

Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning Podcast Series

Season 7, Episode 5: Ready to Find Out What Research Tells Us about Grading and Grade Inflation? Buckle Up! with Josh Eyler

Center for Teaching and Learning, Columbia University

[00:00:00] **Catherine Ross:** Hello and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the center's executive director. As a quick reminder for our listeners, in this podcast series, we are exploring dead ideas in teaching and learning.

[00:00:25] In other words, ideas that are widely believed, though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors. In connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called the "tyranny of dead ideas."

[00:00:39] Welcome, everybody. I'm speaking today with Dr. Joshua Eyler, the University of Mississippi Teaching Center Director and notable author. Josh is the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Director of Think Forward Quality Enhancement Plan at the University of Mississippi, where he is also Clinical Assistant Professor of Teacher Education. He previously worked on teaching and learning initiatives at Columbus State University, George Mason University, and Rice University.

[00:01:12] He is the author of the book, *How Humans Learn, the Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching*, which came out in 2018, and which Book Authority named one of the 100 best education books of all time, not just of that year, but of all time. It was also named a book of the year in the Chicago Tribune.

[00:01:36] His forthcoming book, *Scarlet Letters, How Grades Are Harming Children and Young Adults, and What We Can Do About It*, through Johns Hopkins University Press is about one of the most urgent issues in education

today, grading and alternative assessment. Welcome Josh to our Dead Ideas podcast. I'm thrilled to be talking with you today.

[00:02:02] **Joshua Eyler:** Thank you, Catherine. I'm excited to be here. I love this podcast, and I'm excited to be on this episode.

[00:02:08] **Catherine Ross:** As most of our listeners likely know by now, this whole season we've been unpacking systems and systemic changes that are needed to improve higher ed teaching and student learning, but one major system that we have not yet discussed is that of grading and all its attendant dead ideas like grade inflation, anybody? So, when I saw Josh's LinkedIn post on this topic, um, originally written as a rebuttal to an article in the Chronicle of Higher Ed, I knew immediately that this was a conversation that we really needed. So, Josh, I want to dive in here, so I'll get right to question one. So, in your LinkedIn post, you say, and I'm quoting here, "grade inflation is a monster that is often trotted out by folks who wish that grades were objective, accurate measures for both learning and rigor in the course. They're neither." End of quote. So I want to, there's a lot to unpack in these few words here. So let's start with the grades first. How is it that grades, which are the foundation of our entire system of ranking students for admission, degrees, scholarships, internships, jobs, you name it, pretty much everything, are not objective? I'm, I'm guessing some people are going to be really surprised to hear this.

[00:03:37] **Joshua Eyler:** So grades are not and have never been objective measures of learning. In fact, there is this really brilliant series of articles from the 1910s, shortly after the A through F system was invented, that was basically throwing up all the red flags and saying we have to stop this before it goes too far.

[00:03:57] We're not measuring anything meaningful with this kind of system. So it's been, this kind of conversation and this, uh, this critique of grades as measurement goes back over a hundred years. But, um, so by definition, really grades are truly subjective kinds of evaluation metrics. And by that I simply mean that grades are determined usually by a single individual through criteria created by that individual to evaluate assignments and activities also developed by that same individual. So it is truly subjective. The subject, the instructor is creating all of the criteria that are used to, uh, create the grading system, right? That is not in any way to say that the judgments made by that faculty member are not expert judgments. I'm not saying that at all. Of course they are, but they are subjective rather than objective. Um, to go further, uh, a little bit further with this, one of my favorite papers on grades is called *A Century of Grading Research* and it was published in Review of Educational Research in 2016. It's

Susan Brookhart and Tom Guske and really an all-star cast of grading researchers and they, they literally, as the title suggests, dig into a hundred years worth of research on grades.

[00:05:22] And they, uh, they end with this statement. I'm going to read this direct quote because I think it's so powerful. "Grades, therefore, must be considered multidimensional measures that reflect mostly achievement of classroom learning intentions and also, to a lesser degree, student's efforts at getting there. Grades are not unidimensional measures of pure achievement, as has been assumed in the past or recommended in the present. Although measurement experts and professional developers may wish grades were unadulterated measures of what students have learned and are able to do, strong evidence indicates that they are not."

