

GRADE WHINING: ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

Grade whining or complaining is a bane to marketing instructors. Even when an instructor carefully explains his or her grading process, it seems inevitable that one, two, or more students will be unhappy with a final grade. Further, such dissatisfaction can escalate beyond complaining or whining to grievance appeals and/or legal action. Such behaviors waste valuable instructor time, cause stress, and decrease willingness to teach. Grade complaining also may be a factor in the much-discussed problem of grade inflation. This position paper explores some possible antecedents and consequences of grade complaining and proposes further study. We begin with the assumption that an instructor is trying to be fair. We understand that unfairness may exist, but that is a different topic. The focus of our work is on grade complaining/whining under normal circumstances when the instructor tries to be fair.

Student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a grade does not depend on an absolute standard but rather can change over time. As Sommer (2014, p. 263) observed, “For reasons not clear to me, the ‘whine factor’ appears to have increased, especially for students on the border between B+ and A-.”

Satisfaction is relative and can change depending on the grades other students receive. For example, Singleton (1971) identified the influence of relative deprivation, suggesting that grade inflation can decrease satisfaction with grades overall as students compare their grades with those of other students earning higher grades. Grade inflation is defined as an increasing trend of the grade point average (GPA) over time (Goldman, 1985).

Satisfaction can also be influenced *post hoc* by comparisons with others. In a consumer behavior context, Ackerman, Macinnis, and Folkes (2000) found that consumers who were initially satisfied with their possessions became dissatisfied when they compared themselves with others. Similarly, students who are initially satisfied with a grade might become dissatisfied if they compare their grades with the grades of others. Students are more satisfied when the grades of their classmates are lower than their own, and are happier when their own grades are higher than the grades of others (Hindman, Livingston, & Carter, 2014).

Comparisons with past experience may be another source of grade dissatisfaction. Students accustomed to receiving “As” may be unhappy to receive a “B-.” Conversely, students accustomed to grades of “C” and “D” might be very happy to receive a “B-.” In such cases, an internal reference point drives satisfaction. Thus, reference price theory (Mazumdar, Raj, & Sindha 2005) can be applied to an understanding of grade satisfaction. Students may react to grades against internal reference points based on experience, against external reference points based on the grades that others receive, and perhaps based on their perceived effort. These reference points change constantly with the classes students take and the grading habits of instructors. Reference points are also the reason that grade inflation does not lead to student happiness. Instructors may inflate grades to please students, but students adapt quickly with higher-grade expectations and are dissatisfied when those grade expectations are not met. If failed expectations lead to grade whining, judgments of unfairness seem to drive negative emotional reactions to dissatisfying grades. Similar to prices in a consumer context, grades that deviate from expectation are perceived to be unfair. Students feel entitled to expected grades because they perceive that similarly performing students receive those grades (Gielissen, Dutilh, & Graafland, 2008). Receiving a lower grade than others, or even receiving the same grade as a student believed to have performed worse, will lead to judgments of unfairness and feelings of anger. Of course there is also a self-serving bias. Students tend to penalize an instructor when they receive a grade that is below their expectations, but they do not generally reward the instructor when a grade exceeds their expectations (Griffin, 2004). A grade

that is higher than expected is technically unfair, but it is unlikely that students will perceive it as so, though other students may be angry if they learn of it.

In regard to fairness, Thibaut and Walker (1975) found that evaluations of allocation decisions are influenced both by the fairness of outcomes and by the fairness of procedures used to reach the outcomes, referred to as procedural fairness. Procedural and interactional fairness (quality of interpersonal treatment) are characterized by process and decision control (i.e., having input), consistency across individuals and over time, neutrality, accuracy of information and informed opinion, opportunities for appeal, representation of important groups/persons; and compliance with moral and ethical standards (Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980). Rodabaugh and Kravitz (1994) found that students are motivated when there are unbiased standards and the standards are equally enforced.

Consequences of disappointment are varied. Research on consumer dissatisfaction has found that behavioral responses depend both on the level of dissatisfaction and the emotions elicited (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). This suggests that behavioral response to grade dissatisfaction or disappointment will depend on both the level of deviation from the student's expectation and the student's emotional responses.

In conclusion, we expect the proposed research study to find that instructors who wish to avoid the more serious forms of grade whining and complaining should avoid raising student grade expectations, and also patiently listen to and provide explanations for student grade concerns.

The proposed study will use scenarios to test student reactions to grades. External reference points will be manipulated in scenarios that provide the grades received by other students, not unrealistic since students often compare grades among themselves. Judgments regarding expectations from reference points will be measured and if possible manipulated. Lastly, there will be a measure of grade complaining/whining behavior.

References Available upon Request