

Can Assessment Be Kind? A Conversation About a Pedagogy of Kindness and Specifications Grading

Tai Munro^a, Steven Regis^b

^a School of Continuing Education, MacEwan University; ^b Faculty of Arts and Science, MacEwan University

Abstract

This paper explores specifications grading as a practical application of a pedagogy of kindness within post-secondary education. This paper explores specifications grading as a practical application of a pedagogy of kindness in post-secondary education. Drawing on our SoTL conversation, we—as a university professor (Tai) and a student leader (Steven)—connect Eyler’s (2024) distinction between judgment-oriented evaluation and feedback-oriented assessment to emerging scholarship on the pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2024; Stephens, 2023). Through this conversation, we consider how traditional grading practices frequently undermine two foundational elements of a pedagogy of kindness: clarity and learning support.

Specifications grading offers an alternative model by clearly defining expectations, providing opportunities for revision, and emphasizing learning over point accumulation (Nilson, 2014). Our dialogue illustrates how this approach fosters transparency, reduces anxiety, and supports deeper engagement.

From the student perspective, the approach fostered creativity, autonomy, and real-world engagement, culminating in the design of a campus-wide Kindness Week. From the instructor perspective, it supported iterative, authentic learning, while reducing grading ambiguity and enabling more meaningful feedback loops. Together, these perspectives position specifications grading as a system that supports academic quality while cultivating agency, resilience, and connection for both students and instructors.

Keywords: specifications grading, pedagogy of kindness, assessment for learning, authentic learning

Background

You likely remember the fear of being graded as a student—red marks on your paper, low grades (thanks to averaging) you feel like you can never escape, and a general understanding that even though you are supposedly learning, you must know everything on your first try. Grades can be used for evaluation or assessment (Eyler, 2024). Evaluation is a judgment of performance that students rarely have the opportunity to respond to; it's what we think of when we relive those memories of being graded. Assessment, on the other hand, is intended to communicate feedback that is “meant to guide [the student] toward a goal” (Eyler, 2024, p. 3). Unfortunately, although many instructors intend for their grades to provide students with feedback, the structure of education often limits grades to a form of evaluation. As a result, feedback conveyed through grades is perceived as negative and focused on justifying the grade (Eyler, 2024).

Grades as a form of evaluation are not compatible with a pedagogy of kindness. According to Stephens (2023), “[s]tudents often are not looking for lower expectations or to evade work. They are, however, looking for someone who says, ‘I see you trying, and I believe you can do this’” (p. 137). The pedagogy of kindness, which views students as people who are doing their best amid varied and sometimes competing expectations, supports this need (Stephens, 2023). A pedagogy of kindness is “about attending to justice, believing people, and believing *in* people” (Denial, 2024, p. 2, italics in original).

So, what does kindness in assessment look like? It isn't about lowering expectations or diminishing academic rigour. After all, “kindness does not dissolve the demands of knowledge” (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, p. 724). Rather, it supports two goals: clarity and learning support. Starting with clarity, Brown (2018) asserts that “Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind” (para. 7). A pedagogy of kindness requires that we clarify for both instructors and students exactly what the standards of achievement are and how they are to be met. While rubrics were a vast improvement in clarity because they provided information about the different criteria and the levels of achievement for each criterion, they still contain significant ambiguity because they offer so many gradations in assessment levels (Nilson, 2014). Thus, it can still be challenging for both students and instructors to understand what level must be met to earn a target grade or meet the course requirements. A pedagogy of kindness requires that clear expectations be set for what constitutes an appropriate level of work (Munn & Matthews, 2025).

Regarding learning support, a pedagogy of kindness meets Eyler's (2024) description of assessment. We need to create a feedback loop where students receive feedback and have the opportunity to respond to it, thereby improving their learning. Feedback needs to be used by students to learn, not to justify their grade. In short, feedback needs to be actionable. This also connects to professional skills that students will need in the future as well. Brown (2018) found that leaders ranked one issue as more concerning than all others—leaders are “avoiding tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback” (para. 3). Therefore, there is a need to practice integrating feedback as students.

Specifications grading is an alternative grading structure that meets these two goals and, therefore, supports a pedagogy of kindness. In specifications grading, there are four requirements (Nilson, 2014):

- Coursework is bundled in ways that make it clear what needs to be completed to earn the different letter grades.
- Assignments have detailed lists of requirements (specifications) that outline everything that needs to be included.
- Assignments are graded as “complete” or “needs revisions.” There is no fiddling with whether something is worth 75 or 78%. The specific language around “needs revisions” will differ between instructors and courses, depending on the context of their courses.
- Assignments that are graded as “needs revisions” can be revised or redone in a format that is appropriate for the class.