[00:06:02] Now, I'm not sure exactly why professional developers get thrown under the bus in that last statement, but I think it's a very powerful, uh, it's a very powerful statement, uh, getting exactly to this issue of grades as objective measurements. The research that we have, uh, suggests, and then I would even go further, demonstrates that they are not that. And I want to just unpack that statement a little bit, um, because what they're saying is that they reflect mostly achievement of classroom learning intentions and also student's efforts at getting there. So that's an important piece of this puzzle. What do they mean by classroom learning intentions?

[00:06:42] That is really nothing more than a goal that I as the instructor set for the learning in the course, my intention for student learning. So if I'm teaching a writing course, it may be my intention for student learning that they learn how to develop well-crafted introductions, right? That is a learning intention.

[00:07:02] And so a grade that I would give would measure how, how successful I believe students are at meeting that learning intention. So their effort at getting there, and their ability to match up to the criteria that I myself have established for that particular element of the course. But if that student were to take the writing course next door by my colleague, they would face different learning intentions, different criteria for meeting those learning intentions, different assignments altogether that would supposedly demonstrate, uh, efforts to get there. And so the, uh, getting a particular grade in my class, a B, say, would not be the same as getting a B in that colleague's class or any colleague's class. It is truly subjective, but higher education has set a veneer of objective, uh, of objective measurement over grades as a way to defend itself against, uh, the, the very issues that we're talking about right now, because if grades are subjective how can we ever say uniformly, right, that, uh, that what

students are doing in a classroom is evidence of X, Y, or Z, uh, learning intentions, right? So I think this has been a shield that higher ed has used to defend many of its harmful practices.

[00:08:26] **Catherine Ross:** Oh, I love, I love that. And I love the history. Thank you for that piece. Um, I'm going to keep. There's a lot I'd love to, like, just dig into, but I, there's so much more we need to talk about here. Um, I want to go back to the quote again, because you started with, um, five very interesting words. "Grade inflation is a monster. That is often trotted out by folks who wish that their grades were objective," which is what we just discussed. Um, and then you, further on, you had another quote about grade inflation where you said, "Also, those who lead with the specter of grade inflation are really trying to imply that high grades mean lower standards rather than more learning, and that's not true either." So, grade inflation happens to be a very favorite dead idea of mine, so we're going to take this in two parts. Um, the term grade inflation been used for many years, I believe, to promote the idea, and I think um, you said this as well, that, uh, instructors aren't being rigorous enough in their expectations of their students, um, but as far as I could see from where I sit, and I haven't investigated quite as thoroughly as you have, um, there's actually no way to know if grade inflation is real, given what you just described, that individual instructors all have individual parameters and individual ways of thinking about the goals for learning and individual ways of putting some kind of ranking on students ability to, to meet those goals.

[00:10:12] And we can't know what all those grades mean, right? And they also, I think, sometimes, correct me if I'm wrong, but many times grades include things that are totally unrelated to learning, like coming to class on time, or, um, turning your papers in, meeting deadlines, right, or some kind of participation expectations. Those get worked into grades as well, and they don't necessarily demonstrate learning, right? So can you walk us through this, uh, monster of of a dead idea. Um, I'm sure you have a lot to add to my objections.

[00:10:52] **Joshua Eyster:** Well, and I think those were perfectly stated too. I think that those are primary issues with the idea of great inflation. But I call it a monster because I do think it is actually a really damaging dead idea in teaching. Um, and it's based on a mythology and the mythology goes something like this, that in order to demonstrate that students have learned something, there needs to be a grade attached to it. And part two of that myth is, uh, is that In order to show that your class, uh, that your course, that your assignments, that your, that the, that the set, that you're set up for this is rigorous, there has to be a lot of low grades, right? So let's take both of those apart. The first one that in order to demonstrate someone has learned something, there has to be a grade.

