

Centering Assessment on History Learning Outcomes through Ungrading: How to Implement Specifications Grading in History Courses

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IN 2012, the American Historical Association (AHA) changed the conversation among higher education instructors about the learning outcomes of history by implementing Europe's successful Tuning Project. From 2012-2016, the Tuning Project brought a more coherent framework to conversations about the skills, knowledge, and value of a history degree, and pressed historians to voice what we already do in a language that resonates with external audiences.¹ The results of this endeavor included the AHA's "History Discipline Core."² What has not changed, however, is how instructors of history assess for these learning outcomes, and this risks missing the greatest benefits of the Tuning Project. Traditionally, history instructors prefer a summative assessment in "summing up" student learning on high-stakes exams, papers, or final projects, with assessment based on an arbitrary scale in which students are ranked according to their perceived ability.³ This arbitrary scale continues to sustain the defunct "myth of the bell curve" among history instructors who pride themselves on a C or B- average in their courses.⁴ Studies show, however, that this high-stakes model results in frustration for

the instructor, a sense of unfairness for the students, and a lower level of demonstrated competency among the student population.⁵ In contrast with history courses, “ungrading” assessment models are becoming the norm for English, Philosophy, Political Science, and STEM courses, with great success of students focusing on learning outcomes.⁶ Drawing from these examples, ungrading assessment models like Linda Nilson’s specifications grading would better center the history course on learning outcomes for history like those described in the AHA’s History Discipline Core.

Like in other disciplines, ungrading assessment models work because they change student focus in the course from grades to mastering the learning outcomes of the discipline. “Ungrading” is defined as an assessment model that does not assign points, percentages, and letter grades based on the perceived quality of the work.⁷ Instead, ungrading assessment models use formative assessment in which students have multiple low-stakes opportunities to demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes based on feedback from the instructor on how to improve rather than on lost points. In this approach, students can “fail forward” and redo an assignment until they master the skill, reducing the chance that they will make the same mistake twice while ensuring that they read an instructor’s comments. There are several kinds of ungrading assessment models, such as specifications, contract, labor-based, self-assessment, and peer-assessment. For a sequence of World History courses with 220 students, I chose to use Linda Nilson’s specifications grading because of its success in achieving what the title of her book proposes: “restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time.”⁸ In this article, I illustrate how specifications grading as an ungrading assessment model actualizes the objectives of the Tuning Project to center history learning outcomes.

Moreover, specifications grading resonates with a larger and timely discussion about the role of history and history instruction in allowing for human flourishing. Despite promises of a meritocracy, education has primarily worked to propagate the established social order.⁹ But with the pandemic and climate change, the new normal in humanities at large and in history requires us to work out with our students means of addressing questions of “how to live” or “what to do” through the lens of historical thinking.¹⁰ Specifications grading fosters this environment in the classroom since all the students are

focused on their learning outcomes rather than their ranking against other students. Every assignment links directly back to a learning outcome for the course and is graded pass/fail based on a one-level rubric. Each final letter grade—since transcripts still require them—signifies mastery of a certain number of the course’s possible learning outcomes, with higher grade levels equating to a higher number of competencies. In other words, students chose the learning outcomes and the corresponding assignments that they want to master during the semester. Since these learning outcomes build throughout the semester, students cannot move on to higher-level learning outcomes until they master the basic skills. As Nilson argued, giving the students agency over which learning outcomes to master produces higher-quality student work as students practice “self-efficacy, expectancy-value of good achievement, goal orientation, self-determination, and goal setting.”¹¹ Thus, in specifications grading, grades are not the desired outcome of education: competency in historical thinking is.

Specifications Grading: A How-To Guide

In this illustration of specifications grading, I draw from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s “backward design” concepts to reinforce the emphasis on the learning outcomes to then build out to the assessment model and assignments.¹² All of this needs to be defined in the syllabus before the semester starts so that you and the students know in advance how the course works, how it is assessed, and what choices students need to make to succeed—which may be to switch courses if they prefer the more traditional summative assessment. This planning framework thereby aligns assessment with what students really get out of the course, creating a road map of how to navigate the course for a specific, demonstrable outcome. Once you know the end goal of your specific course, you can then design the flow of the semester with significant learning experiences that build the learning outcomes cumulatively, from basic skill sets to more nuanced and complex ones.¹³ Thus, the semester path of development also mirrors Bloom’s Taxonomy of Higher Learning.¹⁴ Using the taxonomy to structure the learning outcomes means that nothing feels wasted to either you or the students as assignments build on one another: in-class questions for exams, source analysis

sheets for papers, papers for final projects, etc. To this sequence, there are multiple pathways through the course since students have agency over the learning outcomes they can pursue in the course. The only way to create this flexibility is to structure the course using backward design in advance of the first day of class.