Thus, we have clear expectations, not just for individual assignments but also for what each final letter grade requires. And we can use feedback to support student learning through revisions.

Discussion

In what follows, we—a post-secondary student, who also works as a peer health educator, and a university professor—engage in a discussion about how specifications grading supports a pedagogy of kindness and the impact of that relationship on teaching and learning experiences. The conversation was initiated when one of us (the student) reflected on prior course learning to inform the development of a campus week focused on kindness.

In this discussion, we explore further connections between that work and how courses approached learning, especially through the grading practices.

Tai: Steven, you reached out to me regarding an event you were planning, the Kindness Project: Kindness Week at MacEwan (our university campus). The theme was Kindness in Action: From Ripples to Waves. Perhaps you can share your interest in kindness and how you define kindness?

Steven: Kindness, to me, is a language that is dynamic, transformative, and profoundly humanistic in a sense. It shapes both the giver and the receiver. It is simple to express yet difficult to truly understand and practice, especially towards ourselves. Its meaning resists rigid definition because kindness is deeply contextual; it adapts to circumstances, relationships, and environments. I experienced this in your courses. Your approach to assessment was an unexpected act of kindness: flexible, creative, and accessible. While I often struggle with brainstorming and conceptualizing ideas, your system allowed space for exploration rather than the rigid conformity seen in most college lectures (e.g., standardized testing). Tasks such as systems mapping were challenging for me, yet the freedom to choose forms of learning and to demonstrate understanding in diverse ways felt generous compared to traditional standardized testing. That flexibility was kindness in action, an educational design that respects individuality and empowers learners.

Kindness Week at MacEwan emerged from this systems thinking perspective. With limited time, I applied mapping tools from my courses with you, including iceberg models, mental models, and whole-system maps, to prototype a campus-wide campaign. The theme I chose was Acts of Kindness, inspired by the ripple effect I observed: even small gestures can spread positivity in unpredictable ways.

Tai: I admit that I hadn't really thought about kindness within the context of the classes I teach until you reached out to me during your preparation for Kindness Week. I had to look into what kindness actually is and how it applies to both teaching and assessment. I wouldn't say that I was completely falling victim to what Clegg and Rowland (2010) discussed regarding the impacts of Cartesian dualism, where I was only focused on reason in my teaching to the exclusion of emotion. However, as Clegg and Rowland (2010) argued, dualism creates a context in which kindness is often unremarked in teaching, even though it is commonplace. This is perhaps why others have also indicated that they only discovered the extent of their pedagogy of kindness after investigating it (Galvin, 2025; Munn & Matthews, 2025).

As I looked into kindness, I came to the same conclusion as Denial (2024): kindness is distinct from being merely nice. Kindness needs to be an action, connecting to the theme of Kindness Week that you were working on. Kindness to me means creating supports for students so they can successfully complete the required work. Whereas being nice might mean letting them avoid doing something hard and giving them the mark anyway. I don't think doing that is kind, because it will come back to harm them later if they need that skill or knowledge and don't have it. I think this is why Brown (2018) emphasized the importance of having difficult conversations and providing constructive feedback. I'm curious: what were the original connections that you made between kindness and the courses you've taken with me?

Steven: In the courses I've taken with you, your approach is never static; each semester brings thoughtful refinements and changes, whether in an introductory class, a project-based course, or a mapping-intensive or modelling course. The dynamic, ever-changing structures reflect a commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness to student feedback, which I see as an act of kindness in educational or pedagogical design.

Tai: I'd like to pick up on a few things you talked about, Steven. You mentioned earlier that systems thinking was foundational to how you developed Kindness Week. Systems thinking is both a way of thinking and a set of tools and skills that can be applied in practice. In the classes, we discuss how systems thinking helps us think about and respond to wicked problems. Wicked problems are complex issues that involve multiple stakeholders, including individuals who aren't typically considered experts. Other characteristics of wicked problems include that we have incomplete information, the requirements are contradictory or changing, and there is no single solution for the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). I think that both how we enact kindness and assessment, and education as a broader system—all have characteristics of wicked problems.

Your observation that the courses are in a state of constant change is certainly part of this. Munn and Matthews (2025) discussed how enacting a pedagogy of kindness includes "modelling the importance of lifelong learning and ongoing reflective inquiry" (p. 24). If I want

students to develop into lifelong learners and engage in ongoing reflection, which is necessary to address wicked problems where new information or technologies may change the rules entirely—similar to how generative AI is changing the field of education—then I must be willing to do the same. In the same vein, with specifications grading, if I’m going to ask students to revise their work, I must be willing to revise my own based on their feedback. It’s interesting, then, because this one action of constant revision contributes to kindness from two different perspectives: mine as the instructor, where I’m modelling the skills students need for the future and for the class, and yours as a student, to see that I’m responding to student needs and feedback.