I think that is fundamentally flawed assumption because you can, you can, show someone that they have learned something simply through feedback. You do not need an A, B, C, D, or F to tell someone or to teach someone that they've learned something, you simply need to give them feedback. Yes, you have achieved this, uh, you have mastered this particular concept, uh, or, you know, you, you probably need to look closer at X, Y, or Z, right? You do not need a grade to do that. And, you know, the, the myth that has been spread about that I think has been the hardest, uh, obstacle to push against for grading reform. Uh, but the second part of that myth, that in order to demonstrate that your class is rigorous, you have to have a lot of low grades, I think is equally damaging. Because it assumes that high grades mean that, that learning is not taking place. When I think in reality, and, and I, I know you've mentioned this too, Catherine. In reality, uh, it could just be also the case that a lot of high grades means that students are learning quite a lot in the class and they're succeeding at reaching the goals. But those who, uh, put forth grade inflation as a problem to be sold never buy into that argument. They wholesale commit themselves to the myth that rigor must equal low grades.

[00:13:08] And, um, that, that I think has not only repercussions for the grading debate, but it has a lot of damaging ripple effects for the students who are in those courses. Um so I think that this is something that we really need to think carefully about. And honestly, what I would throw back at, uh, at those who, um, are invested in this debate, if you really want to talk about great inflation, let's talk about the, the damaging inflation that happens when grades are curved, uh, that those who are in courses where grades are curved, and I'm talking about all kinds of curves, uh, know that they have not learned what they need to learn to master the material, but the curve inflates their grade. just so that they, just so that the instructor can say, well, I'm giving you a lifeboat here. You haven't met my goals, but, uh, but I'm going to, I'm going to inflate your grade anyway. So if we really want to talk about inflated grades, let's look at curves and all the harms that curves can cause to students, particularly those students who come from, uh, who have prior educational backgrounds that have given them opportunity gaps when they get to higher education, who have not learned the game of curves the way students from higher resource schools, uh, have. And so, not only are you artificially inflating those grades with the curve, but you are damaging the students who need the most support in the process.

[00:14:42] **Catherine Ross:** Wow, yes, curving is, yeah, I'm, I've tried to fight it for years, but it's very, very hard to convince people that there's a problem with it, right? And as you said, I think one of the biggest problems with it is that it perpetuates, you know, whatever students come in with, that's what they're going to end up with, right? So you're just perpetuating the status quo. You're not actually helping students learn. And it's another sign, as you said, that

grades don't necessarily reflect on learning. I was also struck by the You know, I, we agree totally on this that, um, having a lot of low grades is, is definitely not a sign of rigor, but you know, it's kind of echoes the way, um, when universities are ranked, the most selective schools, the ones who turn down the most students, um, get higher rankings than the ones who accept a lot of students. It's a sort of similar system, right, where you're, um, you're gatekeeping, you're trying to weed people out who don't belong, um, and it's quite toxic. So, um, I'm really glad you called that out.

[00:15:59] **Joshua Eyler:** I was going to say, I think the culture of evaluation permeates every aspect of higher education. And so the rankings that you're talking about are a great example of that.

[00:16:07] **Catherine Ross:** Yeah, and you know, I've seen a lot of, um, articles in the past year or two about how students have become so transactional. And I think, well, let's hold the mirror up to ourselves. Who's making it transactional, right? And grading is part of that transaction, right? So, um, I think the other, you sort of, you already kind of touched on this that, um, about the connection between, um, grades and standards, um, and that, uh, grade inflation does not mean that we have lower standards. And I couldn't help but But think about how those of us who work in these universities trying to work with instructors to promote practices that do help all students learn and create more equity in the learning environments on our campuses. If we're successful and those instructors that we work with are successful, we should see, and this is documented in the research, right, a dramatic reduction in DFW rates. So, is that going to then be called grade inflation? Because now we're not failing enough students, right? Or we don't have enough students dropping out? But if the point of education is to teach and we become better and better teachers, then shouldn't more of our students be getting A's and B's? Like, why is that a shock to people? Aren't we failing our job if we give a lot of C's? And no A's.

