and to make sure it doesn't happen again.

So post the university policy and your own plagiarism policy in your syllabus and spend class time talking about it. Make clear to them what counts as plagiarism and what the repercussions are. There are ways to design assignments to help deter plagiarism too, and this is probably the best way to deal with plagiarism. To stop it before it even occurs.

If you emphasize process over product, you should see multiple drafts or students should see each other's drafts in peer review or peer workshops. So, you or they can detect any hints of plagiarism before they have to hand in their final draft. Plagiarism can be rooted out in low stakes situations before it actually matters.

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Chris McCracken: Thanks for watching this PowerPoint presentation on grading and evaluation. Again, I'm Chris McCracken. My collaborator on this Java Murniadi. These are our email addresses. If you have any questions or comments for us, feel free to shoot us an email. Thanks again.