If we turn to assessment directly, you mentioned that the grading policies stood out to you most among the kindness-based course policies. Could you share the connections you made with the grading approach of specifications-based grading?

Steven: Specifications grading is a teaching concept I am still exploring and learning, yet its uniqueness and adaptability totally stand out. As I reflect on my experiences, specifications grading reminds me of the pass/fail (P/F) systems often used in medical training or laboratory practicums. It reduces stress while maintaining academic rigour. The clarity of expectations and the opportunity to revise work foster a learning environment where growth matters more than chasing points. This is profoundly “kind” because it shifts the purpose of assessment from mere compliance to meaningful engagement and a deeper understanding of content material. I particularly valued the end-of-term reflections, thinking outside the box, using resources, and using AI was really fun and so exciting. You get to learn new things, and the final project variations, such as inviting us to offer advice for future students, were really meaningful. Reading a letter from an upper-year student during the intro class was a deeply memorable moment; these students’ tones and styles were uniquely personal to each one of them, and it created a sense of continuity and community. These reflective practices, embedded within specifications grading, give our work significance beyond the norm of standardized grading.

In traditional, Westernized educational systems, especially as we know them in current post-secondary university structures, assignments often feel transactional, completed only to satisfy rubrics or metrics. In your courses, I work because it is enjoyable, because feedback helps me grow, and because we tackle real-world challenges, such as community partner projects, self-directed wicked problems presented at Student Research Day, and initiatives enriched by work-integrated learning opportunities.

Tai: I appreciate that you bring up authenticity and real-world challenges. While not directly connected to the requirements of specifications grading, one reason I adopted specifications grading was that it felt more authentic and more open to authentic assignments. McArthur (2023) argued that:

thinking of authentic assessment as a socially situated achievement is powerful and transformative. It gives genuine agency to a student’s sense of applying what they learn in higher education to the professional and social roles they later go on to hold (p. 94).

As McArthur suggested, we need to expand our idea of what makes an authentic assessment beyond a connection to future work and recognize that students currently work both professionally and socially and will continue to do so in the future. I think that this applies not only to the assignments students complete but also to how they are assessed. Not once in my professional career have I had a manager review my work and say, “I’d give you about a 70% on this. Now let’s move on to the next project.” And personally, I’ve never had a friend tell me that the birthday present I gave them shows that I only understand about 85% of who they are. In my personal and professional experience, I utilize personal reflection, performance standards, and open conversations to create, assess, and refine my work and contributions.

This, however, was in contrast to how I was taught and how I started my teaching career. As you say, assignments feel transactional. As a student, I have definitely created work solely based on what I thought would get me my target grade from that specific professor. The work held no significance beyond the context of that interaction. I wanted to challenge this reality, and specifications grading supported that.

Setting the specifications required me to really reflect on what criteria were necessary and what level of achievement was required. This led me to adopt single-point rubrics (Gonzalez, 2015). A single-point rubric met the requirements for the specifications described by Nilson (2014), providing a clear checklist of what a student must do to complete an assessment. There are no gradations. Additionally, to complete the checklist, a student must understand the meaning of each specification (Nilson, 2014). Honestly, this was a very eye-opening experience for me because it made me realize what is truly important and what has been included just because it was traditionally included in grading judgments. This allowed me to create much more authentic assessments, as the factors that mattered in the assessment were those that supported students in making connections to real challenges and situations that interested them.

Steven: When I was planning Kindness Week, I noticed a gap. While popular pop material celebrates kindness toward others, such as holding doors or giving up a spot in line, being kind to ourselves is far more difficult to do. But how come? This insight shaped the campaign’s focus: self-kindness first. You cannot pour from an empty cup; before giving kindness, you must nurture your own well-being. Ultimately, kindness to me is contextual, systemic, and reciprocal. It is a language anyone can speak, yet it requires intentional practice, especially inward. My journey through course concepts, systems thinking, and educational design feedback has taught me that kindness is not merely an act; it is a framework for living and learning.

Tai: I appreciate you mentioning the importance of self-kindness. To be completely honest, the first thing that motivated me to adopt specifications grading was that I was frustrated that a student could, as you said, chase points and pass a class without having some of the essential understandings. Changing the assignment in question to carry enough weight to prevent people from passing without it was not an option for me. I couldn’t do that without giving the students the opportunity to retake the assignment. But retaking an assignment just wasn’t done. I happened to listen to a podcast episode about specifications grading (Stachowiak &

Nilson, 2015) shortly after a frustrating semester, during which I felt like I had failed a couple of students, and I knew immediately that I had my answer. I revised my course and haven't looked back.

