

# Work Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment through Specifications Grading

Michelle Gricus, DSW, LCSW-C

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology and Social Work

Hood College

[Gricus@hood.edu](mailto:Gricus@hood.edu)

# By the end of this session, you will be able to...



Describe the philosophy behind specifications grading.



Identify three benefits to implementing specifications grading principles as an equitable practice.



Design one assignment using specifications grading concepts.

# Strategies for achieving our objectives

Questions welcome throughout presentation!

Brief lecture points about traditional grading vs. specifications grading

Examples of specifications grading in social work courses

Small group/Pairs discussions

Individual practice and application

# Small Group Discussion

- Introduce self
- What brought you to this presentation?
- What are your most significant challenges related to grading students' work?
- Select a reporter to BRIEFLY summarize group discussion

# Students: Taylor and Cameron

- Taylor is an intelligent student and an excellent participant in class. Unfortunately, Taylor is at risk of failing your class because of frequent late work, which is penalized at a 10% reduction for every day it is late. Discussions with Taylor about the late work have resulted in comments like “I’m juggling full-time school and work; I’m doing my best.”
- Cameron has had a difficult transition to college and was on academic probation last semester. Cameron admits to not being a good test-taker but performs well on weekly assignments and is able to explain concepts when asked. Cameron scored a 60% percent on the midterm exam.

# Instructors: Morgan and Jordan

- Morgan's course evaluations and anecdotal evidence from students reflect that Morgan is a good teacher but students have reported grading to be "unfair" and "inconsistent." While one student might earn an A- on a written assignment, another may earn a B+ similar work. Recently, a student met with the department chair to report that Morgan is giving lower grades to non-native English speakers and students of color.
- Jordan teaches 100-level courses that serve as prerequisites in many disciplines. Faculty colleagues have started to express concern that students with As and Bs in Jordan's courses are not able to demonstrate basic functions in their courses.

# Understanding The Issues

- We'll come back to Taylor and Cameron
- Morgan's inconsistent grading:
  - Subjective rubric descriptions (e.g., "well-written") can leave room for interpretation prompting debates about whether a grade should be changed (Nilson, 2015).
  - Traditional rubrics have been critiqued for being subjective, vague, or restrictive of student creativity (Ragupathi & Lee, 2020).
  - Inconsistencies in interpretation can translate to inequities in the learning environment (Feldman, 2018).
- Jordan's students earning As and Bs:
  - "Misunderstand their own capabilities" (Chowdhury, 2018)
  - Promotes students' faulty thinking about their actual knowledge, skills, and abilities (Miller, 2014).



