



# Symposium on Educational Excellence 2023

## Specifications grading: an approach towards equitable assessment

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this presentation is to review the findings of the implementation of specifications grading into graduate nursing courses in a nursing education program.

**Objectives:** After this presentation, the learner will be able to:

1. Describe inequitable and equitable grading practices.
2. Describe the components of specifications grading.
3. Evaluate how to incorporate equitable grading practices into course assessments.

**Background.** Traditional grading incorporates practices, such as mathematical precision, accumulation of points, averaging performance over the course, and grading for behaviors, such as lateness, effort, or participation. These practices have come under scrutiny as inequitable (Feldman, 2019) since biases underlying these principles may benefit more privileged students. Awarding or deducting points for behaviors, such as lateness, may elicit faculty bias in grading (Feldman, 2019). Learners, especially those unfamiliar with an academic program or the expectations of a faculty, may struggle at the beginning of a course or program (Huang, 2021). Averaging points and/or percentages over a course term may negatively impact students with learning gaps. A standards-based grading practice is recommended that focuses on students'™ achievement of the learning outcomes. Specifications grading is a form of standards-based grading that allows multiple opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes and select the grade and assignments to demonstrate outcome achievement. Specifications grading has been associated with improved student motivation and academic performance (Katzman et al., 2021; Pope et al., 2019) primarily in undergraduate educational settings. **Methods.** A specifications grading system was implemented into two courses: one in the initial course design and the other in which the grading system was revised to address specifications grading principles (Nilson, 2015). Bundles of assignments were created that linked to achievement of the learning outcomes. To earn higher course grades, students needed to demonstrate higher achievement of learning outcomes, through more rigorous or a higher volume of assignments.

Pass/fail rubrics were designed for all assessments. Limited options were provided for learners to submit drafts, revise unsatisfactory work, or to submit work late. Information on specifications grading and criteria for each grade was provided at the beginning of the course with options for learners to select the grade they wanted to work towards.

Results/Impact: Learners were able to achieve course outcomes with the opportunity to revise work to meet assignment expectations. Learners and faculty were satisfied with the experience. Faculty perceived a decrease in time needed for grading assignments. Feedback from some students regarding the grading system indicated that they did not perceive it as significantly different from traditional grading. Others expressed unfamiliarity with grading that was not dependent on percentages towards assignments. Students appreciated the clear directions from rubrics and grading options. One student commented “I really liked how it was presented and especially that we can choose what kind of grade we are going for to help alleviate any stress and anxiety we may feel.” Providing information to learners on the process and benefits of specifications grading can facilitate understanding of this grading system.

## Learning Objectives

1. Describe inequitable and equitable grading practices.
2. Describe the components of specifications grading.
3. Evaluate how to incorporate equitable grading practices into course assessments.

## References:

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