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*Insights for educators from the Center for Teaching and Learning*

March 2023

## Happy Spring Break!

It's hard to believe that finals and commencement are just around the corner. As you prepare for the excitement and inevitable chaos of the end of the semester, I hope this issue provides you with some useful tools and resources. Our main feature offers advice for demystifying grades. You'll also find opportunities for (paid) summer professional development and resources to share with your students as they prepare for the upcoming research conference.

If you have questions or an idea for future content, please reach out!

Sincerely,

[Rachel E. Johnson](#)

Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning

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## 1 – Podcast Recommendation

[Intentional Teaching](#) hosted by [Derek Bruff](#)

“Intentional Teaching is a podcast aimed at educators to help them develop foundational teaching skills and explore new ideas in teaching.”

Did you know that Centenary’s own [Scott Chirhart](#) was recently featured on [an episode](#) about the studio teaching model for introductory biology? Other notable episodes I’d recommend include: [The Hidden Curriculum with Anthony Jack and Missy Foy](#) and [AI Writing with Robert \(Bob\) Cummings](#).

Derek Bruff is a higher education consultant and the former long-time director of [Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching](#). He holds a Ph.D. in Mathematics.

## 8 – Ways to Demystify Grades

The “[hidden curriculum](#)” refers to unspoken traditions, social practices, and specialized knowledge for navigating higher education. Examples range from terminology like “Registrar” to complex institutional policies to classroom expectations. Students from historically marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately burdened with learning a new educational culture alongside new academic content. Grading is one area where instructors can make explicit the implicit and ease the transition to higher education.

### ***Include a visual representation of your grade calculation.***

Every syllabus provides a basic breakdown of how a student’s grade is calculated, often as a list of percentages or point values and their associated categories or assessments. Consider including a [simple pie chart](#) version of this same information. Some students may misinterpret frequent assignments as substantial assignments. For example, although students may take quizzes every week, those scores may only account for 10% of their overall grade. A visual representation can help set expectations and reiterate priorities for student learning.

### ***Clearly label and categorize assessments.***

As you guide students through the process of learning, it’s important to integrate both low-stakes (formative) and higher-stakes (summative) assessments into your course. Helping students recognize that formative assessments are designed to improve their learning through practice and feedback can [increase engagement and reduce anxiety](#). Try simple transparency measures like including learning outcomes on each assignment sheet and setting aside time to explain the learning trajectory of your course.

### ***Take advantage of the consistency and transparency of rubrics.***

Rubrics allow you to share criteria and use pre-defined ratings to offer feedback. [By creating a Canvas rubric](#) and [applying it to a specific assignment or assignment category](#), you can grade students’ work efficiently and consistently (all without leaving the LMS). Students will see their overall score and the rubric criteria and ratings you provided. This helps students understand what they’ve done well and areas for improvement. Pro-tip: Once you’ve built a rubric in Canvas, you can easily [migrate and reuse it](#) from class to class.

### ***Set up weighted grades in Canvas.***

Canvas uses “Assignment Groups” to organize grades in categories. You can create groups for different types of activities, different units or modules, or any other way that may be appropriate for your course setup and grading scheme. [Groups can then be weighted with different percentages to determine students’ final grades.](#) Why is this an advantage? You can

add unlimited assignments within a group without changing how much the group/category figures into the overall grade. Using weighted grades also allows you to use the Canvas “What If?” feature.

### ***Show students the Canvas “What If?” feature.***

The [“What If?” feature](#) allows students to input possible future grades to set goals and prioritize. A student can enter potential outcomes for outstanding assignments or categories to see how different levels of performance might impact their overall grade. If a student stumbles early on in your course, this tool can offer hope for academic recovery. If a student over-values performance on low-stakes assignments, this tool can demonstrate the importance of cumulative assessments. *Still learning Canvas?* Share an Excel [spreadsheet like this one](#) where students can independently [track and estimate grades](#).

### ***Provide examples with instructive commentary.***

During the transition to college, students encounter brand new assignments and course expectations. This is especially true with specialized forms of academic writing, research, and communication. Although instructors find terminology like annotation, attribution, or synthesis accessible, students can feel lost and unsure of how to demonstrate these skills. Help students understand your expectations by providing [exemplars alongside your own instructive commentary](#). Keep in mind, you don’t need to provide a full-length assignment sample. Just a few key skills in action can serve as a long-lasting teaching (and learning) resource.

