

# The Role of Reflection in the Culture of Grading: A University Experience in Formative Assessment

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the role of pedagogical reflection as a strategy to challenge the dominant grading culture in Chilean higher education. Conducted within a peer-support teaching program at a university in south-central Chile, the re-search uses a qualitative case study approach to analyze the experience of a faculty member in a Health Sciences program. Data were collected through classroom observations and a semi-structured interview, focusing on student participation in both graded and non-graded activities. Findings reveal a strong dependence on grading as a source of extrinsic motivation, which limits en-gagement in formative tasks. However, when reflective practices were intro-duced at the beginning of lessons, students exhibited increased attention, in-trinsic motivation, and meaningful learning. The reflections enabled connec-

tions between academic content and students' personal and professional experiences, fostering critical thinking and self-regulated learning. The results suggest that, even in assessment contexts dominated by grades, pedagogical reflection can serve as a transformative tool to promote deeper engagement and shift classroom culture toward a more formative and process-oriented approach. While the findings are not generalizable, they highlight the potential of reflection to support the implementation of authentic and competency-based assessment practices in higher education.

**Keywords:** Formative assessment, Grading culture, Pedagogical reflection.

## 1. Introduction

This research takes place within a peer-teaching support program at a university in south-central Chile, in a context dominated by a grading culture, where passing takes precedence over learning. In the Chilean educational system, grades determine academic trajectories from primary through higher education [1], prioritizing outcomes over processes and devaluing learning as an experience [2, 3].

From early schooling, standardized tests like SIMCE reinforce this logic by impacting funding and institutional prestige [4], while in secondary education, grades determine access to benefits and university admission. This promotes extrinsic motivation based on rewards [5, 6], in contrast to the competency-based approach in higher education, which values process and the development of transferable skills [7].

Authentic assessment proposes contextualized tasks [8], aligned with situated learning [9], although its implementation faces obstacles in environments dominated by the logic of grading [10, 11].

In this scenario, pedagogical reflection becomes relevant due to its potential to foster intrinsic motivation [12], critical thinking [13], learning transfer [14], and student engagement [15, 16]. This study analyzes the impact of the grading culture and the potential of pedagogical reflection to strengthen formative assessment practices in university education [17].

## 2. Method

This study is framed within a qualitative approach, aimed at understanding the meanings and dynamics of formative assessment, as well as the effect of reflection in strengthening intrinsic motivation in the context of non-graded tasks. To this end, the experiences and perceptions of participants are analyzed [18], ensuring methodological rigor and research quality [19]. Specifically, a case study design is adopted [20], focusing on a peer support program among university faculty.

### Context of the Participants

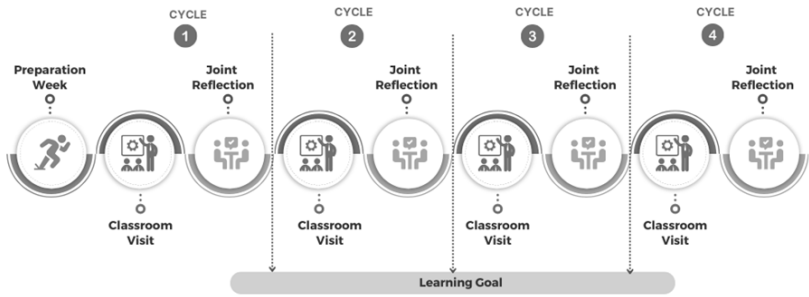
The study was conducted in a required course within a degree program at the Faculty of Health Sciences, with a regular attendance of 15 students and three 80-minute sessions. The observed classes were previously agreed upon with the instructor, prioritizing those that featured differentiated experiences of formative and graded assessment—a relevant criterion in qualitative and case study research, which aims to explore phenomena in depth [21]. The participant was a faculty member with nearly 15 years of experience in university teaching, who voluntarily requested to participate in the peer-support program.

### Data Collection Technique

Data collection was carried out in two stages. First, non-participant observation was conducted through field notes, which allowed for the documentation of classroom dynamics without intervention [22]. This observation covered three consecutive sessions and helped identify patterns related to formative assessment and student participation. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview was conducted, designed based on the emerging themes from the field notes [23], with the aim of exploring the instructor's perception of formative assessment strategies in greater depth. The interview guide was peer-reviewed to ensure clarity and coherence [24].

The data collection process was structured around key milestones of the Peer Tutoring Program, as illustrated in the following diagram:

**Fig. 1.** Structure of the Peer Support Program Milestones



Source: Montenegro et al. (in press)

This methodology allowed for a progressive follow-up of the strategies, facilitating comparison between sessions and the analysis of their impact. The process began with a preparatory week during which observation dates and areas of focus—participation and assessment—were defined. Then, work cycles were carried out, each consisting of a classroom visit followed by a joint reflection session with the instructor to provide feedback on the class. At the end of each cycle, a learning goal was established, defined by the instructor as an action to strengthen her teaching practice.

