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Ted J. Foster
Ohio University

Michael Smilowitz
University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Marilyn S. Foster
Ohio University

Lynn A. Phelps
Ohio University

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Some Student Perceptions of Grades Received on Speeches

***Ted J. Foster
Michael Smilowitz
Marilyn S. Foster
Lynn A. Phelps***

Frequent evaluation of student performances is the established practice in the basic speech communication course. Students are evaluated on their speaking performances, the outlines and other work they turn in, their attendance, quizzes, and examinations. Frequent evaluation is intended to enhance student learning through increased student motivation. One way frequent evaluation enhances student motivation is by encouraging students to keep up with the assigned readings in the text and the other assigned work in the course. A second way frequent evaluation enhances student motivation is by providing information to students about the quality of their work. Students are then able to make informed decisions about: (1) whether to maintain a given level of effort and thus maintain the grade that goes with it, or (2) to increase their effort and thereby to receive a higher grade, or (3) to reduce their effort and receive a lower grade. All of these expectations follow from the overall assumption that evaluation motivates students to do better work.

The literature on grading does not provide much information about the effects of grades on student motivation (Adelson, 1982; Cook, 1985; de Nevers, 1984; Dickson, 1984; Goldman, 1985; Gramling & Nelson, 1983; Hamby, 1983; Hamilton, 1980; Handleman, 1980; Kapel, 1980; Malehorn,

1984; McCormick, 1981; Nelson & Lynch, 1984; Oliphant, 1980; Spinelli, 1981; Suddick & Kelly, 1981-82; Theodory & Day, 1985; Tollefson, 1980; Watson, 1980; Weller, 1986; Williamson & Pier, 1985). The reason for this lack of information about the relationship between grades and student performance is not difficult to discover. Grades have been viewed by both students and faculty as far more objective than they could possibly be. Faculty, no matter what the appearance of their grade distribution, defend those distributions by claiming that their grades result from professional objective measurement. Both faculty members who give no grade below a B and faculty members who give few grades other than C, D, or F are quick to defend such distributions on the grounds of good teaching, objective measurement, student quality, nature of the subject, and so on. Students, too, characterize their own abilities according to objective grade reification so that the "B" students who make "C's" on papers or examinations are quick to approach the professor to discover the fault in the professor's evaluation system that led to assigning a "C" rather than a "B". Given the mutual, ostensibly objective orientation of both professors and students, it is not surprising that there has been little study of the effects of the evaluations called grades on motivation. If grades are perceived as objective and fair, then there would be no point in testing the effects of various grades since those effects would be, in an important sense, beyond the control of both students and instructors.

Since the reactions of students to grades has been little studied, the literature on performance evaluation provides a theoretical base for the effects of various grades on students (Anderson & Kida, 1985; Dawes & Corrigan, 1974; Ilgen & Favero, 1985; Izraeli, Izraeli, & Eden, 1985; Kipnis, Schmidt, Price, & Stitt, 1981; Kopelman, 1979; Meyer, Key, & French, 1965; Mowen, Keith, Brown, & Jackson, 1985; Murphy & Balzer, 1986; Myers, 1982; Pearce & Porter, 1986; Rice, 1985; Rogers, 1983; Sashkin, 1981; Tjosvold, 1985). To see whether

the assumptions that underlie the evaluations conducted in business and industry, parallel those employed in grading, recent studies of evaluation practices in business indicated that in business, evaluations are conducted because of essentially the same beliefs that lead to frequent evaluation in performance course in college. Employers believe that evaluations help motivate employees to keep up with their assigned job duties. They also believe that the evaluation will enable the employee to decide whether to continue, improve, or reduce effort in the areas evaluated. When connected to rewards such as merit pay, the basic beliefs in business and industry are almost identical to those in the academic world. The goal is for the relationship between performance and performance evaluation to be high and positive. Good performers should receive good evaluations and maintain their efforts and poor performers should receive poorer evaluations and be thereby motivated to increase their level of performance.*

This study was designed to discover how grades for speeches might affect motivation in preparing for future speeches. Educational institutions publish in their catalogs "meanings" of their grading designations. These "meaning tables" assume that students will adopt the meanings of the various grades as their own. There are, however, no good reasons to expect that students assign the same meanings that their teachers believe grades represent. During the seven class days of January 26 through February 3, 1988, students in one-half the 18 sections of the introductory public speaking

* There are two chief differences between business evaluation and academic evaluation. First, in business, evaluations occur with less frequency than do evaluations in the basic course classroom. Second, in business the relationship between the person evaluated and the evaluator may go on for four – even a lifetime; it does not end at the end of the term.

course were given a questionnaire about their instructors and their class as a part of a test of the effect of early evaluation teaching. Included in that questionnaire were three open-ended questions about a specific grade on a speech. More specifically, the study asks how students view specific grades in terms of their personal feelings about the grade, who they talk to about the grade and what they say, and the effect of the grade on the nature and amount of work they will do for their next assignment.