### ***Revisit your syllabus throughout the course.***

It may seem obvious that a syllabus is a one-stop shop for information on grading, but remember: students usually take in multiple syllabi from multiple instructors in a very short period of time. It’s no surprise then that they forget or misremember details. *What are some solutions?* Show students elements of your syllabus multiple times throughout your course or ask students to retrieve information from it on a regular basis. Make your syllabus more accessible, searchable, and readable by [with intentional formatting and framing](#).

### ***Incorporate student reflection and feedback.***

*How do we learn more about and respond to students’ misconceptions about grades?* The easiest way is to encourage students to share their thoughts and questions before, during, and after an assignment. Take a few minutes when you introduce a new assignment to let students discuss requirements in small groups, develop questions, and share out. As students make progress on an assignment, offer a quick check in. Distribute index cards and ask students to write one thought to leave with you. After you’ve graded an assignment and shared feedback, [consider a quick reflective survey](#).

## 2 – Upcoming ACS Professional Development Opportunities

The [Associated Colleges of the South](#) (ACS) provides support for faculty research, teaching, and writing projects! Check out these great opportunities to connect with colleagues and knock something off your to-do list.

### *Summer Writing Accountability Group (WAG) Program*

“Join this ACS Summer Writing Accountability Group (WAG) Program if accountability, structure, and community sound like helpful writing assistants to you. Participants will be placed into multi-institutional groups that serve as mutual accountability partners throughout the summer. They will develop a personalized writing plan, establish and celebrate specific milestones as they chart their progress, cultivate a writing practice they can live with, talk through moments of feeling stuck, and share advice on all things writing. The program will be facilitated by Nancy Chick, Director of the Endeavor Foundation Center for Faculty Development at Rollins College. Participants who complete the accountability components of the program will receive **\$500 stipends.**”

To apply to participate, please email the following to [sfabritius@acsouth.edu](mailto:sfabritius@acsouth.edu) by April 17:

1. Name, title, institution, and contact information of applicant
2. Describe the writing you are hoping to complete through participation in this Writing Accountability Group Program.
3. What do you currently see as the primary barriers to your writing progress?

### *Call for Workshops and Working/Reading Groups*

The ACS “wants to facilitate **Motivation and Purposeful Work: Finding your Passion**. This can be interpreted in a number of ways – are you thinking about ways to help your students find the passion in their studies with you? If so, what are some pedagogical solutions that you can discover and use in the classroom? It might involve mentoring, or a different way of assessing learning. It might involve the gamification, or role-playing, or scenario-building or integration of more high-impact practices both in- and out-of-the-classroom. You might be thinking of how you can reinvigorate yourself in your own work as a teacher/scholar. How do you go about this? It might be that you need some colleagues to work together on writing or to participate in a reading group – either on books regarding motivation or other topics related to your field or to the pursuit of teaching or mentoring. Finally, you may be in the position of mentoring and/or supervising others – how can you help others find their passion in their work?”

See the additional attachment from the ACS for more information about how to propose or participate in a group!

## 5 – Resources to Prepare Students for the Research Conference

The [Centenary Research Conference](#) is fast approaching! If you have students presenting or attending, here are some great resources you can incorporate into your instruction or individual mentoring in the coming weeks.

### *What is an academic conference?*

Help students get to know the conventions and structures of an academic conference. These two plain language resources explain different terms and how to get the most out of attending and/or presenting.

[Academic Conferences 101](#) from the American Psychological Association

[Making the Most of a Conference](#) from the Columbia University Center for Career Education

### *How do I prepare for a poster presentation?*

This comprehensive, student-friendly guide contains poster samples and templates, advice for design and development, and general presentation tips.

[Guide to Creating Research Posters](#) from University of Texas at Austin Undergraduate Studies

### *How do I overcome anxiety about public speaking?*

Fear of public speaking is common, and students may need some extra support to overcome their anxieties. These two resources offer students strategies to build confidence and practice their skills before the big day.

[Anxiety Reduction Exercises](#) from the University of Tennessee Public Speaking Center

[Exercises for Speech Anxiety](#) from Stanford's Undergraduate Oral Communication Program

### *A little lagniappe...*

The Learning Commons is hosting an event on **April 13, 2023 at 12pm** to give students feedback and practice for public presentations. [Share this link](#) to invite your students.