## Data Analysis Procedure

The data from the field notes were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The interview was transcribed and coded with the support of ATLAS.ti (version 23), identifying emerging categories that allowed for an understanding of the relationship between grading culture and formative assessment.

## Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Director of Teaching Development at the Academic Vice-Rectorate of the Universidad Autónoma de Chile,

ensuring compliance with fundamental ethical principles. Informed consent was obtained from both the instructor and the students, guaranteeing the voluntary nature, confidentiality, and privacy of the collected data. Additionally, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

### 3. Results

The results will be organized according to the progress made in each of the observed cycles.

#### Cycle 1: Pre-reflection Strategy

##### Classroom Visit

The field notes allowed for the identification of two central themes: (1) attitude toward assessment and (2) teaching strategies to promote participation. Regarding attitude, a strong dependence on grading is evident before starting any activity, expressed in phrases such as “Professor, is this graded?” (E3, 2024) or “Give points for the test” (E6, 2024). When the activity is not graded, motivation decreases, leading to distractions such as phone use or unrelated conversations. In response, the instructor resorts to incentives linked to grades: “Whoever finds a specific part under the microscope will receive a grade of 7” (P1, 2024), achieving an immediate response. Regarding participation, a lecture-based methodology predominates, with passive students who either take notes or disconnect with their phones.

What was observed is summarized in the following table:

**Table 1.** Matrix of Emerging Categories from the Field Notes

| Category                           | Subcategory               | Textual Code                                                                                | Description                                                       |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Attitudes toward Assessment</b> | Dependence on grades      | “Is this graded?”                                                                           | Grading is key to student motivation.                             |
|                                    | Relaxation without grades | ““When mentioning it’s not graded, a sense of relaxation is noticeable among the students.” | Without grades, students relax and participate more.              |
| <b>Teaching Strategies</b>         | Lecture-based methodology | “An expository methodology is observed, where students use their phones.”                   | Lecture-based classes reduce interaction and increase device use. |
|                                    | Use of incentives         | “Whoever finds a specific part under the microscope will receive a grade of 7.”             | Incentives improve engagement in practical activities.            |

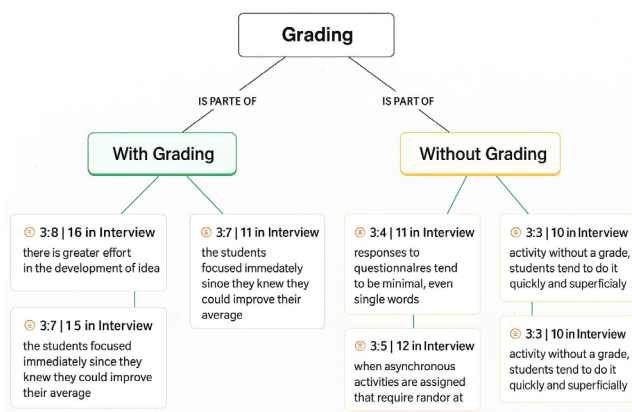
Source: Own elaboration

Joint Reflection

The interview analysis allowed for a deeper exploration of the themes observed in the classes, particularly regarding formative assessment and students’ attitudes toward it. The instructor acknowledges a strong dependence on grading, which hinders student engagement when activities are not graded, acting as a barrier to implementing formative assessment processes.

As shown in Figure 2, the instructor notes that students’ attitudes vary significantly depending on the presence or absence of grading: *“When an activity is presented without a grade, students tend to complete it quickly and superficially, whereas if the activity involves a grade, their attitude changes drastically”* (P1.1, 2024).

**Fig. 2.** Semantic Network on the Impact of Grading on Student Attitudes



This teacher's perception aligns with the field notes. During a microscope activity, when students were informed that it would not be graded, they showed disinterest and limited engagement. However, when a grade-related incentive was introduced, there was an immediate shift: students spontaneously organized themselves and actively participated in the task.

In response, a group reflection was proposed to strengthen interest and participation. Reflection as a pedagogical strategy connects prior experiences with academic content, fostering engagement, intrinsic motivation, and meaningful learning [25], key aspects of formative assessment. It also promotes critical awareness and self-regulation, which are essential for overcoming the grading culture [26]. The instructor stated: "The idea came up after noticing the lack of motivation when activities were not graded. We implemented an initial reflection before analyzing one" (P1.2, 2024).

