

**Bonni:** [00:00:00] There's something wrong with the way we've been grading that isn't being talked about nearly enough. On today's show Dr Linda Nilson shares about a whole new way of thinking about assessing students work and making grades mean more.

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**Bonni:** [00:00:28] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches. So we can have more peace in our lives. And be even more present for our students.

**Bonni:** [00:00:52] Today I am pleased to be welcoming Dr. Linda Nilson who is the Founding Director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation at Clemson University and author of Teaching At Its Best. A research based resource for college instructors now in its third edition. And in fact Linda I understand that's what you're going to be spending your holidays doing. Am I correct

**Linda:** [00:01:17] Yes I am Going to be working on the fourth edition. I'm very pleased to announce. And so yes I always get a lot done over holiday break.

**Bonni:** [00:01:27] Wonderful. And so You've got another book called The Graphics Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating your Course and your latest book Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills was released in 2013 and that's actually not your latest book.

**Bonni:** [00:01:46] I am correct right. There's even. There's the whole reason you're on the show today this your is that your latest book is the one you're talking

about today. Would you share the title of it. I'll have a link to it in the show notes by the way at [teachinginhighered.com/29](http://teachinginhighered.com/29). Tell us about your latest book.

**Linda:** [00:02:01] OK. The title of it is Specifications Grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time.

**Bonni:** [00:02:12] What's wrong with the way most of us are grading today.

**Linda:** [00:02:15] Oh so many things that let's consider all the stakeholders. OK one set of stakeholders are is the employer right. Actually when you look when you do an analysis of the relationship between grades and occupational success you get a correlation of .155 and this was done in a sort of like a mega analysis or meta analysis by led by a gentleman named Sampson.

**Linda:** [00:02:44] And this is statistically significant but it's not much of relationship. I mean grades accounts for two point four percent of the variance in career success. So it's not really any help to employers employers figure like well if I hire somebody with good grades they ought to be able to handle both the technical aspects of the job and the softer skills.

**Linda:** [00:03:09] But they have been disappointed because a lot of companies have established their own remedial colleges where they train their new hires in basic communication and quantitative skills. This is pitiful. So employers are being served.

**Linda:** [00:03:23] Let's look at the institutions of higher learning themselves now. You've got to keep in mind that they have assessment obligations right accreditation and this sort of thing. Therefore you would think that getting a college diploma at commencement means that these students are actually competent in all the abilities represented by all the program outcomes both Gen Ed and the major.

**Linda:** [00:03:49] And we know that's not the case. Let's say communication skills every every two year four year college in the world will make a promise of oh yeah our students know how to speak and write. Excuse me.

**Linda:** [00:04:04] According to a 2006 study by the American Institutes for Research fewer than half the students graduating from four year colleges and fewer than three quarters of those graduating from two year colleges demonstrate literary proficiency boots.

**Linda:** [00:04:21] What happened there. What grades mean you think about OK subjects in a well. Does that mean that they achieved all the learning outcomes in the course at an exceptionally high level of competency or just it a satisfactory. What even more vigorous what does that mean. Did they get a few of them down hope to see how about a D.

**Linda:** [00:04:46] Does that mean that the students achieved a few outcomes a few competencies at a high level and others not at all. What does this mean. So institutions have to go through the additional time consuming steps of assessing learning at the program level and also offered at the Gen Ed level as well.

**Linda:** [00:05:09] Which adds quite a time sink, isn't it? So a passing grade means nothing in terms of what the students are able to do what faculty will do they simply penalize students who failed to achieve that learning outcomes at the desired level by giving them the students a lower grade.

**Linda:** [00:05:32] Now let's look at faculty, the way we grade now boggs faculty down with a necessarily time consuming and very pleasant work burden. And the biggest single problem is the issue of partial credit. And these days students will get partial credit if they put anything down that has anything to do with the subject of the assignment.

**Linda:** [00:06:02] Faculty are looking for anything they can to give power show credit to students and students depending on that. But what faculty have to do every time they don't give 100 percent of credit to an answer an essay or what have you. Faculty feel obligated to explain to the student why they're not getting full credit and maybe they feel happy to get any sort of work out as students.