The following step-by-step guide illustrates how to create a history course based on the learning outcomes in the AHA's History Discipline Core. The example course is a large, general education course on World History at a large, public, R1 university. Studies show that articulating the learning outcomes of the discipline works best with general education courses for non-history majors,¹⁵ and this proved true when I first implemented specifications grading over a sequence of World History courses at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK): thirty students out of one hundred joined me for a second semester of the ungrading assessment model when they could have chosen from among twelve other sessions using summative assessment. Students in the course sequence described the ungrading assessment as “fair” and “straightforward” and recognized that “the pass/fail grading makes an A in this class very achievable if you put in the work.”¹⁶ The example course below draws from my experience in creating the two-semester sequence, but it will be presented as one course.

Step 1: Begin with the Course's Purpose

To determine which learning outcomes from the AHA's History Discipline Core suit your course best, first identify the course's purpose in the university and department. Is it a general education course with specific requirements from the university? Does the department or school have a course sequencing plan? If not, then when do majors typically take the course in their path towards graduation? Will students build on knowledge or skills from previous courses, or do they need specific preparation for the next step in their scholastic journey? In other words, what value does this class add to a student's trajectory in college regardless if they are in a history program or not?

For example, World History at UTK fulfills the Global Citizenship International Focus in the Core Program for all undergraduates, so the catalog already indicates that the course will provide students

with specific, knowledge-retention skills. With both history and non-history majors in the Core Program, this course should have transdisciplinary skills to prepare students for higher-level courses in the program and in their majors. This course is also one of the first courses that many students take at UTK, so World History introduces them to a college-level workload and expectations for excellence in writing, presenting, and identifying the differences in world cultures. For history majors and potential history majors, World History introduces the discipline of history in ways they may never have encountered in grade school. Consequently, students should learn basic concepts of the historical profession that instructors of upper-level courses can later refine through analysis and application without having to repeat these concepts. Whether or not a student is a history major, it is assumed that students do not have a knowledge base for World History and that we will start at the basic learning outcomes for history.

Beginning with the purpose of the course is especially important for large, general education courses so that students understand how the class fits with their scholastic journey. Stating this purpose clearly in the syllabus increases student engagement and reduces frustration for a course that students might initially perceive as “in their way” to complete their major in a timely fashion. It also encourages higher student engagement with the discipline of history, because the students see how the course’s transdisciplinary learning outcomes enable them to engage more deeply with their own interests, majors, or career goals. Identifying the purpose of the course in the context of the students’ scholastic journey thereby clarifies which learning outcomes to include in the next step.

Step 2: Identify Learning Outcomes

With this awareness of the course’s competencies, you can then clarify measurable and specific learning outcomes, structuring each with an *[action verb]* + *[object]* formulation. Since specifications grading relates everything back to the course’s learning outcomes, this is the step to incorporate the results of the Tuning Project.¹⁷ I illustrate here how to select and tier the History Discipline Core’s learning outcomes based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. Through this process, using specifications grading allows you to create a rigorous

Example Possible Learning Outcomes

1. Exhibit knowledge of the histories, experiences, religions, and/or languages of social, ethnic, and cultural groups outside of the United States.
2. Demonstrate understanding of appropriate thematic and course-related vocabulary.
3. Demonstrate an ability to critically compare and reflect on different social and cultural perspectives.
4. Locate secondary sources through the library search engine.
5. Identify the difference between a primary and secondary source.
6. Analyze a primary source for content, context, structure, and limitations.
7. Identify, summarize, appraise, and synthesize other scholars' historical arguments. Recognize history as an interpretive account of the human past—one that historians create in the present from surviving evidence.
8. Practice ethical historical inquiry that makes use of and acknowledges sources from the past as well as the scholars who have interpreted that past.
9. Generate substantive, open-ended questions about the past and develop research strategies to answer them.
10. Craft well-supported historical narratives, arguments, and reports of research findings in a variety of media for a variety of audiences.

Figure 1: Example Possible Learning Outcomes

yet accessible course centered on the learning outcomes of history (see **Figure 1** for example possible learning outcomes).

For this example course, UTK defines three learning outcomes for knowledge retention. Instructors are required to include them in the syllabus as such:

1. Exhibit knowledge of the histories, experiences, religions, and/or languages of social, ethnic, and cultural groups outside of the United States.

2. Demonstrate understanding of appropriate thematic and course-related vocabulary.
3. Demonstrate an ability to critically compare and reflect on different social and cultural perspectives.¹⁸

At the same time, these required learning outcomes also align with the following subsection of the History Discipline Core's learning outcomes:

1. Build historical knowledge.
2. Gather and contextualize information in order to convey both the particularity of past lives and the scale of human experience.
3. Recognize how humans in the past shaped their own unique historical moments and were shaped by those moments.
4. Develop a body of historical knowledge with breadth of time and place—as well as depth of detail—in order to discern context.¹⁹

While I must include UTK's language, I corroborate it with the AHA's learning outcomes to mirror the best practices of the discipline. Following Bloom's Taxonomy, these learning outcomes fall under the first two tiers to remember and to understand, for as Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus posited, knowledge "involves the recall of specifics and universals."²⁰ The three UTK learning outcomes become the core of the class and are the required three to pass the course.