## Cycles 2 and 3: Post-Reflection Strategy

When analyzing what occurred after implementing reflection at the beginning of the class, greater attention and a more positive attitude toward the lesson were observed. Visual reinforcements and the connection between the content and students' future teaching practice stood out.

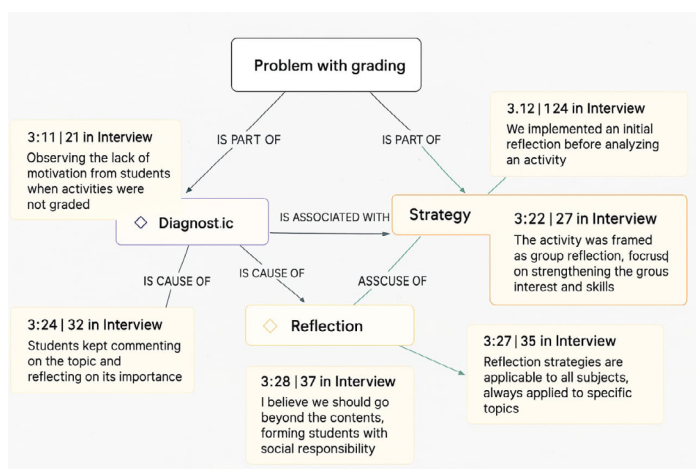
**Table 2.** Matrix of Emerging Categories from the Interview

| Category           | Subcategory          | Textual Code                                                                               | Description                                                         |
|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Role of Reflection | Increased engagement | “Students were not focused on their phones; they were paying attention to the reflection.” | Initial reflections increase student interest.                      |
|                    | Impact of reflection | “It starts by talking about what makes a good professional.”                               | Reflections on the profession create a connection with the content. |
|                    | Reduced device use   | “Statistical data and real news photos are shown.”                                         | Visual resources and data improve classroom attention.              |

Source: Own elaboration

The joint reflection and the final interview with the teacher reveal a shift in students’ attitudes toward formative assessment. According to the teacher, “at first, the students were somewhat confused, but then they relaxed and participated actively. The most significant aspect was that the learning did not stop at the reflection; in the following days, the students continued to comment on and reflect upon its importance” (P1.2, 2024). This perception aligns with classroom records: “we implemented an initial reflection before analyzing an activity and, surprisingly, this strategy yielded positive results” (P1.2, 2024). The analysis of this evidence is incorporated into the semantic network of the diagnosis and strategy:

**Fig. 3.** Semantic Network of Teacher Perception on Reflection



## 4. Discussion

The results reveal a deeply rooted grading culture in university contexts, where grades play a central role in students' perceptions of learning [27, 28]. In this scenario, student motivation is primarily linked to the presence of grading, with extrinsic motivation prevailing, oriented toward academic or professional benefits [29, 30]. This trend aligns with the findings of Cañadas et al. [31], who emphasize that the design of assessment systems directly influences students' perceptions.

A more passive attitude toward ungraded activities has been reported in other studies [32, 33], confirming that this culture shapes both how and why students learn [34]. In contrast, the implementation of pedagogical reflection at the beginning of classes encouraged greater participation, intrinsic motivation, and meaningful learning [8]. Understood as a process that connects personal experiences with academic content, reflection fosters autonomy and active engagement [35, 8], as well as promoting critical thinking and self-regulated learning [26]. Along these lines, Hill et al. [36] emphasize that reflection enhances the development of integrated and transversal

skills, enabling students to connect their learning with real-life situations and professional contexts.

However, resistance to formative assessment persists, often linked to a limited understanding of its benefits and insufficient teacher training [14, 37, 38]. Additionally, institutional policies focused on grading hinder the transition toward learning-oriented assessment [39, 40, 41], reinforcing the need to promote reflective practices as a pathway for educational transformation.

## **5. Conclusions**

The findings of this study confirm the persistence of a grading-centered culture in higher education, where grades remain the primary incentive for student participation, affecting intrinsic motivation and limiting meaningful learning. However, the incorporation of pedagogical reflections at the beginning of classes generated a positive shift in student attitude and engagement, even in the absence of grades.

Reflection enabled students to connect academic content with personal and professional experiences, strengthening their interest in learning, fostering self-regulation, and encouraging a critical perspective on their own teaching practice. This contributed to the development of more active learning environments, where faculty were able to identify critical episodes, reinterpret classroom experiences, and align their pedagogical practices with student engagement. In this way, reflection emerged not only as a metacognitive exercise but also as a strategy for cultural transformation in contexts dominated by traditional assessment logics.

Although the results are not generalizable, the study highlights the value of integrating reflective practices as a means to reduce resistance to formative assessment and to counteract the effects of the prevailing grading culture.

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