

Specifications Grading, Self-regulated Learning, and Graphic Syllabic: Linda Nilson's Innovations in Teaching Applied to Music Courses

Notes to accompany poster presented at 2018 CMS conference

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During the last year I have applied a number of techniques presented by Linda Nilson in her interesting series of books. These have been used in three music classes: an introductory course about the music industry, which is a large lecture class of 125 general education students; a songwriting class with 15 music production majors; and a senior capstone course with 5-10 students per semester.

Specifications Grading

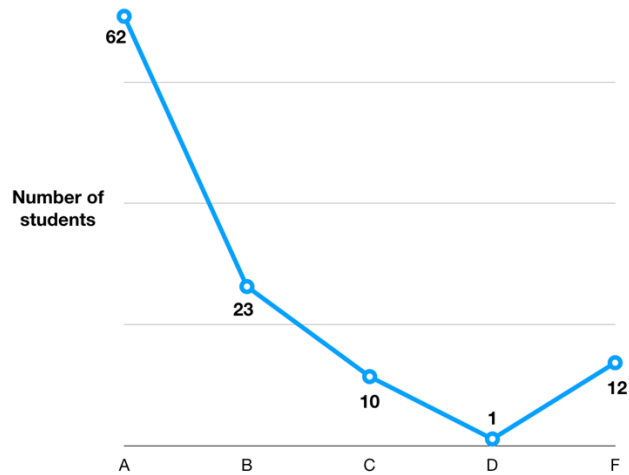
Specifications Grading helps solve many of the problems in the currently broken grade system. Employers see little connection between grades and employee success on the job due to a combination of factors, such as grade inflation, and a disconnect with course goals. Students have become conditioned to submit incomplete work and negotiate for partial and extra credit, teachers live in fear of low student evaluations, and much faculty time is spent justifying the grades they give on assignments. Linda Nilson developed the Specifications Grading system to clarify expectations and raise academic standards, help motivate students and give them more flexibility in earning the grades they desire.

Specifications Grading, or "Specs Grading" revolves around designing clear rubrics that make it very clear what is required for an assignment. All work is graded on a pass/no credit basis and there is no partial credit. To alleviate some of the rigidity of the evaluation process teachers can offer a Token system in which students have a certain number of tokens that they can use to turn in assignments late or to redo them. Extra credit is not offered in the classes, but students can earn one or two additional tokens by completing additional assignments. In the music industry class students can watch and answer questions about a documentary or write a book report. In the songwriting class students can record a singer songwriter or perform one of their songs in public.

Another option is to group assignments into bundles. In her book on Specifications Grading, Nilson explains several ways that bundles can be structured. In my music business class, for example, there are 4 bundles—one for reading assignments, one for activity assignments, one for discussion assignments, and a final project bundle. The letter grade for the semester is determined by how many bundles a student gets credit for. One of the ways that this system increases the flexibility that students have is that they only have to pass 8 of the 10 reading assignments to get credit for the Reading bundle, only 8 of the 10 activity assignments to get credit for the Activity bundle, and 3 of the 4 discussion assignments to get credit for the Discussion bundle. It's important to go over this new grading system carefully at the beginning of the course and explain the benefits to students in becoming more detail-oriented and responsible—characteristics that will be expected when they enter the job market. I ask them what they would expect their boss to say if they were tasked with created a two-page report on company stationary by Friday and they come back (late) the next Monday with one written on binder paper. I also ask them how many chances they would expect their employer to remedy such failures and they usually say once or twice, at which point I remind them that I am giving them 5 tokens for redos, and that they only have to do about 80% of

