

How can a Longstanding Norm-Referenced Grading Policy Impact Teaching and Learning? Leveraging Qualitative Research for Culture Change in a Quantitative Department

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Choose your own adventure!

Are you looking for a conversation about (A) SoTL, (B) Educational Leadership, or (C) Professional Growth? Choose a section.

(A) Perceptions of a Norm-Referenced Grading Policy: A Mixed Methods Study

Departmental Context

- Large, research-oriented department
- 8 Research Areas, all post/positivist methods
- Recent annual estimates: 8k undergraduate students (20k seats), 150 sections of 50 courses by 70 instructors (50-60 full time)
- **Grading policy since late 1990s requires courses to conform to average ranges with expected standard deviations, fail rates**
- Intention to align multi-sections and prevent grade inflation; literature offers no simple answers (e.g., Brookhart et al., 2016)
- Concerns raised include barrier to inclusivity

Research Question

How do members of the department community perceive the influence of the existing policy on current teaching and learning practices?

Methods and Sample

- Received UBCV Behavioural Ethics clearance
- Survey responses: 233 undergraduate majors, 34 course instructors, 18 graduate students, and 39 people who did not disclose role
- Semi-structured interviews of 11 Course Instructors; 2 focus groups totaling 5 undergraduates; all conducted by Dammert.
- Reflexive Thematic Analysis of all transcripts in six iterative phases from familiarization to report writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Results

Survey: Broad agreement it is appropriate to review the grading policy (unanimous for graduate students and racialized course instructors); almost complete consensus that students experience disadvantages because of this policy. Advantages of policy also identified.

Conclusions from Iterative, Reflexive, Collaborative Qualitative Analysis Process

Positives:

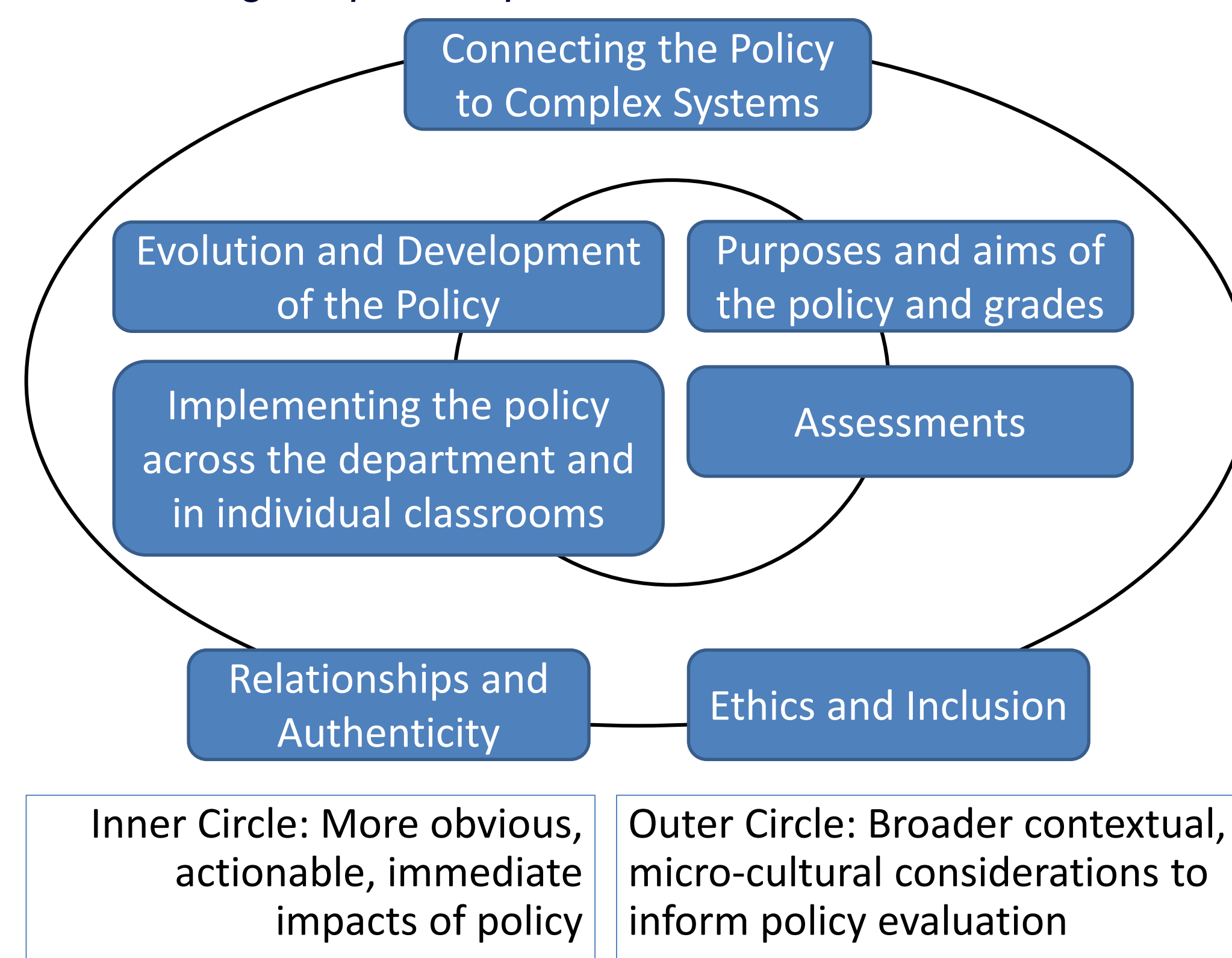
- supports desire to challenge students;
- helps calibrate new-to-Department instructors;
- can align aspects of multi-section courses.