While an instructor could stop at the university's required learning outcomes, specifications grading increases the rigor of a course by building learning outcomes, which in this example course allows me to show more of the breadth of what history as a discipline has to offer. Beyond the three required learning outcomes, I include another sense of knowledge as defined by Bloom et al. to "[involve] the recall of pattern, structure, or setting," along with the addition of four other learning outcomes that apply and analyze knowledge.²¹ From the AHA's History Discipline Core, this would include the set of learning outcomes to "collect, sift, organize, question, synthesize, and interpret complex material" and to "identify, summarize, appraise, and synthesize other scholars' historical arguments."²² For my course, I further define how to "collect" and "sift" sources as "differentiating between a primary and secondary source" and "locating secondary sources through the library's large, institutional research engine." While these skills are for historical methods,

many college students do not have these skills at the beginning of their collegiate education, so clarifying these two learning outcomes defines competencies they will need to have for upper-level courses of any discipline. Once the students master the technical skills to access the correct source, then they draw on conceptual knowledge to analyze primary and secondary sources for content, context, structure, and limitations. Between these four learning outcomes, the students continue to ascend Bloom's Taxonomy with clear technical and analytical skills that will enable them to succeed at the next tier.

The next two tiers of Bloom's Taxonomy call for two more learning outcomes to incorporate procedural knowledge and comprehension. For the first of the two, students analyze and evaluate course material to "recognize history as an interpretive account of the human past—one that historians create in the present from surviving evidence."²³ The second addresses comprehension as students "practice ethical historical inquiry that makes use of and acknowledges sources from the past as well as the scholars who have interpreted that past."²⁴ Drawing again from Bloom's Taxonomy, the students practice procedural knowledge and comprehension through competency in these learning outcomes as "a type of understanding or apprehension such that the individual knows what is being communicated and can make use of the material or idea being communicated."²⁵ At this point, the course has nine scaled learning outcomes from the AHA's History Discipline Core.

The last two learning outcomes correlate with the final tier of Bloom's Taxonomy for metacognitive knowledge and self-knowledge. This final tier gives the most agency to students over their learning process. As outlined by the History Discipline Core, these learning outcomes challenge students to "generate substantive, open-ended questions about the past and develop research strategies to answer them" and "craft well-supported historical narratives, arguments, and reports of research findings in a variety of media for a variety of audiences."²⁶ In Bloom's Taxonomy, creating is the highest form of educational objectives. Since upper-level research courses will expect students to do this at a high level with larger, more complex parameters, mastering these learning outcomes early in the collegiate experience allows the students to refine their skills at a later stage with less stress than if they were attempting such a learning outcome for the first time. Whether or not the students

	D	C	B	A
Class Participation (no more than four absences)	X	X	X	X
70% or better on exams (2)	X	X	X	X
Source analysis sheets (one each unit)	4	5	6	7
Paper 1	-	X	X	X
Paper 2	-	-	X	X
Creative Project	-	-	-	X

Figure 2: Example of Assignment Bundles. The typical B-grade level is set as the C-grade level for the course.

chose to pursue each learning outcome covered in the course, they at least see how learning outcomes build across a course for more complex, rigorous forms of knowledge acquisition and application.

Step 3: Link Learning Outcomes to Assignments

Once you define the learning outcomes of the course, link each learning outcome with an assignment that assesses competency of that specific learning outcome. As shown in **Figure 2**, I have several methods of assessment: attendance, two exams, source analysis sheets, two papers, and a creative project. Articulating how each assignment relates back to a learning outcome makes the work meaningful for majors and non-majors alike, and at the same time, they engage with the course's content intentionally to demonstrate competency in the learning outcome.

Attendance and exams are the most useful way to assess for the first three learning outcomes based on factual knowledge. I measure attendance through clicker questions that students answer at the beginning, end, and throughout the lecture or discussion section. The clicker questions draw from their reading for that day as well as key points from the lecture, thus, they “exhibit knowledge,” “demonstrate understanding,” and “compare and reflect on” the course material of different “histories, experiences, religions, and/or languages of social, ethnic, and cultural groups” from around the world. Attendance

requires them answering all but two of the clicker questions. Some instructors require students to answer the questions correctly, but I only require them to submit an answer since I sometimes do not explain a topic well. Students can then answer a question without the stress of calculating a grade, and we can review the correct answer as a class. These clicker questions also form the core of their two multiple-choice exams, so they know what is coming and can study accordingly. Certainly, I add in additional questions for the exam from their readings and lectures as another assessment for the three learning outcomes on knowledge retention.