[00:17:55] **Joshua Eyler:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more with you, Catherine. Absolutely. Um, so the institutions are sending a message that we have to, we have to minimize those DFW rates. Uh, but there are people who will say that then, uh, we are inflating grades and not doing our job of gatekeeping and, and, uh, you know, um, cultivators of rigor. So I definitely agree with you there. And it's, uh, those two goals, I think, or those two positions. are really butting heads. Um, but yeah, so when, let, if we go back to just curving, for example, uh, when I see a lot of low grades on an exam, I don't think students haven't learned well. I think it's a flawed exam or they haven't been given the conditions under which they can learn well. Right. That to me is not a sign of rigor. It does not demonstrate what those who are at, who are arguing for grade inflation or that

grade inflation exists, say that low grades are demonstrating. Right. And I think the same thing of, you know, larger course grades that if we have a lot of students who are getting D's and F's, that is not um, that is not a badge of honor. That is not a way of saying I have done my job to keep my discipline, uh, you know, safe and secure. That, that is an indication that that course was not designed with learning in mind. Because if it was, if there were effective teaching practices employed, if there was course design, uh, inclusive course design being used there, you would not, you simply would not see that kind of grading breakdown. Now, there are always students who need more, uh, more support. There are always students who have life events come up. Uh, but, but the, the range of unproductive grades or failing grades should be, if our, if we are serious about the goals that we are articulating for learning, those grades should be a very small percentage of the overall grades that are given in the course. And it's hard for me to see how you could argue otherwise.

[00:20:01] **Catherine Ross:** Right. And that's why, I mean, I was so happy when the Boyer Commission report came out last year. I think it was last year. Um, and they said that what needs to change in higher education is that we need to define excellence in terms of equity rather than selectivity and sorting. And I thought that was the first time I've seen a major organization calling out this very thing that, that you just described.

[00:20:28] Okay, we got more questions coming up.

[00:20:30] **Joshua Eyler:** Good, bring them on.

[00:20:32] **Catherine Ross:** So, um, another quote from your, your rebuttal, um, you said, "The thing that gets me most about this essay is that the author is suggesting the only way to combat possible cheating..." and this was with AI, right, the influence of AI, "is to double down on a system of extrinsic reward that incentivized cheating in the first place. It does, this just doesn't make sense." And what the author was saying was that we have to, um, get rid of great inflation and grade harder. Right. To motivate students not to cheat. That was so hard for me to parse. I, I couldn't really figure out where to start. So, um, and this whole idea that grades motivate learning is one of the original three dead ideas that Diane Pike noted in 2010. And when her, her white paper came out on this topic. So, um, it seems like it's just unkillable, that grades motivate learning, that dead idea. Um, so can you please share the research and your thoughts on this? So maybe we can just say once and for all, like, this, it's not true, people. Grades don't motivate learning.

[00:21:51] **Joshua Eyster:** Grades do not motivate learning, that is true. Um, now, I will, so there are a couple things I want to dive into here. One is the claim, the, the twisty pretzel logic of the author's claim that if you grade harder, suddenly students will not want to cheat, um, that all the research indicates, all the research I have seen indicates that the more you prioritize grades, which are true extrinsic motivators, the more you are creating an environment that actually incentivizes cheating. Why? Because the more emphasis you put on the reward or the prize, in this case, the grade, the greater the incentive to do whatever needs to happen to get the prize or the reward, right? And that's just basic psychology. It's basic behaviorism. Extrinsic rewards come out of the traditional psychology of behaviorism, that you can condition people, any animal, but people, to do whatever you want by giving them a reward for a particular behavior. And grades operate in very similar ways. And so if you if you really focus and double down on grades, you're just you're not doing what the author says will happen. You're actually creating a more you're creating more of an incentive. for students to cheat. Now it's not saying, I certainly, I personally don't believe that, that there's, um, large numbers of students out there just waiting to find opportunities to cheat. But I do know that, um, that the, that the author's, uh, the author's position is not helping matters any by trying to focus more. The first chapter of the, the book that I've finished, um, which is intended for kind of a wide audience of parents and educators and policymakers is about motivation and learning and how grades, uh, how grades stand in the way of that. And I will say that the research on motivation is is pretty messy. It's thorny. I have a great admiration for the folks who study this for a living, because it's it's it's very hard to untangle what we do know is that extrinsic motivators can work in certain situations. Again, it's basic behaviorism in educational settings, though they work that they can only function well for things that people do not want to do or find boring to do. That extrinsic motivators can get people to do things that they would otherwise not really choose to do on their own, right? And so grading, you know, grading attendance or grading participation or grades at all will, will get them to do the basic behaviors that you, that you are trying to get them to do, right?