**Linda:** [00:06:28] And you know but they definitely feel that they have to explain everything. Boy does this take time rubrics reduce the burden. But they don't get rid of the burden. So faculty are so pressed for time that they can't even conduct appropriate assessments.

**Linda:** [00:06:46] More and more and more faculty are relying on objective tests multiple choice this sort of thing when you know even the faculty know in their hearts that they should also be testing students with FAA exams or with more written assignments.

**Linda:** [00:07:03] But they don't have the time. The problem is we've been increasing class sizes we've increasing institutional sizes too but class sizes. Well

we're not hiring the number of faculty we need to keep the classes at the size that we were used to.

**Linda:** [00:07:18] So now we've got like 40 students in a writing class and 300 to 500 students and more introductory science classes. So it's all a bunch of facts in terms of things that you could almost all of your choice tests and of course be the faculty.

**Linda:** [00:07:34] They know what is it right there. There's no choice. And they're getting more courses to teach in addition to larger courses to teach and and they are still under research pressures more than ever. Still under service pressures more than ever and students are breathing down their neck for more and more frequent assessments.

**Bonni:** [00:07:55] Tell us about specs grading what is it and what are some of the benefits we get if we use it.

**Linda:** [00:08:00] Students are graded pass fail on individual assignments and tests and also odd bundles or modules. I'm going to call them bundles of individual assignments and tests and I'll explain those later. But in any case students earned full credit or no credit depending on whether their work meets the specifications the specs that you laid out for that piece of work.

**Linda:** [00:08:26] No partial credit at passing does not mean you know getting a C or C minus level. No no no. And this is where we restore rigor. You make pass a B level quality of work if you want you can make it a level quality of work.

**Linda:** [00:08:43] But whatever it is you are raising the standards just to students to get credit. The key for us and this is a key ingredient of specs grading is that we as instructors have to provide very clear and very detailed specs and even models when necessary for what constitutes passing acceptable piece of work.

**Linda:** [00:09:06] You might think specs is a one level rubric and some assignments might be Speck's might be as simple as completeness like all the questions are answered all the problems attempted or set up in good faith.

**Linda:** [00:09:19] The work satisfies the assignment and other subjects are going to be more complex of course like a description of the characteristics of good literature review or the content of each section of a proposal. So you've gotta write the specs clearly and carefully but all the works up front for the students.

**Linda:** [00:09:36] It's all or nothing. It's no sliding by no blowing off the directions no bending or partial credit for sloppy Last-Minute work. Another ingredient is students are allowed at least one opportunity to revise an unacceptable piece of work. Or they can start a course with a limited number of quote tokens virtual tokens that they can exchange to revise a piece of work or drop it or to submit a work piece of work late to get an extension like 24 hours.

**Linda:** [00:10:05] So there are second chances and some flexibility built into this but not a lot because they've got to take you seriously. You know it's one thing to slip up once especially at the beginning of the course when they don't believe that you were capable of failing them or not giving them any credit.

**Linda:** [00:10:23] But they've got to get used to that notion and you want you can have it give them opportunities to earn tokens or whatever you can you know make a game out of it. You can say the person with the most tokens at the end will get a gift certificate for pizza whatever.

**Linda:** [00:10:42] The other thing is the point system goes away so that's very important that's where we get these bundles of assignments. Yes and you've got to pass this everything in the bundle for them to count but each bundle is associated with of course grade.

**Linda:** [00:10:59] And the bundles that earn the higher court grades require the students to demonstrate mastery of more skills or content or more advanced skills more complex ones or both. And you can design these bundles such that they are providing evidence of students achieving certain outcome.

**Bonni:** [00:11:20] How does the student then get the feedback. So if I haven't met the expectations I didn't receive the pass grade. How do I know where I need to improve if I do decide to use a token to make that one up.

**Linda:** [00:11:32] Since you made the specs pretty detailed all you've got to do is highlight what they didn't do and then they still have the chance they do it.