The source analysis sheets assess the next four learning outcomes through answering eight to ten specific questions. Students can choose whatever reading they like, so long as one is from each section of the course and so long as the analysis is submitted on the day that the reading is assigned. For the learning outcome to “locate secondary sources through the library search engine,” I provide the primary sources via an online software, but the students must find the course’s secondary sources through the library system. Next, to “identify the difference between a primary and secondary source,” the source analysis sheets are not the same for a primary or secondary source, so a student must select the correct source analysis sheet that corresponds with that specific reading. Since the readings are distributed evenly among secondary and primary sources in each section, the students will ultimately complete a source analysis sheet for both a primary and a secondary source. With ten questions, the primary source analysis sheet focuses on analyzing for “content, context, structure, and limitations.” With eleven questions, the secondary source analysis sheet requires students to “identify, summarize, appraise, and synthesize other scholars’ historical arguments.” Consequently, every element of this assignment assesses for a specific learning outcome.

The papers assess for the next two learning outcomes on procedural knowledge and comprehension. The first paper asks students to analyze how two secondary sources address the course’s topic. This first paper builds on the source analysis sheets for secondary sources and assesses for the learning outcome to “recognize history as an interpretive account of the human past—one that historians create in the present from surviving evidence.” The second paper requires students to apply historical methodology to the primary sources that we have been studying in the course. The questions from the source

analysis sheets already prompt students to examine sources ethically, and they then use that analysis to make an argument for how they would respond to the course's central topic themselves, agreeing or disagreeing with the scholars that they analyze in the first paper. This second paper thereby assesses the learning outcome to "practice ethical historical inquiry that makes use of and acknowledges sources from the past as well as the scholars who have interpreted that past." Just as the learning outcomes build across the semester according to Bloom's Taxonomy, the assignments also reinforce each other as students build their factual knowledge, technical skills, and source analysis of earlier assignments.

The last two possible learning outcomes correlate with the creative project that students initiate, design, and implement based on three secondary sources that they locate through the library system. For these final learning outcomes, a student meets with me to identify the topic of the project and its final product based on their interests, major field of study, or potential career paths. Before the meeting, they prepare "substantive, open-ended questions about the past" and then "develop research strategies to answer them" with me as the instructor. Along with their final project, the student submits a final reflection on what it is like to work independently on a research project. The final products for assessment are as diverse as the students and their interests: from public speaking to GIS mapping, from artistic designs to creative writing, from grant proposals to historiographical essays, they are assessed based on the learning outcome to "craft well-supported historical narratives, arguments, and reports of research findings in a variety of media for a variety of audiences." In this final project, students deploy and reinforce the previous learning outcomes at the highest level for this course.

Step 4: Write a One-Level Rubric for Each Assignment

In specifications grading, since you assess students based on competency, they either do or do not demonstrate mastery of the learning outcome, so all assignments are graded pass/fail as defined in a one-level rubric. As an equitable practice, all one-level rubrics must be in the syllabus on the first day of class, because setting expectations upfront clarifies course navigation, especially for students with additional responsibilities beyond course work. One-

level rubrics can be as simple as “Answer 8 out of 10 questions correctly on the source analysis sheet” or as multi-stepped as listing a certain purpose for each paragraph in a paper (see **Figure 3**, **Figure 4**, and **Figure 5** for examples of the one-level rubrics for various assignments).

For attendance as an assessment of knowledge acquisition, the one-level rubric indicates that students can only miss four classes. As explained earlier, the clicker questions reflect the course content, so missing beyond four classes limits their mastery of the most basic learning outcomes, much less the more advanced ones. The students manage their time and do not have to tell me when they are missing. Some have excellent communication skills and let me know in advance, but that is not required at the general education course since we are starting with the basic skill of time management. However, more advanced courses can require communication skills as students deepen their awareness of and experience with the historical profession. Each additional absence takes their final grade down three points, so if a student has a fifth absence, then the whole letter grade of A, B, C, or D drops to an A-, B-, C-, or D-. Note that Step 6 describes a safety net for additional absences, for the goal of specifications grading is to motivate and not to stress students.

In my courses, the one-level rubric is most effective for emphasizing the difference between a primary and a secondary source. Students can choose from any of the 32 readings from the course to complete a source analysis sheet, each due on the day that the readings are assigned. Some days have two readings, and so students can submit two on the same day. To pass the course, they must answer at least eight questions correctly on at least four source analysis sheets and at most seven source analysis sheets. Students cannot pass a source analysis sheet assignment if they choose a primary source template for a secondary source, or vice versa. Choosing the wrong source analysis sheet for a primary or secondary source is an automatic “fail” that students can redo with a token (as explained in Step 6), or they can forgo a resubmission in lieu of completing a new sheet for a different source in that section. The only restriction is that they must complete at least one source analysis sheet from each unit, which keeps them engaged throughout the semester. This restriction also complements their papers since the material for their papers derives from the readings that they analyzed

One-Level Rubric - *Exam*

- Exam Dates: March 15 and May 15
- Multiple-choice answers based on clicker questions and reading questions.
- Via Canvas, open-book, open-note, no outside materials are allowed.
- Acceptable Work: 70% or better based on two attempts.

Figure 3: Example One-Level Rubric for the Exam

thoroughly in the source analysis sheets. Because of the one-level rubric, every student knows the difference between a primary and secondary source by the end of the semester.