Since then, adopting specifications grading has been an act of self-kindness. My teaching approach now aligns more closely with my values, which recognize the benefits of failing and learning from that experience. I also spend way less time dithering over what grade an assignment deserves. I just ask myself if it meets the requirements or not. And now I know that my feedback is being used and not just by students who have to do revisions. I provide feedback to everyone, and it is a highlight every time a student sends me an email saying that I helped them think even further about a topic. Feedback is becoming something for future learning, not something that gets dumped in the recycling bin on the way out of the classroom. As much as I appreciate the benefits this approach has had for students and learning, I also appreciate the benefits it has had for me.

Steven: Specifications grading is kind because it values meaning, agency, and authentic learning. It creates a ripple effect: without this approach and the framework supporting it, I would not have been able to redesign Kindness Week into its full form this past September, which ultimately generated over 1,800 interactions across campus. This grading philosophy does more than measure performance; it cultivates purpose, resilience, and collaboration—qualities that extend far beyond the classroom. It's quite practical and useful in any discipline, really.

Final Thoughts

Tai: As an educator, it is an incredibly motivating experience to have a student reach out and say, "Hey, I had this positive experience in your classroom, and it inspired me in this way." Having Steven reach out to me took this a step further by inspiring me to look at my courses and how I teach through a different lens than I had before. My conversation with Steven has improved the alignment between how I teach and what I value.

To return to systems thinking, one key concept is emergence. Emergence is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, or that the interactions between parts in a system create something new that can't be isolated to any of the individual parts. This paper is a sign of that emergence. While assessment does come up in the literature around pedagogy of kindness, it is rarely connected to alternative grading approaches such as specifications grading. Similarly, the literature on alternative grading has not been closely connected to approaches such as a pedagogy of kindness. As an educator, this doesn't really surprise me. We get caught up in what we are doing and only look beyond when we have a reason to. I am fortunate that a student brought that reason to me. The emergence of the relationship between specifications grading and the pedagogy of kindness is important and warrants further exploration through both theory and practice.

Steven: Upon reflecting deeply on my experiences following Kindness Week and completing my courses with Dr. Munro, I have developed a more nuanced understanding of how kindness can be meaningfully integrated into both pedagogical practices and assessments. These experiences have significantly shaped my approach to teaching and learning, particularly

through my work with the Peer Health Education team (as a Peer Health Educator). A central insight that emerged is the importance of cultivating forms of kindness that do not rely on reciprocity. Instead, kindness operates as a generative force that encourages further acts of care and connection. This became especially evident during and after Kindness Week, when many participants and volunteers expressed a desire to continue engaging in acts of kindness. Several individuals expressed interest in sustained involvement through volunteering, often describing their experiences as emotionally impactful and deeply meaningful. These responses underscore the capacity of kindness to foster a sense of purpose and community engagement.

The incorporation of kindness within specifications grading has had a profound influence on my academic and personal development. This approach to assessment encouraged sustained reflection and introspection, enabling me to articulate my values more clearly and transparently and to examine how kindness intersects with my evolving sense of identity. Specifications grading, when grounded within principles of care and transparency, shifts assessment from a purely evaluative mechanism to a supportive and developmental process for students. It aligns with broader pedagogical commitments to equity, student well-being, and relational learning. Together, these experiences have informed my understanding of kindness as both a personal ethic and a pedagogical practice. They have also inspired a commitment to fostering a culture of kindness within the MacEwan University communities. Such a culture extends beyond individual actions and invites students, faculty, and staff to reconsider how teaching, learning, and assessment can be approached with intentional care. This includes recognizing the importance of being kind to oneself, to others, and to the educational processes that shape learning environments.

Ultimately, this integration of kindness and specifications grading has led me to view kindness as a practice that is both teachable and transferable. It can be intentionally embedded within pedagogical frameworks and enacted across diverse educational contexts. Future directions for this work include further exploration of pedagogies of kindness that prioritize compassion, inclusivity, and reflective engagement. By continuing to develop and apply these approaches, educators can contribute to learning environments that are more humane, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all participants.

Conclusion

This paper offers specifications grading as an actionable pathway for enacting a pedagogy of kindness in post-secondary education. By shifting assessment from judgment to feedback, specifications grading addresses critical shortcomings in traditional grading systems, including ambiguity, anxiety, and limited support for iterative growth. Our conversation highlights how these shifts are experienced across roles, revealing both the student's increased sense of agency, creativity, and engagement, and the instructor's enhanced capacity to provide meaningful, values-aligned feedback.

Specifications grading does not lower academic standards; rather, it clarifies them and creates structures that enable students to meet those standards more effectively. As higher education continues to grapple with questions of equity, well-being, and meaningful learning,

specifications grading offers a practical approach to designing rigorous, humane systems that support connection, authenticity, growth, and kindness for both students and instructors.

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