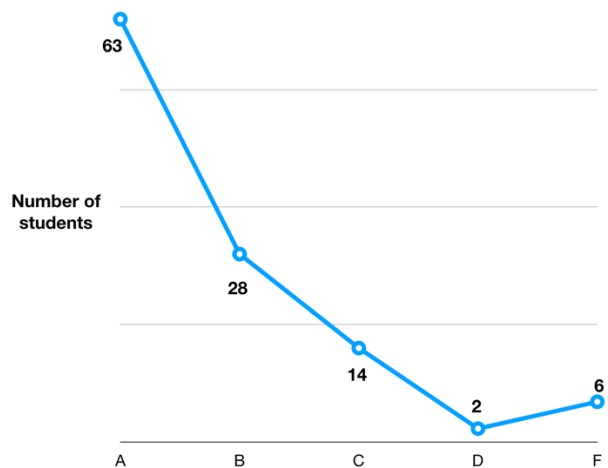
the work in the class in order to get an “A” for the semester, as long as they are careful and do the right work in the various bundles.

I was warned that I wouldn’t get Specifications Grading right the first semester, and this proved to be the case. This turned out to be true, and there were a significant number of students who perceived it as unfair, while those in the majority who figured out the system and understood how to work with it had no problem earning “A”s and “B”s:



Graph showing number of students receiving each letter grade the first semester I taught the music industry class. Some of the “F”s were for people who dropped the class, others may have been from students who gave up when they realized they had not passed enough assignments in the different bundles.

In subsequent semesters I have spent more time at the beginning of the semester making a case for the value of developing the habit of satisfying expectations and carefully following instructions, and opportunity to redo assignments that they didn’t pass the first time, and the flexibility that the system offers by allowing them to skip entire assignments and still get an “A”, and now the students are reporting that they enjoy the system and wish other professors would use it. The second semester I taught the class there were more “B”s and “C”s and fewer “F”s:



Graph showing number of students receiving each letter grade the second semester I taught the music industry class. The distribution of semester grades is

similar to the first semester, but there many fewer grads and student evaluation scores were much improved.

There is a Google form that students fill out when they want to use one of their 5 tokens to turn in an assignment late or to redo it. In the form they report their name, which bundle the token is for, which assignment within the bundle, and if they are redoing it, what they failed to do when they turned it in originally and what they have done to fix that.

One of the advantages of using Google Forms is that they automatically populate a spreadsheet that aggregates the responses. There are two columns with responses from students about what they fixed on their individual assignments, followed by two columns (empty so far) for reports on what the team fixed. Here is an example of the data collected from the songwriting students:

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
Timestamp	What is your name?	Which module does this Token apply to?	What are you using this Token for?	Is this for your own individual assignment or for a group project?	Who needs do to do what in order to finish the group production?	What needed to be fixed?	What did you do to fix it?	What needed to be fixed?	Who did what to fix it?	As far as you know, is the group production now ready to be evaluated?	You may leave any questions or comments here	TEACHER COMMENTS
9/3/2018 16:36:51	Jeremy	I - refrain chorus song	Turn in an assignment late								Turning in the recording for my song late	x
9/3/2018 21:48:31	Morgan	I - refrain chorus song	Redo part of an assignment	Individual song composition		My lyrics and recording url	redid the mistakes to make them right					x
9/4/2018 21:12:11	Kyler	I - refrain chorus song	Redo part of an assignment	Individual song composition		I incorrectly linked my Soundcloud recording, and some of my chord symbols were incorrectly placed/labeled.	I fixed the hyperlink, as well as moved the chord symbols to their proper locations and fixed the chords that were incorrect as well.					x
9/6/2018 10:44:51	Aaron	I - refrain chorus song	Turn in an assignment late									x
9/10/2018 11:24:11	Aaron	I - refrain chorus song	Redo part of an assignment	Individual song composition		A few chord and grammar changes	Lined up the chords with the lyric so that it's easier to read.					x

Here is an example from the token requests from the music industry course:

