# Chapter 1

# Introduction

**WE WROTE THIS BOOK** because, as teachers of English and biology, we have struggled across our careers to make our grading fair, time efficient, and conducive to student learning and to figure out how the grading process can be part of departmental and general education assessment. When Walvoord, as director of four teaching-learning centers, would ask faculty for suggestions about workshop topics, grading was always at the top. And in the hundreds of workshops for faculty that we have led, we have found that workshops on teaching always have to address grading issues. Workshops on assessment in departments or general education always raise questions about the role of grades.

Grading infuses everything that happens in the classroom. It needs to be acknowledged and managed from the first moment that an instructor begins planning a class. Trying to keep students from caring about grades is futile. Trying to pretend that grades are not important is unrealistic. Trying to establish an institutional assessment program unconnected to the grading process is wasteful. Grades are the elephant in the classroom. Instead of ignoring the elephant, we want to use its power for student learning.



## Grading as a Complex Process

By "*grading*," we mean not only bestowing an "A" or a "C" on a piece of student work. We also mean the process by which a teacher assesses student learning through classroom tests and assignments, the context in which good teachers establish that process, and the dialogue that surrounds grades and defines their meaning to various audiences. Grading encompasses tailoring the test or assignment to the learning goals of the course, establishing criteria and standards, helping students acquire the skills and knowledge they need, assessing student learning over time, shaping student motivation, planning course content and teaching methods, using in-class and out-of-class time, offering feedback so students can develop as thinkers and writers, communicating about students' learning to appropriate audiences, and using results to plan improvements in the classroom, department, and institution. When we talk about grading, we have student learning most in mind.

For example, a biologist teaching a capstone course for undergraduate majors asks the students to complete scientific experiments and write them up in scientific report form. She chooses this assignment because it will teach and test her learning goals for the course—goals that she carefully discusses with her students and for which she asks the students to be responsible. She sets clear criteria and standards, and she communicates these to her students. Across the semester, she helps students learn the requisite knowledge and skills. She responds to drafts and final reports in ways that help students learn from their experiences. And after grading the set of scientific reports, she thinks, *Well, the students did better than last year on experimental design, but they still didn't do very well on graphing data. I wonder if that would improve if I. . . .* and she plans a new teaching strategy. After turning in her final course grades, she analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of her students as a group, considering how their prior training in the department prepared them for the culminating research project in her course. With her report, she goes to the final faculty meeting of the semester and talks with her colleagues about how skills such as graphing might be more effectively developed earlier in the curriculum. At this point, her classroom assessment becomes departmental assessment.

In short, we view grading as a complex context-dependent process that serves multiple roles:

- *Evaluation*. The grading process should produce a valid, fair, and trustworthy judgment about the quality of each student's work.
- *Communication*. The grade itself is a communication to the student, as well as to employers, graduate schools, and others. The grading process also spurs communication between faculty and students, among faculty colleagues, and between institutions and their constituents.
- *Motivation*. Grading affects how students study, what they focus on, how much time they spend, and how involved they become in the course. Thus, it is a powerful part of the motivational structure of the course.
- *Organization*. A grade on a test or assignment helps to mark transitions, bring closure, and focus effort for both students and teachers.
- *Faculty and student reflection*. The grading process can yield rich information about what students are learning collectively and can serve as the first step in systematic assessment and information-driven teaching.

This book is divided into two parts: one for classroom grading and one for wider purposes of assessment.

## Part One: Grading in the Classroom

Faculty in our workshops have posed the questions that shape Part One of this book:

- What are the principles of good practice in managing the grading process?
- How can I construct good assignments?
- How can I foster healthy motivation around grades? How should I respond to the student who asks, "What do I need to do to get an 'A' [or a 'C']?"
- How can I establish criteria and standards for student work? Should effort and improvement count? Should I grade on the curve? How should I handle grammar and punctuation? How can I fairly grade students who enter with a wide range of skills and preparation?
- How can I guide students' learning process in the most effective way?
- How should I calculate course grades?
- How can I communicate effectively with students about their grades? Which kinds of comments and feedback are most useful? How can I help my students without doing their work for them?
- How can I handle the workload and make grading time efficient?
- How can I analyze the factors that are influencing learning in my classroom? How can I tell which teaching strategies work well for my students? How can what I learn through the grading process help me improve my teaching?

## Part Two: How Grading Serves Broader Assessment Purposes

As faculty members assess student learning in their own classes, it makes sense for them to work collaboratively to evaluate students' learning in broader settings: a grant-funded program, an undergraduate major, a graduate degree, a certificate program, or a general education curriculum.

In the context of requirements by accreditors and others, "assessment" is commonly defined as the systematic collection of information about student learning, or programs of student learning, for the purpose of improving that learning. Assessment has three main components:

1. Articulate the goals for student learning.
2. Gather information about how well students are achieving the goals.
3. Use the information for improvement.

In the chapters in Part Two, we argue that students' classroom work, evaluated by faculty, can be a rich and fruitful component for assessment of student learning in wider settings. Departments and institutions need not, and should not, rely solely on standardized tests or on surveys of students and alumni.

We have shaped the second part of the book around questions that faculty and administrators ask in the assessment workshops we have led at colleges and universities. The chapters in this part address questions such as:

- Are grades themselves acceptable for assessment? If we give fair grades, what else do we need to do? What is the relationship between assessment and grades?
- How can we use students' classroom work to evaluate learning in an entire degree program or in general education?
- What is the relationship between students' classroom work and other assessment measures, such as surveys and standardized tests?
- How do we assess the highest kinds of learning, such as originality, global perspective, or ethical decision making? Will assessment force us to "dumb down" what we teach?
- Does assessment have to be "objective"?
- What about portfolios?
- How do we handle the workload of assessment?

## Using This Book Individually or in Faculty Workshops

Part One of this book follows a course planning sequence that is as appropriate in planning a course for the first time as rethinking the course after twenty times. At the end of each chapter are suggested activities to help readers apply the suggestions presented in the chapter to their own course planning. Readers can complete the activities by working individually, but the activities are also designed for use in a workshop setting. A group of faculty might read each chapter in turn, complete the activities, and then discuss their ideas with each other before moving on to the next chapter.