**Linda:** [00:11:42] You're getting higher standards out of this. You're reflecting student learning outcomes in the grades all you have to do is look at you know what section of the syllabus you are motivating students to learn to add to excel to do good work.

**Linda:** [00:12:01] You are reducing you're actually reducing student stress because were first of all students can choose their grade. And so I think I'll just go

for C I need only a C. I don't want to do all the work involves getting a beer and hey hey I'm cool with a C.

**Linda:** [00:12:20] And then we can respect that that reduces student stress they're in control of their success and of course we've given them details specs and what they're expected to do. And so if they just connect the dots they will be able to have this assignment or have this test pass and by passing a test what would that mean.

**Linda:** [00:12:42] That would mean that they have to get let's say 80 percent to pass. So all you've got to worry about is whether the student gets 80 percent on the test. You're not putting have students coming into uni. I want another point I deserve another point which is what the point system has bred all this grade grubbing all that goes away. Yes. Is it wouldn't that be nice.

**Bonni:** [00:13:06] Having recently experienced that I would have liked to discuss them.

**Linda:** [00:13:11] Yes exactly. The point system has become sort of what students will negotiate on because they don't they don't take our standard seriously.

**Linda:** [00:13:22] They know everything is negotiable because frankly this has worked for them in the past so why should they come to you and try to nickel and dime you to death on another half a point or two. All right.

**Bonni:** [00:13:32] And I think culturally we're teaching them to do that because even though I don't do that and it's something I really push back on and say what you're asking me to do I just won't do and it's not fair to the other students etc.

**Bonni:** [00:13:43] And but they have this attitude of it doesn't hurt to ask. And I think in a lot of cases they do get rewarded for doing that from other individuals who just have a different perspective on it than I do. But sure we do kind of culturally build that up and then it makes those exchanges I think that much harder. The whole operant conditioning been conditioned to work.

**Linda:** [00:14:01] These people are crazy. They do it because it works. Yeah. Yeah. You know it's a simple little behavior is that's all it takes. And I imagine it also worked you know in K through 12 and at least some some stages of K through 12. So yeah. So everything's negotiable to them. Our professional judgment is negotiable and you know what. It should be.

**Bonni:** [00:14:23] You have gotten a lot of criticism about this. This caused some controversy. And what are some of the main concerns that you're getting from faculty and how do you address them in your own research and work.

**Linda:** [00:14:36] One of the things I got and I've had a lot of a lot. Matter of fact I got this before I put out the book so I was able to deal with it. What about first generation and disadvantaged students. What about their confidence level.

**Linda:** [00:14:50] Maybe they won't have the confidence in themselves to go for the. And they need very special that I think individually encouragement to do that. We need to show how much we believe in them. Yes they can do this. He's got to follow directions and make it easier for them to aim high. Some faculty abroad. Well what about the students. How are they going to slack off.

**Linda:** [00:15:14] You know I don't think we should worry about them but of course we can and we should praise their work their good work anyway in our comments if we want to add comments but such students are probably going to continue to excel because they are self-motivated and they take pride in their coursework.

**Linda:** [00:15:31] Then I see about specs grading it might help them relax a little bit which might help foster their intrinsic motivation. I don't think we're going to lose them along the way. Oh I had one complaint once tokens or to game like. And so I said this was in a workshop. So I said to the person fine don't use them.

**Linda:** [00:15:49] Students like gmaes they respond to these tokens. They want to save them. They want to accumulate them. They look at them as insurance. And so for that matter it teaches them to defer their gratification and to avoid procrastination. These are wonderful lessons. Here's another one. If we tell students precisely what to do in the specs then they won't learn how to figure things out and make decisions on their own.

**Bonni:** [00:16:15] That's a big one.

**Linda:** [00:16:16] how to be creative yet all them learn how to do is to follow directions. And then there was also a concern about this is related what about long assignments. It won't fit with long assignments or substantial like big assignments major assignments. How much direction you provide depends on the assignment and ultimately your learning outcomes.

**Linda:** [00:16:40] If you want students to learn how to do something fairly formulaic you'll want to give them pretty detailed precise instructions. For instance we make a lot of formulaic assignments.