9/9/2018 11:21	Anna		Activity Bundle			[A-2]	Redo an assignment that I turned in on time but didn't get credit for		comment section apparently, missed the last question	not in the comment section , did the last question, as well as fixed my answer for #11.	thankful for these tokens
9/10/2018 15:11	Kathleen		Reading Bundle			[R-1]	Turn in assignment late				Thanks!
9/10/2018 20:11	Jared		Reading Bundle			[R-2]	Turn in assignment late				I lost my book but found it in the library lost and found after the due date
9/11/2018 9:01	Isaac		Reading Bundle			[R-1]	Turn in assignment late				

Filling out the form becomes the signal that their work is ready for re-evaluation, reducing the number of email messages that I receive. There is a column in the spreadsheet where I mark that the token has been processed, and I decrement the count of remaining tokens on Blackboard (our course management system) so they can see how many they have left.

The assignments in the songwriting class are different and so are the bundles. Each bundle consists of assignments spread over a 4-week period. In the first two weeks students individually compose and record a song incorporating a new set of tools, which are represented by this graphics outcomes map shown at the end of this report. They turn in their work by linking them from portfolio created in a Google Drive document. There students are divided in three teams of five students, and in the last two weeks of each module the team votes on which of the team member's songs they would like to re-record as a group. In order to get credit for a bundle the student must compose and record their own song, create a lyric sheet for it and a lead sheet, and write a short descriptive paragraph about how they applied the tools for that song. They must also satisfactorily contribute to their team's work as reported by a peer evaluation form submitted by their colleagues. The team also has their own portfolio page where they link to the studio recording and credit those who participated. Completing all the specifications for four songs results in an "A" for the semester, completing the requirements for any three of the songs a "B", any two songs a "C", one song a "D", and no songs an "F".

In the senior capstone project there are four bundles:

1. A 15-minute oral presentation to the class on the first half of their project and first part of a written report
2. A 15-minute oral presentation to the class on the first second of their project and second part of a written report
3. A 30-minute public presentation on their project and the third part of a written report
4. A website linking to the artifacts from their project

Self-Regulated Learning

"Self-regulation encompasses the monitoring and managing of one's cognitive processes as well as the awareness of and the control over one's emotions, motivations, behavior, and environment as related to learning... Learning is about one's relationship with oneself and one's ability to exert the effort, self-control, and critical self-assessment necessary to achieve the best possible results—and about overcoming risk aversion, failure, distractions, and sheer laziness in pursuit of *real* achievement. This is self-regulated learning." (Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners*, 2013)

Self-regulated learning is intended to:

- Cultivate reading skills and study habits
- Help students get control over their emotions and behavior
- Help students become aware of what they have and have not understood
- Make students more aware of their learning process, where there is resistance, and how it can be overcome

Combines well with teaching and learning techniques proposed by other authors such as Peter Brown, Angela Duckworth, Carolyn Dweck, and James Lang.

Helping students become independent learners may be one of the most important goals of education, and those of us in higher education are in the position to help students develop this ability before they finish their formal education. Many schools talk about the importance of lifelong learning, but to many this sounds like instilling a thirst for reading good books. In Nilson's view it is rather a mindset to be curious and self-sufficient, and being equipped with the skills necessary to learn on one's own without the direction of a teacher, something that our students will be increasingly faced with doing in the future. More people will switch careers more often than in the past, and more will be working independently.

Each week an assignment or class activity incorporates self-regulated learning experiences, many of which get students to observe their learning process and how it is affected by the consistent effort they put in and how they manage their time. The first assignment comes from one of Nilson's suggestions: having students doing a little time traveling and reporting on what they imagine themselves reporting at the end of the semester on how they achieved the grade they did for the class. This provides a good opportunity to check their understanding about how the specifications grading system works, how tokens can be used, and to incorporate suggestions that were made by students in previous semesters that were shared in lecture, such as:

"Everything was clear and easy to follow. Follow the instructions and just do the work early. The assignments were not hard, you just have to sit down and do them."

"Stay on top of the class work and when given time to work on it in the class make sure to talk with your neighbors."