My  
Experience

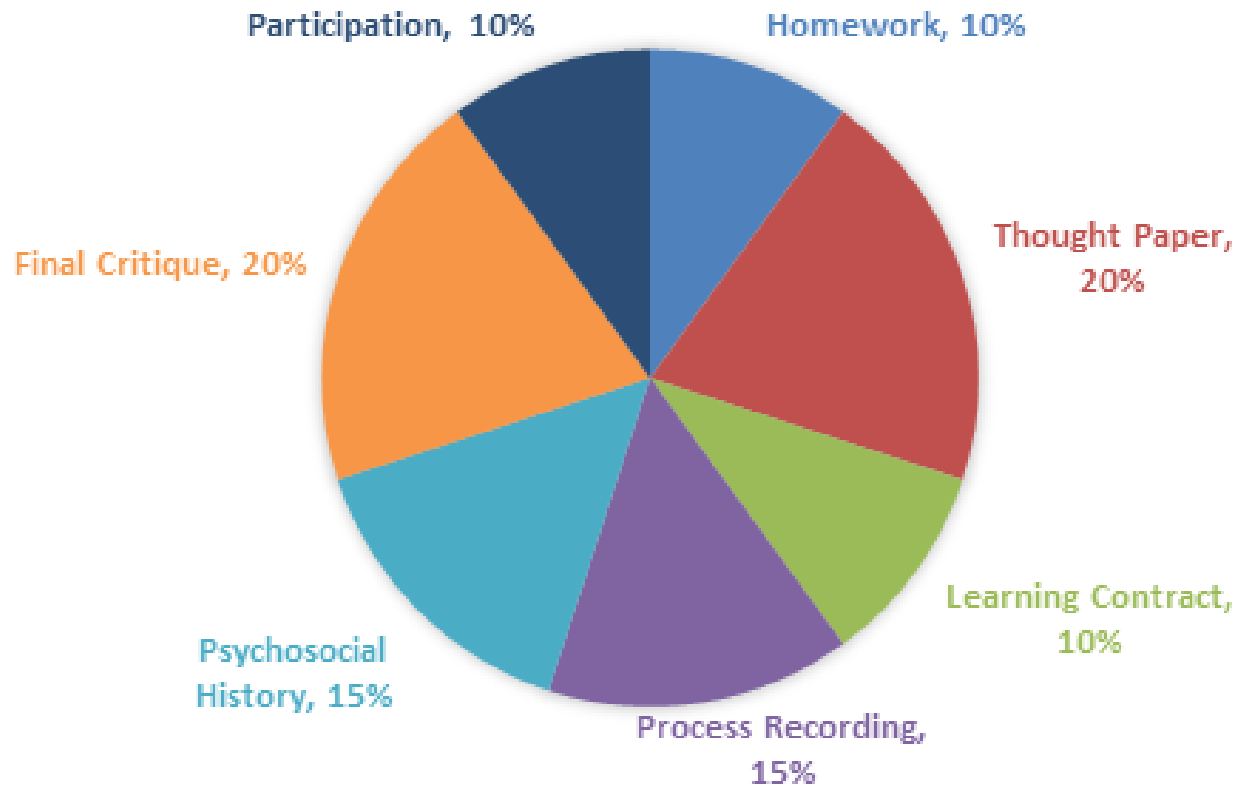


# Course Info and Considerations

- SOWK 342: Social Work Practice Methods
- Purpose: The purpose of this course is to provide students with the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for generalist entry-level positions as generalist social workers able to practice with diverse populations and client systems of all sizes or modalities.
- Many course objectives!
- Social work majors must earn a C- to pass the course and continue in the major.
  - Further, advanced standing programs typically require a minimum of B- or higher in practice courses (SOWK 342, SOWK 442).

# Grading System—Traditional

## ASSIGNMENT WEIGHTING



## Grading

<b>A</b>	93-100	<b>C</b>	73-76
<b>A-</b>	90-92	<b>C-</b>	70-72
<b>B+</b>	87-89	<b>D+</b>	67-69
<b>B</b>	83-86	<b>D</b>	63-66
<b>B-</b>	80-82	<b>D-</b>	60-62
<b>C+</b>	77-79	<b>F</b>	59 or below

# The Challenges

## Student-Related

- Perceived homework as “busy work”
- Didn’t do more than rubric requested (e.g. no intro/conclusion paragraphs)
- Requested extra credit to improve grade
- Students were successfully completing coursework but not able to take learning forward to other courses/field work

## Instructor-Related

- Grades didn’t always reflect learning
  - Rigid policies resulted in big deductions or 0%
  - It was possible for a student to earn a B on an assignment where the most important standard was marked “Needs Improvement.”
- Felt discouraged at the end of the course
- Felt pressure to give partial credit or extra credit opportunities

# Specifications Grading (Nilson, 2015)

- Students are graded pass/fail on individual assignments and tests or on bundles or modules of assignments and tests.
- Instructors provide very clear, detailed specifications (specs)—even models if necessary— for what constitutes a passing (acceptable/ satisfactory) piece of work.
- Specs reflect the standards of B-level or better work.
- Students are allowed at least one opportunity to revise an unacceptable piece of work or start the course with a limited number of tokens that they can exchange to revise or drop unacceptable work or to submit work late.
- **Bundles** and modules that earn higher course grades require students to demonstrate mastery of more skills and content, more advanced/complex skills and content, or both.
- Bundles and modules are tied to the learning outcomes of the course or the program. Students will not necessarily achieve all the possible outcomes, but their course grade will indicate which ones they have and have not achieved.