The one-level rubric sounds stringent, but it is also flexible since the assessment ties back to a learning outcome that emphasizes learning over performance or ranking. For the exams, the one-level rubric (see **Figure 3**) is to score a 70% or better on an open-note, 55-minute, multiple-choice exam of fifty questions, and the students have two attempts to do so through the learning management software, Canvas. I give the students a 24-hour window and allow them to take the test through Canvas wherever works best for them, while still offering the classroom for students during regular course hours if the setting and time are their best option. Canvas draws from a question bank of 100 questions and shuffles the questions and answers for each student and each attempt. My teaching peers worried that students would search for the answers online. If they did, it was not sufficient, because half of the class still needed the second attempt to pass each time. The significant time between attempts indicated reviewing their notes and course materials again. Out of the two semesters and 440 exams, only three students did not pass their second attempt. I could then meet these students where they were, talk about what happened, and follow up on the knowledge retention skill that the exam assessed. To put it another way, I was not assessing the students on their ability and skill to excel in an exam format: instead, the exam was a tool to assess their knowledge retention quickly. Since the exam format was not a format in which they thrived, we arrived at another solution for them to write a short

One-Level Rubric - *Paper 2*

- Due: Friday, February 17
- No outside sources are allowed. Cite all sources and lectures using Chicago Manual of Style or MLA, whichever your primary discipline uses.
- Open with Headrick's definition of "technology" or your original impression of what "technology" meant before this course. Do you now agree, disagree, or both? Justify your position with a thesis comparing what "technology" looked like in different political, religious, social, or environmental contexts. (Five sentences at minimum.)
- Use one primary and one secondary source from Unit 1 to advance your case. Your analysis of the sources should detail the technology and the sites of knowledge production in each society. (Ten sentences each at minimum. Build on your answers from your source analysis sheets.)
- Compare the two examples that you selected. What questions or topics interested people? Were they the same in these two societies? Did events, laws, or practices influence different systems of knowledge production? If so, how? If not, why not? (Five sentences at minimum.)
- Conclude with a summary of your position. (Five sentences at minimum.)
- In your paper, underline three templates that you used from Graff and Birkenstein.
- Synthesize your position into a title for the paper. (Max. 140 characters.)
- Acceptable work: Meets the specs of this assignment and has fewer than five grammatical errors.

Figure 4: Example One-Level Rubric for Paper 2

answer for each incorrect multiple-choice question. So, in exchange for a token (explained more in Step 6), they corrected their exams, demonstrated their mastery of the course content, and continued their learning in the course. By thinking through the one-level rubric and building in flexibility before the semester, I can meet students where they are and focus on their learning rather than performance.

To some, the one-level rubric for papers may seem pedantic, but it teaches students how to write in such a way as to master the learning outcomes that the papers assess. Most students in a general education history course do not know what a history essay looks like. Previously, with summative assessment, my comments would tell them what was missing to make an assignment into an A, but then on the next assignment, the qualities for an A would be different, resulting in student frustration. Summative assessment thereby privileges students who have already been shown the “correct” way to approach a topic or idea, while students with a different background are guessing at how to write a historical essay in a general education course.²⁷ In the history courses, attempts at standardizing grading can result in vague rubrics with qualifiers like “poor,” “good,” and “excellent” that suggest that there is a “correct” and undisclosed way to write a historical essay. This leaves students lost and guessing how to succeed in a history course, much less the profession and its transdisciplinary skills. For the papers, the one-level rubric (see **Figure 4**) incorporates specifications grading to clarify the specifications for a history essay. These specifications detail that the paper needs to open with a position in response to a question, analyze sources independently before comparing them, and conclude with a summary of the position. The specifications also require citations, a title, and writing templates from the course’s writing textbook to facilitate effective writing. Acceptable work must meet all these specifications, so, for instance, if a student does not cite a source, then they fail not only the assignment, but also the learning outcome to “practice ethical historical inquiry that makes use of and acknowledges sources from the past as well as the scholars who have interpreted that past.” Especially for the general education course, the one-level rubrics for papers do not assume the basic knowledge of how to write a history essay; instead, the specifications detail how the students show competency in the learning outcome through the historical essay.