"There is a lot of class time to work in your group and you should make good use of the time."

"My advice would be to make sure you check Blackboard after every class meeting to make sure you're on track for due dates, and to have, a fun with the class."

"I slacked off for one module and it hurt my grade."

"I think the reason I got a C instead of a B is because it took me a while to figure out the Token system on re-doing assignments. Overall I'm okay with a C and enjoyed the class tremendously because of all the new music we were exposed to and the way the music industry works and bands are run in the business world."

These comments were taken from what students wrote at the end of the semester when they did a second writing assignment, this time reflecting and looking back on what grade they actually ended up with after having reviewed what they turned in at the beginning of the semester, what helped them learn the most, and suggestions they have for how the course could be improved. Students at the beginning of the semester pay attention to what actual students from the past have recommended that they do in order to get the best grade with the least amount of work, more so than they do to warnings from their teacher.

Other self-regulated learning activities include:

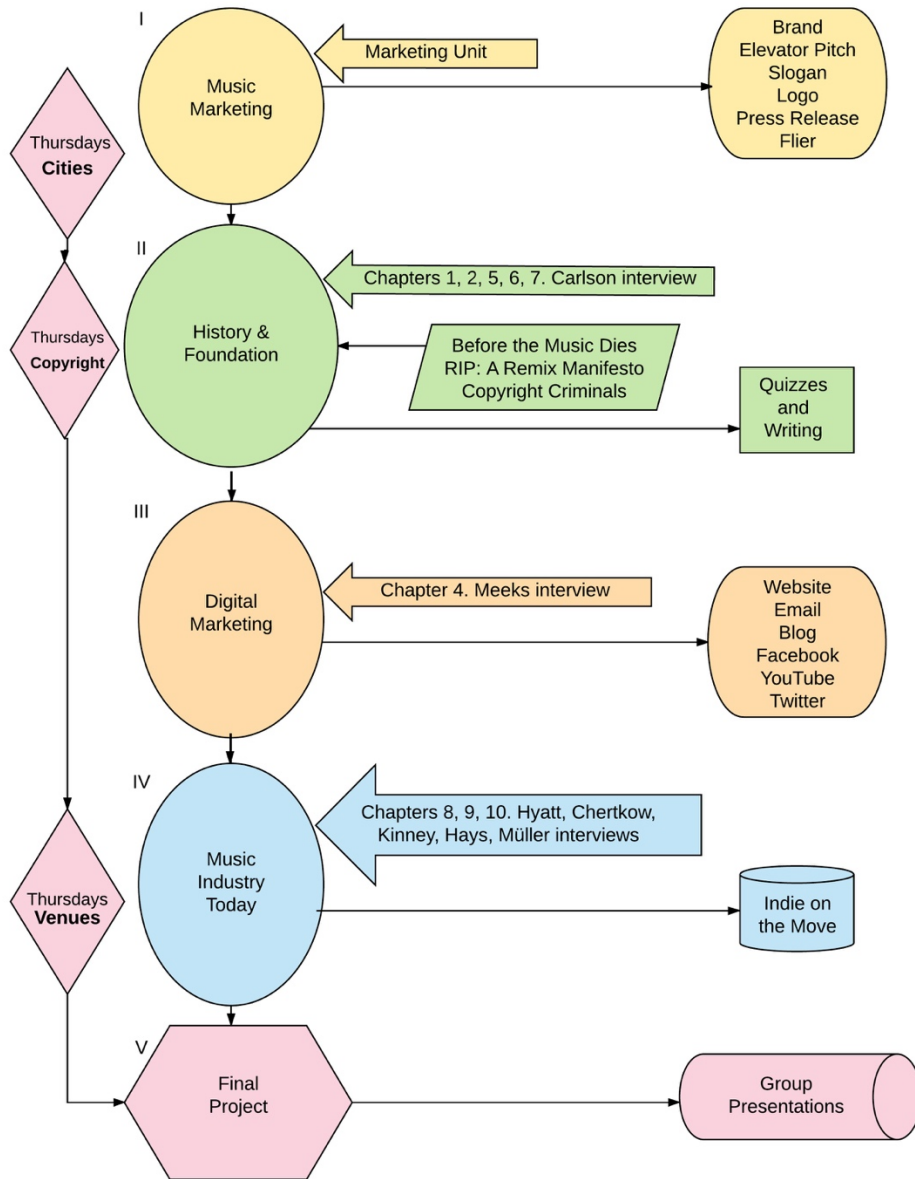
- Beginning an assignment in class and then asking students how much time they expect it will take to finish, and then asking them at the beginning of the next class how much time it actually ended up taking. This helps them get better at planning for how much time they will need to do something.