# My Process

- Incorporated specifications rubrics on at least one major assignment across all courses (Starting in Fall 2019)
- Create full specifications syllabus in two courses in Spring 2021 semester
  - 300-level practice course
  - 400-level senior capstone
- Revised approach, and created specs syllabus for most difficult course in curriculum (Fall 2021)
  - Language tweaks: Unsatisfactory → Incomplete; Mastery/No Credit
  - Created milestones for submitting re-do
  - Amnesty week
- Worked with new faculty colleague to implement specs grading in 2/4 of her Fall 2021 courses
- Revised Spring 2022 syllabi

# Bundle Examples: A and B

<b>A Grade Bundle*</b>	<b>B Grade Bundle*</b>
Satisfactory/ <u>Excellent participation</u> * with no more than 2 absences	Satisfactory/ <u>Excellent participation</u> * with no more than 3 absences
4-6 minute annotated demonstration video of process or skill, completed with another student	4-6 minute annotated demonstration video of process or skill, completed with another student
11 (of 13) Satisfactory Journal Entries	9 (of 13) Satisfactory Journal Entries
9 (of 11) Satisfactory Workbook Sections	7 (of 11) Satisfactory Workbook Sections
87% average on Thought Paper, Process Recording, and Biopsychosocial Assessment	82% average on Thought Paper, Process Recording, and Biopsychosocial Assessment
Satisfactory Final Critique	Satisfactory Final Critique

# Bundle Examples: C and D

<b>C Grade Bundle**</b>	<b>D Grade Bundle**</b>
Satisfactory participation* with no more than 4 absences	Satisfactory participation* with no more than 6 absences
8 (of 13) Satisfactory Journal Entries	6 (of 13) Satisfactory Journal Entries
6 (of 11) Satisfactory Workbook Sections	5 (of 11) Satisfactory Workbook Sections
77% average on Thought Paper, Process Recording, and Biopsychosocial Assessment	72% average on Thought Paper, Process Recording, and Biopsychosocial Assessment
Satisfactory Final Critique	Completed Final Critique



## Final Grade Configuration

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- A grade of minus (“-“) will be added to any bundle where participation standards are not met at the level of Satisfactory.
- A grade of “+” will be added to B, C, and D bundles where criteria are met for a higher-grade bundle.



# Considerations in Other Courses

## SOWK 345: Human Lifecycle (Theory)

- SO.MUCH.CONTENT.
- Weekly “quests”: earn 80% to earn “Complete”
- Cumulative final exam: Minimum score required for each letter grade

## SOWK 452: Seminar on SW Profession (Senior Capstone)

- Disparate course objectives
- Portfolio, professional development
- Flipped classroom
- Some graded group projects

# Exercise:

## Choose Your Own Adventure

- Option #1: Create A Specs Rubric
  - Consider an assignment where you use a traditional grading rubric.
  - To start, identify 5 qualities of a B grade on this assignment, using numbers whenever possible (e.g., provide 3 examples from the text)
- Option #2: [Convert a Traditional Rubric \(see example\)](#)
- Option #3: Create a Bundle (using current course assignments)
  - Then, consider what changes would need to be made for a level up or down

# Remember Our Students?

- Taylor is an intelligent student and an excellent participant in class. Unfortunately, Taylor is at risk of failing your class because of frequent late work, which is penalized at a 10% reduction for every day it is late. Discussions with Taylor about the late work have resulted in comments like “I’m juggling full-time school and work; I’m doing my best.”
  - Issues: late work, grade not congruent with learning
- Cameron has had a difficult transition to college and was on academic probation last semester. Cameron admits to not being a good test-taker but performs well on weekly assignments and is able to explain concepts when asked. Cameron scored a 60% percent on the midterm exam.
  - Issues: difficulty with tests, able to explain course concepts