[00:24:39] But if what we are most interested in is learning and the quality of the work that students are turning in, intrinsic motivation is, uh, is the way we do that, right? And so both motivators can work, but when we, we are interested in cultivating learning and quality, we have to develop intrinsic motivation for our students.

[00:25:03] There are all kinds of models for that, that we probably don't have time to get into today. But, um, there are ways that we can, uh, help students see the value for themselves in the material, uh, in the material that we are presenting. The, the last thing I'll say is the, the really tricky part of this is that,

um, there are some models like self determination theory, uh, of motivation that do show that you can begin being motivated extrinsically and it can morph into intrinsic motivation, right? So I'll give you one, uh, one possible example of this. Let's say I am taking an introductory physics course, not knowing anything about it. You know, I had, I'm terrified, petrified, but I know I need to, need to take it. I need to do well for my GPA. Um, then I find myself in that course, suddenly fascinated by Newton's laws. Right. And I, I find myself wanting to learn more and more about that just because I have discovered I'm interested in it. So it began with an extrinsic motivation, but then because of, uh, because of autonomy and interest, it becomes intrinsic motivation because I'm interested in.

[00:26:22] **Catherine Ross:** Which, um, actually would present a different solution than what was proposed in that article. Meaning, like you redesign your assignment to make it more intrinsically interesting to students by helping them see, giving them choice, giving them ways to bring themselves into the assignment in ways that are meaningful to them, to their goals for the course, their goals for their life. Right. So redesigning the assignment might be an easier solution than controlling grade inflation, I would say. So the next question I want to talk about is, um, related to rigor, also one of my favorite topics. I dedicated an entire season to unpacking rigor. As you noted in your remarks, you said, "As for rigor, we've had lots of rebuttals and even progressive reclamations of that term, but in terms of grades, we need to divorce the presumed connection between academic standards and grades. The idea that we would only know if someone learned something challenging because they received a particular grade is silly." So how would you envision a system that did not use grades to signify rigor, academic achievement, or learning that students have accomplished?

[00:27:51] **Joshua Eyster:** I love this question, and I love it because I, I don't have to imagine it, uh, because such a system actually exists, and in the book I feature Evergreen State in Washington, which is a gradeless college and has been since its inception in the 1960s.

[00:28:09] Um, and there are several of those, um, around the country. And so they have developed a system that's, um, that has every bit the same level of academic standards of any other College or university in the country, but they don't give grades at all. They have narrative transcripts that, uh, faculty devote a lot of time at the end of every term. They have shorter terms than, than most places, but at the end of every term, they, um, they take a whole week where they create long narrative feedback evaluations for their students. They meet with the students, they talk to them about it, and then a version of that feedback goes into the students transcript. So they use written and oral feedback to

communicate how students have made progress on the goals, where they have excelled, where they have developed mastery of concepts, where they still need to put in some more work. Um, everything that proponents of grades say that a grade communicates, they do with written and oral feedback.

[00:29:14] And what I would say is the students who go through a system like that, are much better able to communicate what they know and can do than those who just say, well, I got an A minus in intro to U. S. history, right? Um, and, and so a student at Evergreen or a college like it can say, well, here are the historical skills that I have developed. And I know this because, uh, I got this feedback directly from my faculty member. So I think that system does exist. It is rigorous. Um, at, uh, at events and talks and workshops that I do in grading, some people will ask me, do they, do those students still get into graduate school and medical school? And the answer is yes, of course, they do. Uh, and because, um, it, the grade itself is not the answer to the educational question that that we are asking here. It's the feedback and the interactions between the faculty member and the student that matter for the student to understand whether or not he shared that it has learned something.