- Many other techniques presented in books by Peter Brown and James Lang compliment this process of accelerating the learning process, such as asking students about a subject that they have not studied yet, asking them with how much confidence they are answering a question (which they often overestimate), stopping lecture to have them discuss things with their neighbor and then sharing with the class, writing down everything they can remember about the previous lecture or a topic we have just finished discussing in class, having them write down the things that students commonly do wrong for an assignment, what they are most confused about, and how what we have just discussed fits with what they know.
- In the large music industry class we use the Top Hat polling system which allows for complete sentence responses and a richer experience than iClicker. Students often complain that they have already purchased iClicker, but once they see how much more interactivity Top Hat allows they generally accept it. I award quite a few prizes throughout the semester for best Top Hat responses, some of which are supplied by community partners, such as a copy of the textbook, a gift certificate to a local bookstore or record store, an Amazon gift card, erasers, and compact disks.

Graphic Syllabi

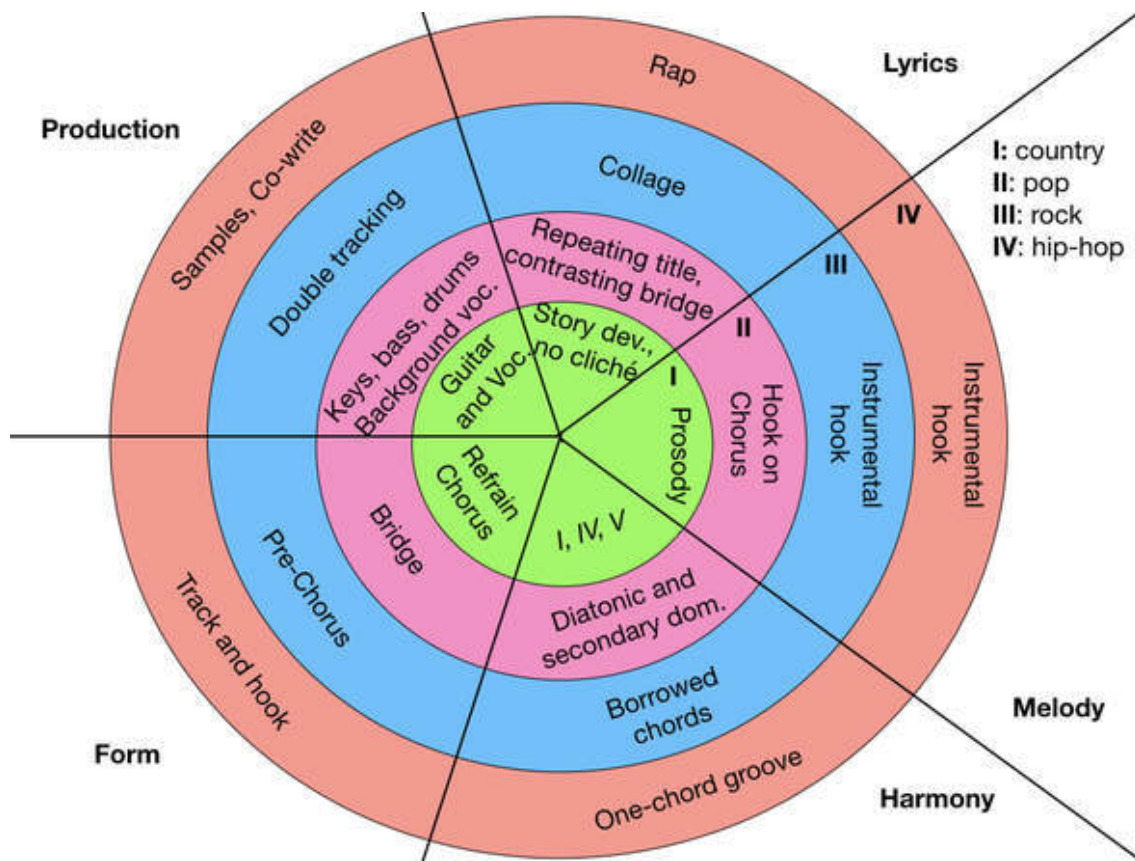
The traditional syllabus is often produced as a formality by the instructor and ignored by students. The most important information may be the contract provisions such as the grading and attendance policies. A graphic syllabus, which can be an add-on to a conventional one, provides a one-page overview that shows how a course is organized, for example, how a course is divided into modules (see music industry example on right). The interrelationship between topics can similarly be expressed in a concept map, for example, the elements that become part of a student's toolkit in a songwriting class (see example on right). Information that is presented visually may be more easily understood and retained by students, since it comes in a form that more closely resembles how it will be stored in the brain, compared with a text representation that requires more pre-processing.

