

No Grading, More Learning

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When Duke University's Cathy Davidson [announced her grading plan](#) for a seminar she would be offering this semester, she attracted attention nationwide. Some professors cheered, others tut-tutted, and others asked "Can she do that?"

Her plan? Turn over grading to the students in the course, and get out of the grading business herself.

Now that the course is finished, Davidson is giving an A+ to the concept. "It was spectacular, far exceeding my expectations," she said. "It would take a lot to get me back to a conventional form of grading ever again."

Davidson is becoming a scholar of grading. She's been observing grading systems at other colleges and in elementary and secondary schools, and she's immersed herself in the history of grading. (If you want to know who invented the multiple choice test, she'll brief you on how Frederick J. Kelly did so at Emporia State University and how he later renounced his technique.)

But it was her own course this semester -- called "[Your Brain on the Internet](#)" -- that Davidson used to test her ideas. And she found that it inspired students to do more work, and more creative work than she sees in courses with traditional grading.

Her approach -- first [announced on her blog](#) -- works based on contracts and "crowdsourcing." First she announced the standards -- students had to do all of the work and attend class to earn an A. If they didn't complete all the assignments, they could get a B or C or worse, based on how many they finished. Students signed a contract to agree to the terms. But students also determined if the assignments (in this case blog posts that were mini-essays on the week's work) were in fact meeting standards. Each week, two students led a discussion in class on the week's readings and ideas -- and those students determined whether or not their fellow students had met the standards.

So how did it work? Davidson, the Ruth F. Devarney Professor of English, said that of the 16 students in the course, 15 already have earned an A and she expects the remaining student to soon finish an assignment that will earn an A as well. To those who believe in traditional grading, that could of course be evidence that letting students do the grading results in easy As, but Davidson said that she believes students did more work under this system (and that she did as well).

She said that the students each ended up writing about 1,000 words a week, much more than is required for a course to be considered "writing intensive" at Duke (even though her course didn't have that designation). She also said that the writing (she read every word, even while not assigning grades) was better than the norm.

"The writing wasn't using the kind of language you normally see in research papers, with words you only use in research papers," she said. "There was less jargon. I didn't see the thesaurus-itis that I usually see." Further, she said that students took more risks.

For an assignment that dealt with privacy and surveillance in the Internet era, one student secretly filmed fellow students (and Davidson) and played the video in class (before agreeing not to post it elsewhere). For a project dealing in part with attention span, a student flashed images on a screen while also doing a presentation, and then gave a quiz on the presentation, noting that there were many missed questions that correlated with times that interesting images were on display in the background. "I think students were going out on a limb more and being creative and not just thinking about 'What does the teacher want?'" Davidson said.

While the students are ending up with As, many of them are doing so only because they redid assignments that were judged not sufficient to the task on the first try. The students were tough on each other, Davidson said. And this, she believes, encouraged students to work harder on their assignments. "No one wanted to get one of those messages" that an assignment needed to be redone. (But when they did receive such notes, the students didn't complain, as many do about grades they don't like. They reworked their essays, she said.)

Lacey Kim, a Duke senior who took the course, said she thought the alternative approach to grading in the course didn't eliminate the teacher's role, but changed the dynamic from "a single teaching-student interaction to multiple teacher-student/student-student interactions" with students in the roles of both student and teacher. She said she was certainly aware that fellow students would be looking closely at her work, and that "peer pressure is a very influential thing."

But Kim said that what was really important in the class dynamic wasn't pressure, but a sense that "everyone had insightful and varying experiences to share" and that in every way, "everyone participated." In making the transition to this approach to grading, students may have been helped by the Internet as the course's subject matter, Kim said. "A lot of the topics we discussed were contemporary, easily applicable to our lives, but because all of us had different voices, we felt we were on an equal plane."

While Davidson's experiment was in a course at a highly competitive private university, she said she didn't think it was applicable only there. She said that, since going public with her ideas, she has been seeing experiments elsewhere, and in grade schools with students as young as sixth grade. "The kids are amazing" in high schools and middle schools, she said, "if you set it up right and make this a responsibility."

Her responsibility as an instructor didn't evaporate in this system, Davidson stressed, but changed. "I worked like a dog," she said. She added an individual comment on every student essay, reading it along with the students who were determining that it met that week's requirements. All Davidson didn't do was assign a grade.

She said that she noticed a different feeling about her own work as a result. Of the time spent reading and commenting on student work, she said: "I never resented it. I always ended up learning things. I wanted to give the feedback." But reducing the feedback to a letter grade? "It's intellectually stultifying. I can't imagine going back."