Overall, the one-level rubric approach eliminates grade disputes in my courses. Structurally, partial-credit grading systems make the course into a game, “the object of which is to maximize the number of points towards one’s grade with the lowest possible investment of time and effort.”²⁸ This results in quibbles over points and a feeling that the final grade originates outside of the student’s learning. In past semesters when I worked with courses based on summative

One-Level Rubric - *Creative Project (A-track)*

- Due Tuesday, May 9 (with several smaller due dates ahead of time)
- For those pursuing an A, schedule a meeting with the professor before or by Thursday, March 23, to discuss your ideas for a creative project. Prepare for the meeting by reflecting on what outcomes would benefit you in your major field of study, potential career paths, or interests that you find enjoyable. In other words, what do you want to get out of this project? Presentation of knowledge in a dynamic format? Public speaking skills? Creative writing about what it would have felt like to live in one of scientific communities that we studied? Networking skills? The possibilities are endless and should strengthen your interests, skills, and imagination. Once you decide on a skill, consider a topic from the course content that interests you.
- This project first requires approval from the professor. Specifications for the assessment will be decided at this meeting.
- Five check-ins on project progress due on Fridays via Canvas. Answer the following: What did you do for the project this week? What is the most exciting thing you learned this week for your project? What sources are you using for the project? What difficulties have you had, and why? How do you plan to overcome these difficulties?
- Submit or present the creative project on Tuesday, May 9. If your project does not submit easily on Canvas, then submit it as a hard copy, in-person, or via email in the same email thread as the specifications for your specific project.
- Submit a write-up on Tuesday, May 9, on how your values, attitudes, or thinking changed while working on this project, and how you plan to use these skills in the future. The write-up should be submitted with your creative project.

Figure 4: Example One-Level Rubric for the Creative Project (A-track).

assessment, students contested their grades regularly to the primary instructor, and it took time, energy, and documentation to navigate these sensitive conversations. Since specifications grading details the qualities of a “pass” in the syllabus, it is easy to measure if a student demonstrated mastery of the learning outcome or not.

Defining the qualities of a “pass” also allows for different styles and voices in student writing, thereby curtailing unintended bias of a grader to a certain style of writing.²⁹ If a student misses one or more of the specifications for an assignment, then they can retry based on feedback of what is missing, and the “fail” disappears from the record, removing barriers in the learning process and progress in the course. With specifications grading, between two courses and 220 students, I had only one student who complained about my assessment of their paper, and after reviewing the specifications for the assignment and the policy for resubmission with a token, they relaxed and made the effort to correct their paper for a pass. In the end, with the one-level rubric, students perceive my comments as opportunities to master the learning outcome rather than as demerits.

Furthermore, the one-level rubric saves me a great amount of mental labor when grading. Based on the specifications for a “pass,” I can confidently assess if the student masters that learning outcome. When I used summative assessment previously, I spent an average of 15 minutes per essay or exam, reviewing my comments to be sure that I could justify taking off a certain number of points. I spent additional time after grading individual assignments to be sure that I graded them consistently, for grading fatigue was not always the kindest towards students at the bottom of the stack. Consequently, for fifty essays, I would spend at least twelve hours grading. With specifications grading, the amount of grading time is so predictable that I average five hours a week to grade, and so simply build that time into my weekly schedule. Building that daily time also keeps me in communication with the students, so I respond in real time if the students are missing a key concept. The students and I therefore remain in communication throughout the semester about their learning, and I adjust lectures, review concepts, and even incorporate some of their findings into our course discussions. Overall, the one-level rubric saves me time and allows me to keep the course focused on the learning outcomes as we navigate the course content.

Step 5: Bundle Assignments for Letter Grades

Despite shifting a course to an ungrading assessment model, the university still requires a letter grade. To equate competencies with a letter grade, specifications grading bundles the number and

kinds of assignments that students pursue for the grade that they want in the course. Nilson recommended setting your previous expectations for a B as the passing C level in the course, and this is easy to do, thanks to the earlier steps of building learning outcomes based on Bloom's Taxonomy. As shown in **Figure 2**, a D grade requires mastery of the course's factual knowledge and of UTK's three required learning outcomes, as evidenced in attending class with no more than four absences, earning a 70% or better on two exams, and answering eight out of ten questions correctly on four source analysis sheets for course readings. From there, the bundles include more and higher requirements of competency. Conceptual and procedural knowledge equates with a C grade, demonstrating competency in all the requirements for a D, with a higher number of source analysis sheets and completing acceptable work for Paper 1. For a B grade, students complete the same conceptual and procedural knowledge for a C, but at a higher level and for Paper 2. For an A grade, students pursue all the course's possible learning outcomes and uniquely complete the creative project for metacognitive skills and independent study. Each bundle of assignments thereby links learning outcomes with the letter grade based on Bloom's Taxonomy.

Instead of one pathway through the course, the bundle of assignments operates more as a framework in which the students have agency to choose among multiple pathways in the course. In other words, students select the bundle of assignments that correlates with the learning outcomes and the grade that they want from the class. Certainly, there are hurdles that every student must complete to pass the class, such as the two exams, attendance, and source analysis sheets, but students are not required to complete anything beyond these to complete the course. As an example, for a C, a student only needs to complete Paper 1 to demonstrate sufficient mastery of the learning outcome; they then skip the remaining papers and projects while still completing the source analysis sheets, attending class, and passing exams. Unlike contract grading, students are not obligated to stick with a certain bundle of assignments throughout the semester; they can attempt higher levels or shift to lower levels as they choose. For instance, a handful of students usually begin the creative project, but elect not to complete it, and as they shift back to the bundle for a B, they also have fewer source analysis sheets to pass. Within each bundle, the students choose how they will move

through the class, including what source analysis sheets they will complete, which sources they will use for their papers, when they will attend or not attend class, where they will take their exams, and which assignments they will or will not complete. The bundle of assignments keeps the focus on the learning outcomes so that students can navigate the class meaningfully.