PROCEDURES

This study was designed to discover the kinds of feelings, immediate motivations, and long-term motivations students perceived as being associated with the 12 possible grades they might be given for their speeches at a medium sized mid-western university. The 12 possible grades are: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, and F. The questions about each grade were presented in the same way as in this example of the B+ grade:

You have received a grade of B+ on a speech you have given in class. Please answer each of the questions below.

- A. How would you feel about receiving such a grade?
- B. Who would you tell about receiving such a grade?
- C. How would that grade affect your preparation for the next speaking assignment?

For the sake of brevity, these questions will be referred to as Question A, Question B, and Question C throughout the rest of the paper when that is appropriate.

The classes were selected using a random procedure. The order in which the various grades were presented to students

was also determined by a random procedure. A minimum of 14 students responded to each grade while the maximum number of responses for one grade was 21. The average number of responses per grade was 17.

The exact response or the gist of the response, if the response was long and redundant, was recorded in each of the three categories for each of the twelve grades. The data contained in these protocols were reduced and analyzed in the following manner.

SCORING

There was no direct method of converting student responses to Questions A and B into a meaningful set of numbers. Independent interpretation of the comments by two judging panels widely separated by time in their judgments, produced de facto independent pools of scores best dealt with by independent statistical analyses. The answers to Question C led to straightforward score assignments requiring independent analysis of those answers to avoid mixing interpretative scoring with direct scoring. The procedure for assigning numerical values to the student answers to Questions A and B was similar, although the time between the two rating sessions was long enough (approximately 12 months) that the two common judges in each session would be unable to remember the ratings from the previous question.

Question A

Each of the responses to the question "How would you feel about receiving such a grade?" were assigned a random number and then sorted by that number into random order. A panel of three expert judges (faculty members with decades of experience in grading students and hearing student responses to those grades), rated each response on a five point scale from 1 "very negative feeling response" to 5 "very positive feeling response". In addition, each judge indicated the grade with which he/she thought the comment would be associated.

The average score for each comment was computed and used as the index of the degree of positive or negative affect of the statement. The comments were resorted back into the grade categories used to generate them, and the total average scores for each grade were computed to generate them, and the total average scores for each grade were computed to indicate the degree of positive or negative affect associated with that grade. This resulted in 12 categories, each with an independent sample of comments from a random sample of students in the public speaking course. After ascertaining that the variances of the groups were homogeneous and that there were no marked departures from normality in the sample, statistical analysis was performed by SPSS-PC using the simple random analysis of variance model followed with Tukey's test for between mean differences. The alpha level selected for all tests was $p < .05$.

Question B

Likewise, each of the responses to the question "Who would you tell about receiving such a grade?" were assigned a random number and then sorted by that number in order to

randomize the order in which the items appeared in the rating forms presented to the three judges. The panel of three expert judges (faculty members with an average of decades of experience in grading students and hearing student responses to those grades), rated each response in terms of whether it would be associated with improved performance on subsequent assignments. The scale used was a 5 point scale where 5 was the high score anchored with the statement, "Significantly increases the likelihood of improved performance," through the low score of 1 anchored with the statement, "Significantly decreases the likelihood of improved performance." In addition, each judge indicated the grade with which he/she thought the comment would be associated.

The average score for each comment was computed and used as the index of the degree of likelihood that the behavior described in the protocol would be subsequent speaking performance. The comments were resorted into the grade categories used to generate them, and the total average scores for each grade were computed to indicate the degree of positive or negative affect associated with that grade.

The result was 12 categories, each with an independent sample of comments from a random sample of students in the public speaking course. After ascertaining that the variances of the groups were homogeneous and that there were no marked departures from normality in the sample, statistical analysis was performed by SPSS-PC using the simple random analysis of variance model followed by Tukey's test for between mean differences. The alpha level selected for all tests was $p < .05$.