**Linda:** [00:16:53] The five paragraph essay a review of the literature a research proposal a lab report a corporate annual report a press release certain kinds of speeches the formulas for these and in fact we follow formulas often when we write a teaching philosophy or when we write scientific journal articles. Those are formulaic.

**Linda:** [00:17:17] They're laid out the organizations all laid out one them can be pretty sophisticated. Now other assignments might not be formulaic but but students still don't know how to do that. Let's think like a reflection. We want students to be sure to answer certain questions to address certain issues to be introspective in certain specific ways.

**Linda:** [00:17:40] And so what we have to do is just list the questions that they have to answer and maybe the approximate number of words we want the answers to be because that tells them level of depth that's their lingo for depth and if students are a number of words specs then the answer or other questions.

**Linda:** [00:17:59] Hey they pass, for more creative assignments You need only give the barest directions. There was a psychology professor who did this and she had an assignment at the end she was teaching brain and behavior and she told her students pick any brain and behavior topic that intrigues you and then creatively communicate this information about this topic to others in one of many possible modalities for instance like a documentary video.

**Linda:** [00:18:29] And then she put a link which should be 30 minutes a series of commercials that should total 30 minutes like public accounts public service announcements a collection of pamphlets for a specific audience. A staged debate educational play job talk and she give a length.

**Linda:** [00:18:45] That's all she had to do she got great products. Another faculty member had her students do a mind map of all the course material as a capstone assignment. Her specs were simply the minimum number of first level branches and how many branching levels it should be or the minimum number.

**Linda:** [00:19:04] That's how she got precisely what she wanted. Both of these courses were upper division but they weren't graduates or anything we were



dealing with undergraduates. And so by implication the size of the assignment just doesn't matter.

**Linda:** [00:19:21] Couple of more objections won't we faculty feel pressured to pass any work. When given the stakes are so high and see this token system works well for us to take the pressure off of us because we can say no this really isn't satisfactory.

**Linda:** [00:19:39] But the students the student has a chance to do it over again and you know within limits of course and then hear one more. How can this was a real concern and I thought about this before I published the book. What about accreditation standards.

**Linda:** [00:19:53] If you're allowing students to choose your outcomes we've got your students have to meet all these outcomes in order to meet our accreditation standards. Well no problem because what you do is that you put those outcomes those essential outcomes at the C level or even the D level.

**Linda:** [00:20:15] Such that any student who passes the course and gets credit for the course can meet those minimal outcomes for accreditation. So those are the objections that I've heard. It's interesting. Younger faculty are more likely to jump on this than older faculty and I can certainly understand why younger families say they go to this right away. I know they didn't like traditional grading either.

**Bonni:** [00:20:40] Is there any way that someone could dip their toe into the world of specs grading or is that an all or nothing thing in a given course I'd imagine. You have to go all the way with it's structured.

**Linda:** [00:20:51] To get all the benefits you've got to go all the way. But for some people say well I really like this the pass fail part. However they don't want to give up go. The point system that your preferred system works against everybody right but were so emotionally attached to it and so used to it.

**Linda:** [00:21:11] So they won't do the point system part. Now you've got that option. You know you can just stick with the point system. But the problem with that is you won't be able to relate your outcomes to the grades because you won't have the concept of bundles where there are that are clearly related to certain outcomes and perhaps not to others.

**Linda:** [00:21:41] So that's been the major objection most faculty likes the idea of the tokens because they don't know this well you don't have to listen anybody's excuses. They know somebody is late. Fine you take a token out or you might ask students to say tell you in advance that they're going to be late.

**Linda:** [00:22:04] And so they know you could say OK no problem you have two tokens left will simply subtract token and you can say that with a smile. So they understand that there are consequences to their actions. There are costs. There are costs but you don't have to sit around and listen to excuses.

**Bonni:** [00:22:22] I have a similar thing like that when students are late I take the sign in sheet away the concourse starts and so it did really have to learn to say things with a smile and what a difference it makes. There's so much less to be.