At the same time, the bundle of assignments allows me as an instructor to meet students where they are and support them in their mastery of the learning outcomes. The Canvas makes plain where a student is not meeting the assignment bundles. Attendance and the source analysis sheets are early indicators that a student is struggling to navigate the course. I set up alerts in Canvas for myself and the students, and, often, the students reach out first. At this point, tokens are not enough to help a student catch up, and even if tokens were sufficient, then the student would lose their safety net entirely at the beginning of the semester, increasing student stress. Instead of penalizing the student, I focus on the course's learning outcomes and recognize another layer of skills needed to succeed, such as time management and organization. I then partner with student resources on campus and require the student to meet with an academic coach, writing tutor, or advisor within a week of the notice to review the syllabus for the course, their semester plan, navigation of Canvas, and the obstacles that prohibit them from achieving the learning outcomes that they want in the course. Once they meet with a campus expert who confirms the meeting with me, then they submit their missing assignments in exchange for a single token. The additional amount of work to navigate the university's student resource system equivocates with their peers who already have the time management and organizational skills to navigate the course. Students who took this option did not have trouble again and went on to succeed in the course. This also holds true for more advanced students. When the grading load lightens at the end of the semester, I have more time and mental energy to tailor creative projects to individual student interests. This is most evident during the creative project's weekly check-ins. For five weeks, students submit a short check-in electronically through Canvas on their unique projects that we designed with their specific research, major, or career interests in mind. The check-ins focus on their research process: the ebbs and flows of research, questions on how to navigate the library's search

engine, discussions of how to find the best secondary sources, or the joys of discovery and connection. For each bundle of assignments, specifications grading allows me to work with students on developing their skills, no matter their goals in the course.

Step 6: Create a Safety Net

After setting up the ungrading assessment model for the course, next fashion a flexible safety net in which students can try, fail, and try again at mastering the learning outcomes. This step is important since there is a learning curve to the no-partial-credit model. Nilson has several recommendations in her work of such safety nets, and the token system is the simplest and clearest to me.³⁰ The token system gamifies the courses and gives agency to students over their learning process. For my courses, I give students three tokens at the beginning of the semester. They can use a token for an assignment revision, a 24-hour extension on a submission, or an additional absence beyond the four allowed absences. Some safety nets allow for a revision on any failed assignment, but for large courses, it is more realistic to limit their revisions to a possibility of three assignments. A limited number of revisions also produces better first attempts, so there is less to revise in the event of a failed assignment. Students have one week to revise an assignment from the time that I return it to them. Returning a revision within a week also helps the student stay abreast of the course's progression as they build learning outcomes and skills throughout the semester. Therefore, even the safety net centers on achieving the learning outcomes of history.

In particular, the token system reduces student stress since they can attempt the learning outcomes without the fear of failing the course. New and transfer students particularly thrive in specifications grading since it articulates clearly to them what it means to be in a course at a large, public, R1 university. At first, however, some new and transfer students feel lost in specifications grading and the pass/fail assessments, and the safety net helps to reduce this stress. If students are still hesitating after we review an assignment's specifications several times, then I encourage them to try, and remind them that they can always revise an assignment with a token. It is thereby possible for students to pass both papers with the token system; they master the learning outcomes by revising each paper into two excellent writing

samples for the next step in their scholastic journey. With summative assessment, these students might not rank as highly as their peers, but with specifications grading, they learn how to cite sources effectively and consistently, how to identify an academic conversation, and how to make an evidence-based argument. Learning, retrying, and succeeding are at the heart of letting students revise and resubmit with the token system, just as it is for academics to revise and resubmit their journal articles and book manuscripts.

Since the students have a high engagement with tokens, this safety net can also be a mechanism for individual and class rewards. Conventional extra credit mechanisms can be highly inequitable when they require extra time or resources of students beyond what the course outlines. For example, attendance at an in-person visiting lecture penalizes students with caregiving or work responsibilities, while spontaneous extra assignments at the end of the semester increases student stress as they reconfigure balancing other coursework. Instead, with specifications grading, the rewards are spelled out at the beginning of the course through the token system. If students have three tokens at the end of the semester, then those students receive three points to raise their grade from the whole letter grade of B, C, or D to a B+, C+, or D+ in recognition of their high level of time and resource management skills. This system is also flexible without being inequitable. For instance, at the end of the semester, I offer an extra token to the whole class if 70% of the students complete their student evaluations, which they can complete in class or at their convenience. It is fun to celebrate reaching a goal together and everyone gets a little more breathing room at the end of the semester to reach their goals.