Question C

The responses to Question C, "What would you do to prepare for your next assignment," were straightforward, and fell into three categories. The responses indicated that the student would "relax" and prepare less, continue to prepare about the same as before or significantly increase preparation behaviors. These responses were scored 1, 2, and 3 respectively. In addition, the number of times students reported that they would consult the instructor before preparing their next speech were counted.

The result was 12 categories, each with an independent sample of comments from a random sample of students in the public speaking course. Statistical analysis was performed on SPSS-PC using the simple random analysis of variance model followed with Tukey's test for significance between mean differences. The alpha level selected for all tests was $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Question A

The F test (see Table 1) indicated overall significance ($p < .001$).

Table 1
Analysis of Variance Grades x Affect

Source of Variance	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	11	132.42	12.04	28.39	.001
Within Groups	184	78.02	.42		
Total	195	210.44			

A Tukey's Multiple-Range (see Table 2) test revealed the precise locations of differences between the group means that produced the significant F.

Table 2
Means of Grade Affect

Mean	Group	4	1	2	3	7	5	6	8	10	9	12	11
		D+	F	D-	D	C+	C-	C	B-	B+	B	A	A-
1.8444	D+	4											
1.9259	F	1											
2.0392	D-	2											
2.0526	D	3											
2.2222	C+	7											
2.2708	C-	5											
2.8148	C	6	*	*	*	*							
2.9259	B-	8	*	*	*	*							
3.5490	B+	10	*	*	*	*	*	*					
3.5641	B	9	*	*	*	*	*	*					
4.1556	A	12	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*			
4.2222	A-	11	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		

(*) indicates that pairs of means are significantly different $p < .05$

Figure 1 graphically portrays the relationships among the mean scores with respect to the various grades

The grades of A and A- while not significantly different in affect from each other or the grade of B, are significantly more positive than all the other grades. The grade B while not significantly different from A, A-, B+, B-, or C, is significantly different from C+, C-, D+, D, D-, and F. Because Tukey's pooled estimate variances are not constant from comparison to comparison, the grade B+ while not significantly different from A, A-, B, or B-, is significantly more positive than C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, or F. B- is more positive than the grades of D+ through F, though not significantly different from the grades above it. The negative affect associated with C+ is not different from C or C-, nor from any D or an F. C, however, is significantly different from the D's and F.

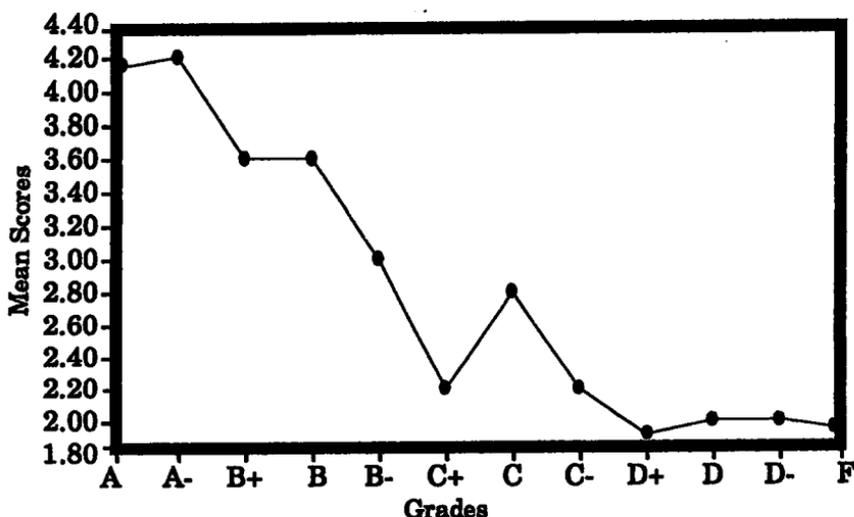


Figure 1. Question A Means

In short, affect scores on the grades seem to group them into three groups: Group I is comprised of A, A-, B+, B all of which are significantly more positive than all the C grades except C+ (with the exception that occurs when B is matched against C). Group II is comprised of B- and C, both of which are significantly less positive than most grades in Group I and more positive than the D through F grades. Group III is composed of C+ combined with the D's and F.

Question B

The overall F was significant (see Table 3) $p < .001$.

Table 3
Analysis of Variance Grades x Short-run Motivation

Source of Variance	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	11	26.44	2.40	6.17	.001
Within Groups	185	72.02	.39		
Total	196	98.46			

A Tukey's Multiple-Range (see Table 4) test revealed the precise locations of differences between the group means that produced the significant F.