**Bonni:** [00:22:36] Not a problem because if I allow them to two times during the semester call and leave me a professional voicemail. If we were meeting with business contacts I teach in business so if we were meeting and you were going to be late you would call your business associate and let them know.

**Bonni:** [00:22:49] And so that is teaching them to leave their professional but really said with a smile I think things like that can make such a difference and it can help them learn a little bit to take responsibility and then gosh we've done it more than twice but that is going to start to eat into place we're going to probably have to figure out a way to get here but said with a smile it makes a difference.

**Linda:** [00:23:10] Oh yes. You know it's just about you says you're cool you're unflappable you're not you know all emotionally involved in this. And so it really is nothing personal. You're not taking it as anything personal because it isn't anything personal.

**Linda:** [00:23:28] So it makes you look really good. Yes. As Well as you know taking this taking the sting out of it for the students.

**Bonni:** [00:23:36] Is there any kind of a community that's starting to be built somewhere online where people can share examples of what they're doing or the way that that someone could see. I know that your book certainly has examples but is there anything building online.

**Linda:** [00:23:49] Robert Talbert blogging and by the way his blog appears in the Chronicle of Higher Education every once in a while. So he has a couple of

blogs where he talks about specs grading what is an interview with me and the other one is where he decided to endorse next grading and to use it.

**Linda:** [00:24:05] And so we're all going to be looking at that. So that would be one place to be talking about specs grading would be Talbert's blog. It's called casting out nines by the way he's a mathematics professor at Grand Valley State an absolutely superb teacher.

**Linda:** [00:24:25] I'm eager to find out how it's going to go in his class although obviously I based my book on people using some method or parts of the method and having tremendous success. Students are more motivated. They do like the method you know the first time they have it is like what's that.

**Linda:** [00:24:46] But you have to explain. Of course the method you've got to sell it you've got to let's say like ruffed tells them that yes there is a relationship between your shoulder the instructor holding high expectations and their success. One of the things about specs grading is usually students have a choice they have a choice about the grade.

**Linda:** [00:25:08] They have a choice about their workload. But there are other places where you can integrate choice. Students love choice. It's a very adult attraction pass fail grading practices. That's what licencee exams are all about employment's exams.

**Linda:** [00:25:23] It's pass fail. You know you either become a lawyer or you don't you either pass the Ed collect to become a nurse or you don't. It's real simple. Out in the real world its all pass fail.

**Bonni:** [00:25:35] This is the part in the show when we transition over to our recommendations. And for me I recently did a half day class and I was loading up all my tools the night before making sure I test everything and get it ready.

**Bonni:** [00:25:48] And I've mentioned before on the show that I use a tool called PollEverywhere and so far I've been using the free version although there certainly is a time when I plan on having the students pay that I think it's 15 dollars a year or something like that and doing that.

**Bonni:** [00:26:01] But so far I've been pleased with the free version it's given me enough of what I need. And they might I just discovered had come out with some new tools that they have rolled out through all they're both are played and they're free plans.

**Bonni:** [00:26:14] And it was one of those things where it was in beta and it said you know you could click here to change it. Oh no you'd never do that when you try a new tool. But I decided to throw caution to the wind because said I could set it back if I didn't like my result. So I did.

**Bonni:** [00:26:28] And it's so great because it used to be when you were texting in to PollEverywhere if you were asking a multiple choice question the users would have to type in a series of six digits and that for a lot of us is an atrocious short term memory.

**Bonni:** [00:26:42] So for me to get those numbers wrong and it's not going to work and all that well they've changed that now where essentially the person responding to the polls just has to sign onto your session by text on your special your user name to the system and then they know while you're in.

**Bonni:** [00:26:58] And then from there on out if it's a multiple choice question they just type in the ABC or D or you can have a one two three or four or you can set that up in advance and then for the open response questions they just type their response like they would think that would naturally do they don't have to type in the six digit number and then type in their response.

**Bonni:** [00:27:15] So it does really reduce the amount of time I had to remind students how the tools work and someone in the class inevitably just had a real problem with the six digit number. Now all of that is gone once they're signed onto that session they're on those really innovative and a great upgrade.