Negatives:

- disincentivizes support for struggling students;
- undermines some instructors' desire to support student learning;
- fuels student competition;
- inconsistent implementation strategies;
- inequity in course instructor job security reveals different pressures to follow policy.

Thematic Mapping Results Overview

We developed seven themes which captured both instructors' and students' perceptions of this policy. Themes highlight how policy must be considered in terms of how it is situated, supported, and implemented. Note that ethical considerations limit sharing of specific quotes in this format at this time.



(B) Departmental Educational Leadership: Changing a Longstanding Grading Policy Process

Rawn shared results to request a mandate and participation from Department, including changing from SoTL researcher to role as Associate Head for Undergraduate Affairs. **Working Group (WG) met biweekly for Term 2: 5 instructors (various ranks), 7 undergraduates, 2 graduate student TAs.** Honoraria and snacks provided.

WG reviewed evidence, and developed **Guiding Principles (student learning, validity, equity, belonging, flexibility, transparency, excellence)** before developing proposals. Intensive dialogue, contextual and evidence review, led us to consider and reject “no policy.”

Resulting Proposals

Practical balance: Intending to shift existing policy to empower those who want to change. *Currently under departmental review.*

1. **Minimal Change:** Continue to support alignment across sections but frame in positive terms, add rationale, remove expectations of normal distribution and fails, clarify some implementation questions.
2. **Moderate Change:** As above, plus revise target average ranges and create “upper ranges” so all instructors see transparent way to provide evidence for higher average.
3. **Pre-registered opt-out pathway:** Enable innovation and student support by creating transparent process and pedagogy-based criteria for exemption to the grading policy.
4. **5-year review:** Evaluate policy, supporting materials, feedback.

(C) Transformation into Qualitative SoTL Research

Preparing for Boundary Crossing

Quantitative approaches had been unsuccessful at changing this policy in the past. My (Rawn's) quantitative psychology disciplinary training could not address my research question.

Epistemological challenges of learning qualitative methods co-occurred for me with deepening learning of Indigenous ways of knowing, and broader meaning-making in context of deep personal grief. My positionality as tenured professor provided a privileged safety net.

Challenges of Boundary Crossing

Boundary crossing into SoTL has been framed as navigating both flat and political landscapes (Kensington-Miller et al., 2021). Likewise, I experienced (flat) openness and interdisciplinary collaboration that was essential to my process of un/re-learning research fundamentals. And political questions remain (e.g., *How to effectively mobilize qualitative evidence to incite change among quantitative-focused colleagues?*)

Impact on Teaching about Research

Changed my relationship to teaching quantitative research methods. Redesigned entire course to feature positionality, situating quantitative methods as one of many students may pursue. Created space for Indigenous ways of knowing.

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