Table 4
Means of Grade Short-run Motivation Strength

Mean	Group	12	11	10	2	8	9	4	5	3	6	7	1
		A	A-	B+	D-	B-	B	D+	C-	D	C	C+	F
2.59	A	12											
2.69	A-	11											
3.29	B+	10											
3.33	D-	2	*										
3.33	B-	8	*										
3.36	B	9	*										
3.56	D+	4	*	*									
3.56	C-	5	*	*									
3.65	D	3	*	*									
3.67	C	6	*	*									
3.69	C+	7	*	*									
3.82	F	1	*	*									

(*) indicates that pairs of means are significantly different $p < .05$

Figure 2 graphically portrays the relationships among the mean scores with respect to the various grades

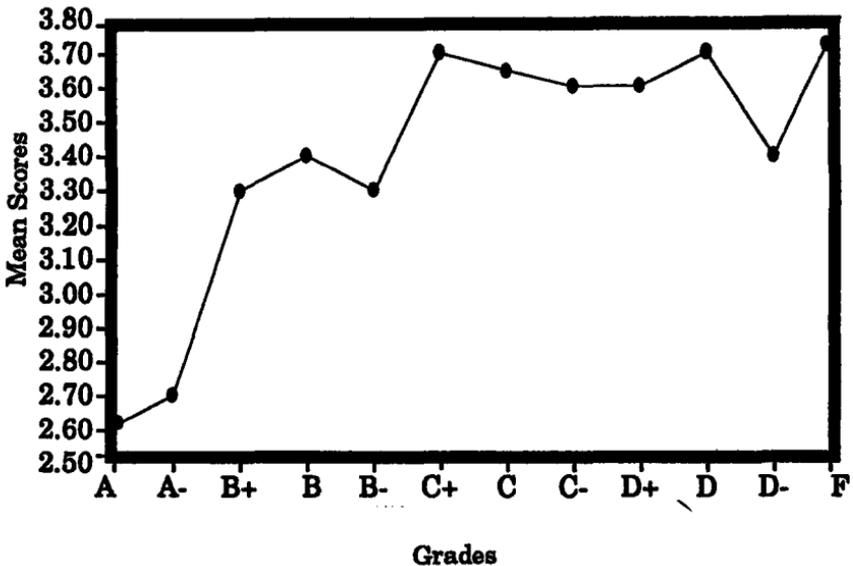


Figure 2. Question B Means

A and A- produced the lowest ratings on the likelihood of improved performance scale, 2.63, and 2.69, respectively. Nine grades produced significantly higher ratings than A, and six significantly higher ratings than A-. The order and strength of the deviations of the nine grades that differed significantly from A were: D- < B- < B < D+ < C- < D < C < C+ < F. The order and strength of the deviations of the six grades from A- were: D+ < C- < D < C < C+ < F. It appears that any grade below a B+ differs significantly in motivational effect from an A and that all varieties of C, the D, and the F differ significantly from the A-. In fact D- and B- are viewed as equally motivating in the sample while B is inferior to both in motivational impact though this effect appears when B is compared with A but does not when compared with A-. B's relationship to the B-, D-, A, and A- is intriguing, but probably due to sampling error. In the analysis in Question A, C+ produced strong negative affective responses. here C+

produces stronger motivational effects than any other grade except F.

Question C

After ascertaining that the variances of the groups were homogeneous and that there were no marked departures from normality in the sample, statistical analysis was performed by SPSS-PC using the simple random analysis of variance model followed with Tukey's test for between mean differences. The alpha level selected for all tests was $p < .05$. The overall F was significant (see Table 5) $p < .001$.

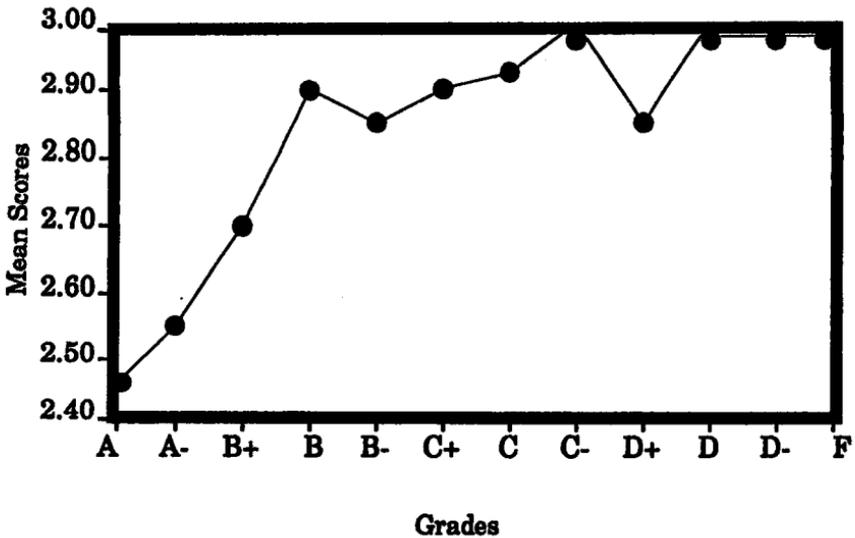
Table 5
Analysis of Variance Grades x Long-run Motivation