**Bonni:** [00:27:32] So if anyone's using PollEverywhere I will tell you it's a great thing to try out the beta. It worked great for Mitt and have any problems with polls that I had used many times before. So that's my recommendation. And now is your time what do you want to recommend to people.

**Linda:** [00:27:46] Well this is related to specs grading but it did start with specs grading. You know you're trying new things you've got to be courageous you've got to have a high amount of courage. So my advice is keep your courage sharp keep your courage high and the way you do that is every once in a while if not frequently do things that scare the pants off you do.

**Linda:** [00:28:14] He said that really that you were afraid to do. And I've been doing this when I first started teaching public speaking in graduate school I hated public speaking so well. I was trying to conquer that. And so public

speaking is a scary thing to do with you haven't been teaching a long time and then you know I sort of like him really needed to reinforce it.

**Linda:** [00:28:37] So in the early 90s I bungee jumped, just to get my courage sharp just to get it ready for whatever was ahead of me. Several years later I skydived I'm looking around for something risky to do because I do want to to keep that curious ready to go would ever I need it.

**Linda:** [00:28:59] And so that is my advice. Something like trying specs grading does take courage and you know try it try it. Nobody's going to get hurt. You know you're still producing A's B's and C's out of your course. The administration is not going to come down on you.

**Linda:** [00:29:19] So this is a safe thing this is within your control and in your control within the course. So go ahead and do it. And you know when something comes up next time that might be you know requiring some courage you'll have more of it.

**Bonni:** [00:29:36] Thank you so much for coming on to Teaching in Higher Ed and sharing about specs grading with us and all your other expertise and I just so look forward to having people listen and get engaged to the conversation at [Teachinginhighered.com/29](https://teachinginhighered.com/29) it's been so nice talking with you.

**Linda:** [00:29:53] Thank you Bonni for this opportunity. Take care.

**Bonni:** [00:29:57] Linda spoke so eloquently about courage and just this morning I had seen this quote from Maya Angelou on courage and wanted to share it with you.

**Bonni:** [00:30:05] "I would encourage us to try our best to develop courage. It's the most important of all the virtues because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can be anything radically kind. Fair true generous all that. But to be the thing. Time after time you need courage.

**Bonni:** [00:30:26] We need to develop courage and we need to develop it in small ways first because we wouldn't go and say I'll pick up this 100 pound weight without knowing our capacity. So we need to say oh I'll start by picking up a 5 pound weight than a ten pound weight than a 25 pound. And sooner or later I'll be able to pick up a hundred pound weight.

**Bonni:** [00:30:49] And I think that's true with courage. You develop a little courage so that if you decide I will not stay in rooms where women are belittled I will not stay in company where races no matter who they are are belittled I will not take it.

**Bonni:** [00:31:05] I will not sit around and accept dehumanizing other beings. If you decide to do that in small ways and you continue to do it finally you will realize you've got so much courage. Imagine it. You've got so much courage that people want to be around you.

**Bonni:** [00:31:23] They get a feeling that they will be protected in your company." Again that was a quote by Maya Angelou and thanks again to Linda for being on the show. And thanks to all of you for listening today.

**Bonni:** [00:31:37] That was the twenty ninth episode of Teaching in Higher Ed if you want to find the notes there at [Teachinginhighered.com/29](http://Teachinginhighered.com/29). And as always I welcome your feedback; feedback for suggestions for the episodes in 2015.

**Bonni:** [00:31:52] There are going to be a lot of them and I've already got some books but welcome new ideas. [Teachinginhighered.com/feedback](http://Teachinginhighered.com/feedback) and if you have not already subscribe to the weekly email. It's just going to come in one sense going to have all the show notes so you don't have to remember to go grab them as you're listening.

**Bonni:** [00:32:11] And it's also going to have included in that same email. A weekly article about either productivity or teaching that's at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe).

**Bonni:** [00:32:21] And I just really thank you for listening. Thanks for being a part of the Teaching in Higher Ed community. And perhaps this week you can tell one or two of your colleagues about the show so we can continue to grow the listeners even more. Thanks again for listening.

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