Shorten grading time: Using specifications (specs) grading in a writing intensive course

Cara R. Lawson, M.S.
Graduate Research Assistant
Department of Agricultural Education and Communications
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
Phone: (806) 742-2880
Email: cara.lawson@ttu.edu

Haylee Lindsey, M.S.
Program Manager, Institutional Effectiveness and Compliance
Division of eLearning & Academic Partnerships
Texas Tech University
Box 45095
Lubbock, TX 79409
Phone: (806) 834-6429
Email: haylee.lindsey@ttu.edu

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Introduction / Need for Innovation

Evaluation is a key component of the teaching and learning process (Bloom, 1956) and instructors spend a great deal of energy and effort to provide students with feedback in hopes of improvement in future work (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005). While faculty and staff find enjoyment and reward in working with students, many struggle to manage time when it comes to grading. It is not uncommon for those in higher education to express feelings of dissatisfaction with the grading process (Crisp, 2007). Negative feelings associated with grading can amplify when previously corrected mistakes continue (MacDonald, 1991). Grading writing assignments can be especially time consuming due not only to the length of assignment, but also the tedious nature of correcting writing mistakes and providing explanations.

The aim of specs grading is to reduce time and stress associated with evaluation, shift responsibility to students earning rather than receiving grades, and decrease conflict between teacher and student by using rubrics with detailed standards for either passing or failing an assessment (Nilson, 2015). Huba and Freed (2000) indicated a hallmark of learner-centered teaching involves the learner's understanding of characteristics of high-quality work. Specs grading is designed to lower student confusion and stress pertaining to assignments, and encourage high quality work by removing the opportunity for partial credit (Nilson, 2015).

How it Works

Specs grading assesses whether student work meets certain specifications or requirements (Nilson, 2015). When grading using a specs approach, work meeting or exceeding specifications earns full credit, while work not meeting the specifications receives no credit. In this case, specs grading was applied to one assignment in an online scientific writing course at Texas Tech University. Students were instructed to watch a video about modern animal agriculture practices then write a short journal entry. Journaling was selected because it helps gather insights about student attitudes (Robinson, 1995) and enhances critical thinking, challenges perspectives, and provides a practical way to understand content (Heimstra, 2001).

The instructor created a rubric that clearly outlined five characteristics of a satisfactory assignment, and five characteristics of an unsatisfactory assignment. To receive a satisfactory grade, students needed to have no more than five issues with grammar, spelling, and punctuation, no unclear sentences, his or her name on the assignment, between 75 and 100 words, and submit a Word or PDF file of the assignment. If each of these standards was met, the student received the full 25 points associated with the assignment. If any of these specifications were not met, grading stopped, and the student received zero points on the assignment. Within the assignment description posted online, students were informed assignment grading was different than in the past and were encouraged to carefully review the rubric for grading criteria. Students were also informed of the grading and assignment details via a weekly announcement email. Students were encouraged to ask questions about the rubric or assignment. A second email was sent later in the week to remind students of the different grading structure.

Specs grading also allows for flexibility and second chances after student work has been graded. Students were informed if their first attempt on the assignment resulted in an unsatisfactory

score, they would be given the chance to correct and resubmit their work for a chance at full credit. The instructor individually emailed each student who did not earn full points with directions on how to resubmit if desired. This was one of the final projects due in the semester and worth relatively few points overall. Instructors selected this timing as it was assumed most of the students had learned proper writing based upon a broad range of previous assignment feedback. Additionally, the assignment was selected for specs grading because the low number of points associated with the assignment was assumed to lessen student anxiety.

Results to Date / Implications

For comparative purposes, a journal response assignment with similar instructions was required the week following the specs graded assignment. The two graders for the course both said they spent significantly less time grading the specs assignments. Specs grading generally takes less time than traditional grading (Nilson, 2015). The grader reviews only certain features of the assignment, allowing less time spent determining partial credit and writing detailed justifications.

While official data were not collected from the students, none asked questions regarding the assignment or rubric. This may suggest the students paid greater attention to assignment details. For example, on the specs graded assignment more students put their names on their assignment than the traditional assignment, despite being a requirement on each rubric. For the writing prompt graded using specs, all 49 students submitted an assignment. Seven of 49 students did not meet the specs of writing prompt one, but four of those seven did successfully resubmit the assignment and earned a satisfactory grade. For writing prompt two, which was graded using the traditional way, 47 of 49 students submitted an assignment by the due date. While the majority of students received full-points on both assignments ($n = 30$), 17 students scored better with specs grading than with traditional grading.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Specs grading will be used again in future writing courses. However, this approach is not appropriate for every assignment. In the future, more detailed student feedback will be solicited to better understand student perceptions and attitudes pertaining to specs grading. While specs grading appears to have benefits in this case, instructors should be cognizant of other factors associated with the students and the structure of assignments in general. This form of grading can induce student anxiety, instructors must be mindful of this threat and implement safety-net strategies to help students perform at a high level. Lastly, the timing of using specs grading is important. Instructors should consider their students' knowledge levels and abilities to meet the specifications set. Using specs grading on assignments later in the semester are suggested.

Costs / Resources Needed

In order for specs grading to be effective, students must understand the specifications for which they are being evaluated (Nilson, 2015). Therefore, communication is the most important resource involved with specs grading. Detailed rubrics are key and serve as a sort of check-list as students complete their assignments. Additionally, a comprehensive communication plan is required in order to inform students of the grading structure. Finally, instructors must also create a safety-net plan for those students who do not initially meet the required specifications. No monetary costs are associated with specs grading.

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