Source of Variance	D.F.	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	F Prob.
Between Groups	11	6.82	.62	5.17	.001
Within Groups	184	22.01	.12		
Total	195	28.83			

The Tukey's tests revealed that while the overall F was significant due to the comparatively large number of subjects, there were no significant differences among the various pairs of means. Nonetheless, the significant overall F makes it worth viewing the plot of the means (see Figure 3) prior to conducting further research on the affects of grades on students.

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**Figure 3. Question C Means**

Still, there was no evidence that students perceived any effect of the 12 grades on their longer-range plans for preparing their next assignment. The number of times students mentioned seeking help from instructors appeared to vary somewhat by grade, but a count of the number of times this was mentioned, revealed little actual difference. Grades at the lower end of the distribution produced statements 100 percent of which indicate the intention to work harder, while less than 100 percent indicate an intention to work harder when considering grades at the upper end of the distribution.

DISCUSSION

Question A: Feelings about Grades

Although many faculty may think that they are capable of identifying or classifying their students into as many as 12 meaningful groups, this study offers evidence that students do not necessarily accept those classifications and meanings (Gould, 1981). In terms of their feelings about grades they may receive on speeches, there are only good grades, acceptable grades, and poor grades. B+, C+, and D+, grades instructors might give to encourage the student to try for the next level seem to be interpreted by students as negative and unpleasant. Although the effect is most pronounced on C+, it is somewhat present with B+ and unquestionably present with D+, a grade that had more negative affect associated with it than F. The minus grades go in the opposite direction. Instructors may use them to indicate that work was not quite up to snuff, but student interpretation is that a miss of the lower grade is as good as a mile. A- is slightly better than A, B- beats all variety of C's by a sizable amount, and D- beats F and D+ and is much worse than D.

Question B: Short-term Motivation

The principal finding is that when grades are unacceptable plans directed toward enhanced preparation procedures are significantly increased. Conventional beliefs about rewards and punishments point toward a "U" shaped relationship, with motivation at high levels at both ends of the distribution. People receiving high grades should be motivated to maintain them and people receiving low grades

should be motivated to raise them, while those in the middle should have the least motivation. When the answer to this question and to Question A are considered together, they appear to point, instead, toward an initial threshold that begins with the first grade below the B range, C+. The exception appears to be the B and D- grade when A is the level of comparison, but when A- is the comparison level, then all grades below B- (C+ through F) support the idea of a threshold. Once that threshold is passed, then unhappiness increases as do the plans to take appropriate action. Although the relationship between the degree of unhappiness produced by C+ and the grades below it is not linear, the motivational effects are linear, at least when contrasted with the A-. Still, it would appear that the basic course instructor who gave grades in the C range could expect that the students receiving those grades would plan to expend greater efforts on the next assignment.

Question C: Long-term Motivation

The responses to Question C are consistent with the responses to Question B, and support the idea that the grades with maximum motivational effects seem to be the lower grades.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this study dispels the myth that student reactions to grades on their speeches correspond to what instructors may intend in giving those grades. It also runs contrary to myth that higher grades are as much or more motivating than lower grades. It further suggests that grades on

performances do have potential motivational impact, and that this impact is far less differentiated than the variety of grades used by instructors. There is good reason to further explore student reactions to grades received on their work on oral performances in basic communication courses as well as explore the effect of grades on other forms of student work. In a broader sense, it may be important to determine whether the "good," "ok," and "poor," trichotomy that operated in response to Question A, carries over to the world outside Universities. And it may be equally valuable in the future to determine whether the "Good Grades - Bad Grades" dichotomy that operated in response to Questions B and C, carries over to the world outside universities. Does business care about the difference between 3.25, 3.10, and a 2.77 grade point average on a 4.00 scale, or is it only graduate programs that would be inclined to distinguish between people that basis?

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