The following graphic syllabus was developed for the music industry class the first time I used Specifications Grading and had fifty assignments divided into five bundles: marketing assignments, quizzes and reading assignment responses, digital marketing assignments, research on venues for the indieonthemove.com website, and group presentations. The number of assignments were cut in half and consolidated the second semester, which contributed to much less confusion about due dates and improved student satisfaction.



Graphic syllabus for the music industry course

Students in the songwriting class often start the semester wishing that they would be turned loose to express themselves and write the songs they feel in their hearts. I let them know that they are encouraged to write as many songs as they can, both inside and outside of class, but explain that one of the main goals of the class is to develop a toolkit of techniques that they can use to write songs in the future. Presenting the toolkit as a graphical outcomes map helps them see how the pieces fit together and results in more buy-in to the benefit of systematically learning a variety of techniques.



Graphic outcomes map for the music industry course showing the order of tools that are covered

I suggest that they write for four different genres, beginning with a country or folk song in the first module (at the center of the diagram in green), a pop song next colored in pink, a rock song shown in blue, finishing the semester with a hip-hop or EDM on the outside layer. We had a session at the end of the semester with Los Angeles songwriter Mark Cawley, and afterward I asked him about the number of elements that students were asked to incorporate in each song and whether it would be too complicated and restricting. He told me he thought it was a bit too mental, so in subsequent semesters I have covered the elements as we go through the semester but do not require that they incorporate them all into their song. For example, for their first song I encourage them to limit themselves to three chords and write about folk or country themes, and accompany themselves on guitar, but the only requirement is that they have the same single line refrain at the end of each verse. For the second song I suggest that they continue to develop a diverse stylistic palette by writing a pop song with a wider range of diatonic chords and at least one secondary dominant, and to record it with keyboards, bass and drums, but the only requirement is that they have a contrasting bridge. The class is evolving by including more team-based activities, and next year I am planning on giving each team a month to come up with song that merits repeated listening and letting them decide how they want to divide up the work of songwriting, arranging, recording, mixing, and documenting.

Bibliography

Linda Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus, 2014

Linda Nilson, *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills*. Stylus, 2013.

Linda Nilson, *The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Suggested Reading

Peter Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, [Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning](#)

Angela Duckworth, [Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#).

Carolyn Dweck, [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#).

James Lang, [Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning](#).