# Grade Distribution Comparison

SOWK 342

	2019 (n=20)	2020 (n=17)	2021 (n=14)
A	7	2	7
A-	4	5	0
B+	2	4	1
B	3	2	1
B-	0	2	0
C+	4	1	1
C	0	0	0
C-	0	1	1
D+	0	0	1
F	0	0	2

“Taylor”= 

SOWK 345

	2019 (n=14)	2020 (n=19)	2021 (n=8)
A	1	0	2
A-	2	5	0
B+	2	6	2
B	3	2	1
B-	3	1	0
C+	0	0	0
C	1	1	1
C-	0	0	1
D	1	0	1
F	1	4	0

“Cameron”= 

# Course Evaluations

The instructor fairly and accurately evaluated my performance.

SOWK 201		SOWK 345		SOWK 452		SOWK 342	
Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Spring 2020	Spring 2021	Spring 2020	Spring 2021
4.5	4.9	4.7	4.6	4.2	4.3	4.7	4.7

Overall, this course was excellent.

SOWK 201		SOWK 345		SOWK 452		SOWK 342	
Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Fall 2021	Spring 2020	Spring 2021	Spring 2020	Spring 2021
4.2	4.8	4.7	4.6	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.6

# A Selection of Comments from Midterm and Final Course Evals

The bundle grading really used to scare me but after having classes with you in the past I have learned to trust the process (and that it helps me actually learn the content instead of just checking a box).

I think it gives a lot of freedom to the student to be in control of their grades. I think they can look at everyone and say "hey, I'm having a really rough week and if I miss one of these journals I still will not ruin my final grade"... it takes a lot of this anxiety off needing to feel perfect. While every paper students should still try their best on, they know that they have wiggle room between satisfactory and unsatisfactory that may relieve some of that perfectionist anxiety.

The satisfactory and unsatisfactory grading system really stresses me out. The idea is ok but, I would much rather see an actual grade on my assignments to see where I am at with grades. The tokens are also stressful just knowing that you can use them but also have all of them gone if something comes up.

Personally I do not like the grading system for the course. I do not find it to be a fair grading system. The amount of time and effort that needs to be put into the assignments/ at home weekly assignments is a lot to be getting unsatisfactory. It is difficult to do weekly assignments on new material and being able to get it all 100% percent. I think a letter grading scale would be better.

# Personal Benefits and Drawbacks

## **Benefits**

- Reduction in grading bias
- Accommodates different personal and academic learning challenges
- Tokens gave students autonomy and allowed me to grade
- Grades reflected mastery of course objectives

## **Drawbacks**

- Caused some students to stress more about grades
- Didn't anticipate all "what ifs"
- Time issues...

# A Word about Time

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- Time-intensive
  - Converting syllabi
  - Re-thinking rubrics
  - Email updates until students understand process
  - Re-grading revisions, late work
  - Tracking tokens (until I created a form)
  - Worrying about students who were choosing a D
- Time-saving
  - Grading assignments
  - End of the semester: count-and-match (Was unaware of “schema grading” in Blackboard until recently)



# Wrap Up:

With your partner, imagine a conversation with either Morgan or Jordan about specs grading as an option for addressing the teaching challenges addressed in their scenario.

## **Morgan**

- Morgan's course evaluations and anecdotal evidence from students reflect that Morgan is a good teacher but students have reported grading to be "unfair" and "inconsistent." While one student might earn an A- on a written assignment, another may earn a B+ similar work. Recently, a student met with the department chair to report that Morgan is giving lower grades to non-native English speakers and students of color.

## **Jordan**

- Jordan teaches 100-level courses that serve as prerequisites in many disciplines. Faculty colleagues have started to express concern that students with As and Bs in Jordan's courses are not able to demonstrate basic functions in their courses.

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