[00:30:21] **Catherine Ross:** Right, but of course that pushes against the model of higher education where we put students in classes of 200 and 300 people because we don't really value teaching at the undergraduate level, you know, that's obviously not going to be feasible for those size classes, right? So we know it can be done, but it would require other huge systemic changes.

[00:30:45] **Joshua Eyler:** Absolutely, absolutely. So if we're envisioning a system, it exists, but what would need to change in other institutions. This is why I think you've seen a movement toward, uh, what some people are calling ungrading. I call it collaborative grading with linguistic interference. Um, but so I think that's a, an individual instructors answer to the question. How do you do this within your own classroom.

[00:31:14] **Catherine Ross:** Well, speaking of that, how do you do it in your own classroom? I'd love to hear more about your own grading policies and how you handle students expectations because sometimes students don't buy into these things either. They want the grade they want. That's what in their mind. That's what they're paying for. Right? I want the grade on my transcripts so I can go out and get that job.

[00:31:37] **Joshua Eyler:** That is absolutely right. And I don't blame them. I mean, they've been, uh, they've been conditioned for 12 years in a system that has told them the most important thing is getting good grades. So, I don't blame

them at all for that. It does present a challenge. So what do I do? I've been through lots of different models and sometimes I use different models for different contexts, but most recently I have been doing collaborative grading or, or ungrading. Um, and, uh, so a basic system where students do a lot of self assessment. I give a lot of feedback. And they, uh, they make a, an argument for what final grade they should get at the end of the semester. And we talk about that in a conference. Um, I adopted that model, like a lot of people, to push back on the very issues that we have been, uh, discussing here. Um, what I have found over the years that I've done it, though, is, uh, better ways to address the question you are asking. How do you help, uh, students to see, uh, the value of a system that questions the very nature of grades that they've grown up with? And so, um, a lot of, there has to be a lot of trust cultivated with students, and that's something that happens over the course of a semester. I found it useful to talk to them at the beginning of the semester about their experience with grades in the past, the ways it makes them feel, the, the options for doing things differently and why we will be doing what we're doing in the class. Um, I find it important to give them autonomy and give them agency and helping to develop some of the, the class policies and, and, um, some of the rubrics and things like that, that, that we're using, but I think the best lesson that I have learned for making sure that students feel empowered by this, but also that they are arguing for a grade that they feel best reflects their progress in the course is that though we start the semester talking about their own experience with grades, we end the semester by talking about what a grade signifies to external audiences. So what does a grade signify to their major advisor, to graduate schools, to future employers? So if you got an A in Writing 101, what, what would that signify? What do you think that would mean to a future employer or to a graduate school? And so we talk about both the inward and the outward facing ripple effects of grades and that has made those conferences that we have more nuanced at the end of the semester.

[00:34:12] **Catherine Ross:** That's so interesting because I interviewed a couple of undergraduate students. couple seasons ago about grades and what you just said reminds me that one of the students said, I finally had to realize that grades were not a measurement of me and who I am. They are something separate and they don't reflect on me as a person. And when I could divorce myself from seeing a grade as some kind of statement about me, it was much easier for me to worry less about the grades.

[00:34:50] **Joshua Eyler:** That's very insightful and absolutely right. I mean, again, the history of this. The, the A through F system was not adopted nationwide because people thought it was the best way to measure learning, it was adopted because it was an easy way to standardize and send and

communicate amongst institution. And so it really has never been about the students and it's always been about

[00:35:15] **Catherine Ross:** the systems.

[00:35:16] **Joshua Eyler:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:35:19] **Catherine Ross:** Oh my gosh. Well, thank you so much, Josh. I'm so grateful that you would come and chat with me this morning, um, in this, uh, fall season of Dead Ideas. Really appreciate it.

[00:35:32] **Joshua Eyler:** I really appreciate the invitation and it's been a fun conversation.

[00:35:39] **Catherine Ross:** If you've enjoyed this podcast, please visit our website where you can find any resources mentioned in the episode, ctl.columbia.edu/podcast. Please like us, rate us, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Dead Ideas is produced by Stephanie Ogden, Laura Nicholas, John Hanford, and Michael Brown. Our theme music is *In the Lab* by Immersive Music.