Step 7: Communicate the Ungrading Assessment Model to Students

On the first day of class, students must have everything in hand to decide if they will engage with this ungrading assessment model, and the syllabus must have all the one-level rubrics, the assignment bundles, and the safety net. As a resource for students to succeed in my courses, the syllabus is the point of reference to set expectations for the instructor and the students about course behavior, culture, requirements, and cost. In consequence, I include an explanatory paragraph of specifications grading in the syllabus along with the chart of assignment bundles. It is important to give students all the

information at the beginning so they can choose if they want to opt out of the ungrading assessment model and take another iteration of the course.

Some students feel uncomfortable at first about no-partial-credit options, so I regularly review the ungrading assessment model in class to acclimate students to course expectations. In the first discussion section, each student writes a semester plan for the learning outcomes that they want to attempt in the course. They must include all due dates, plans for using tokens, and potential hurdles to completing the assignment bundle of their choice. In this semester plan, students write about their high achievement as if it has already happened. They can include their most effective reading, writing, and study techniques from previous successful courses. Returning students are the best at explaining specifications grading to their peers, so if I have a few in my course, then I have the students explain the ungrading assessment model to each other after they write their semester plan for the course. Student-to-student explanations prompt additional questions that I can answer for the group. I then review these plans and clarify any confusion at the next class. The students still need reminders throughout the semester, but while we review the assignment bundles (in **Figure 2**) nearly every week for the first quarter, the students only need a reminder for the rest of the semester before an exam or paper deadline as to the specifications for mastering a specific learning outcome. The token system, regular reminders, and syllabus reviews reduce their stress over the course of the semester. This is an inverted curve compared to courses based on summative assessment, in which student stress increases towards the end of a semester with the high-risk final exams or papers. Overall, I received much less feedback about student stress at the start of the second semester thanks to the calm confidence of those who were already on board with this assessment model.

Challenges and Modifications

While the students and I find many benefits to specifications grading, there were some challenges. For example, Canvas does not conform to ungrading and continues to issue number grades to the students. This confuses several students who are accustomed to referring to Canvas rather than the syllabus. If I cannot change the Canvas page

early in the semester, I take a few minutes at the beginning of class to review the syllabus, learning outcomes, and chart of assessment. One semester, some computer science students had excellent ideas for how to reformat the Canvas pages based on each grade level with a unique chart that populates as the student moves through the course. For future courses, I will work with the university's technology office to reformat the Canvas page before the semester starts. Changing these pages midway through the semester risks confusing students who have already learned to navigate the existing format. As argued in this paper, the work to implement specifications grading largely takes place before the semester, because once the students get the hang of it, any disruption to expectations increases student stress and risks inhibiting students from succeeding in the course.

In another example, there is a learning curve for the instructor about the amount of assessment required to demonstrate mastery of a learning outcome, which can result in busy work. Originally, I assigned source analysis sheets as I had done with a summative assessment course at an increment of two between each bundle of assignments. This meant that students had to complete at least four and at most ten source analysis sheets depending on their bundle of assignments. In addition to requiring more time for assessment from me, I noticed that the quality of source analysis sheets remained the same after passing seven source analysis sheets. Additionally, anything beyond seven felt like busy work when those students were working on their independent creative projects. The next semester, I dropped the source analysis sheets from an increment of two to an increment of one, with students completing at least four and at most seven to demonstrate competency in the learning outcomes. Readjusting this requirement also allowed me to modify the syllabus timeline so that there is more time for students to complete their papers with my feedback on the first assignments. It takes at least a semester to get a feel of the course's pacing with ungrading and to eliminate assignments that do not directly or meaningfully tie back to a learning outcome.

Summary

Overall, specifications grading minimally changes the average of all the grades in the course, but it does shift the focus to the learning outcomes like those of the AHA's History Discipline Core. From

my previous course based on summative assessment, the students averaged at an 86; if assigning the same numbers to the final grades with specifications grading, then the average for this sequence of World History was an 88. Despite the greater amount of work and the greater quality of work in the course, half the students attempted *all* the learning outcomes, turning the bell curve of grade distributions into an exponential one. This is not grade inflation. Rather, students chose time and again to reach for more complex skills, more dedicated work, and more nuance in their historical analysis. This dynamic would not have been possible if I had not done the work before the semester to establish the specifications grading model as a fair system based on individual demonstrations of mastery—and not based on my interpretation of student ranking.

The discipline of history has much to offer students at every level of instruction. The AHA defined the learning outcomes of history thoughtfully and concretely through the Tuning Project's History Discipline Core. Ungrading assessment models like specifications grading bring these learning outcomes to the forefront in assessment, and Bloom's Taxonomy organizes the learning outcomes meaningfully for the final grade assignments. Implementing an ungrading assessment model in a history course requires care and advanced planning so that you and your students can be in conversation about their learning rather than in contention about their grades. Ultimately, specifications grading centers a course on the learning outcomes of history, to the benefit of both the instructor and the student.

Notes

My sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers of *The History Teacher* for their excellent comments to expand and deepen this article's intervention.

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